

XX Settembre 1870: Rome's Capture as Contested Public Memory

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September 20, 1870, commemorates the completion of national unity with the Kingdom of Italy's conquest of the Papal States. Rome's capture marked the end of the Church's temporal power, which formally began in 728 CE after the Donation of Sutri, as well as the elevation of Rome as the capital of a united Italy. Yet despite emotive similarities to the Fourth of July in the United States and *le 14 juillet* in France, the 20th of September is not officially celebrated in Italy and remains largely ignored by the public. This historical amnesia arose from political tensions between church and state concerning both the Risorgimento process and contemporary discourses on national identity.

“Libera Chiesa in libero Stato”: Rome and the Risorgimento

On March 25, 1861, Rodolfo Audinot interpellated the Chamber of Deputies on the Roman question: “L'Italia ha bisogno di Roma, perché Roma è la capitale naturale d'Italia; [...] ha bisogno di Roma, perché Roma capitale d'Italia è l'espressione più alta dell'unità e dell'indipendenza della nazione” (Italy needs Rome, because Rome is the natural capital of Italy; [...] it needs Rome, because Rome, as capital of Italy, is the highest expression of the nation's unity and independence).¹ Camillo Benso di Cavour, president of the council of ministers, responded to Audinot's interpellation and reaffirmed the necessity of making Rome the Kingdom of Italy's new capital:

La scelta della capitale è determinata da grandi ragioni morali. È il sentimento dei popoli quello che decide le questioni ad essa relative.

Ora, o signori, in Roma concorrono tutte le circostanze storiche, intellettuali, morali, che devono determinare le condizioni della capitale di un grande Stato. Roma è la sola città d'Italia che non abbia memorie esclusivamente municipali; tutta la storia di Roma dal tempo dei Cesari al giorno d'oggi è la storia di una città la cui importanza si estende infinitamente al di là del suo territorio, di una città, cioè, destinata ad essere la capitale di un grande Stato. [...] Convinto di questa verità, io mi credo in obbligo di proclamarlo nel modo più solenne davanti a voi, davanti alla nazione, e mi tengo in obbligo di fare in questa circostanza appello al patriottismo di tutti i cittadini d'Italia e dei rappresentanti delle più illustri sue città, onde cessi ogni discussione in proposito, affinché noi possiamo dichiarare all'Europa, affinché chi ha l'onore di rappresentare questo paese a fronte delle estere potenze possa dire: la necessità di aver Roma per capitale è riconosciuta e proclamata dall'intera nazione.

¹ *Il Parlamento dell'Unità d'Italia (1859–1861): atti e documenti della Camera dei Deputati*, vol. 2, *Gli atti politici e legislativi dell'Unità d'Italia* (Rome: Tip. della Camera dei Deputati, 1961), 116–17. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Italian are my own.

The choice of the capital is determined by great moral reasons. It is the sentiment of the people that decides the questions relating to it.

Now, gentlemen, in Rome all the historical, intellectual, and moral circumstances converge that must determine the conditions of the capital of a great State. Rome is the only city in Italy that does not have exclusively municipal memories; the entire history of Rome from the time of the Caesars to the present day is the history of a city whose importance extends infinitely beyond its territory, a city destined to be the capital of a great State. [...] Convinced of this truth, I believe that it is my duty to proclaim it in the most solemn manner before you, before the nation, and I am obliged in this circumstance to appeal to the patriotism of all the citizens of Italy and of the representatives of its most illustrious cities, so that all discussion on the subject may cease, so that we can declare to Europe, so that whoever has the honor of representing this country before foreign powers can say: the necessity of having Rome as the capital is recognized and proclaimed by the entire nation.²

Cavour then articulated the many obstacles and challenges that prevented immediate action on the Roman question. He died soon after (June 6, 1861), before his vision could be realized. Moreover, when the nascent state did overcome those obstacles and challenges in 1870, the celebration was short-lived: September 20 was declared a national holiday in 1895, only to be expunged in 1930. Despite the proud proclamation that “*per noi resta una festa!*” (for us it remains a holiday!) that was made by the [Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti](#), the [parades](#) sponsored by the [Associazione Mazziniana Italiana](#), and the events promoted by the Masonic grand lodge [Grande Oriente d’Italia](#), for most Italians the day slipped from social memory. Though Rome’s capture was the political culmination of the Risorgimento and fundamental to Italy’s process of national formation, September 20, if not for street names, is today all but forgotten.³

Why is this so? Cavour identified this divisive crux in his response to Audinot:

La questione di Roma non è soltanto di vitale importanza per l’Italia, ma è una questione la cui influenza deve estendersi a 200 milioni di cattolici sparsi per tutta la superficie del globo; è una questione la cui soluzione non deve solo avere un’influenza politica, ma deve esercitarne altresì una immensa sul mondo morale e religioso [...] Se si potesse concepire l’Italia costituita in unità in modo stabile senza chiamare Roma la sua capitale, io dichiaro schiettamente che reputerei difficile, forse impossibile la soluzione della questione romana. Perchè noi abbiamo il diritto, anzi il dovere di chiedere, d’insistere perchè Roma sia unita all’Italia? Perchè senza Roma capitale d’Italia l’Italia non si può costituire.

The Roman question is not only of vital importance for Italy, but it is a question whose influence must extend to 200 million Catholics scattered throughout the

² Ibid., 124.

³ The events of September 20, 1870, remain understated in both Risorgimento and Italian military historiography. Even Piero Pieri’s canonical work, *Storia militare del Risorgimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962), ends with the Battle of Mentana in 1867.

surface of the globe; it is a question whose solution must not only have a political influence, but it must also exert an immense one on the moral and religious world. [...] If Italy could be conceived as established in stable unity without calling Rome its capital, I frankly declare that I would consider a solution to the Roman question to be difficult, perhaps impossible. Why do we have the right, indeed the duty, to ask, to insist that Rome be united to Italy? Because without Rome as the capital of Italy, Italy cannot be founded.⁴

Two days later, on March 27, 1861, Cavour pronounced his defining principle on the relationship between religious and secular society: “Libera Chiesa in libero Stato” (A free Church in a free State).⁵ The question then became: how to divest the Papacy of its temporal power and territory without alienating Catholics? Cavour’s assessment—“difficult, perhaps impossible”—was sanguine in the face of realpolitik. Militarily, Italian troops resolved the vexed issue in 1870, but the political solution that Cavour had sought took six decades to achieve. The Lateran Treaty, signed on February 11, 1929 and ratified by the Italian Parliament on June 7, 1929, ended fifty-nine years of Kulturkampf by ceding purviews of the State to the Church in order to satisfy Mussolini’s political exigencies. Indeed, Renzo De Felice argued that the Lateran Pacts were essential to the Fascist regime’s consolidation of power and building of consensus.⁶ In tracing the political and cultural manifestations of September 20, 1870, deliberate neglect emerges as a conscious strategy to preserve and to advance the hegemonic order. Rather than a day to remember, it devolved into a forgotten day enveloped by a communal escapism: a victim of politics and of cultural amnesia. The mythographies of September 20, as evinced in print, painting, photography, and film, present a counter-narrative to the political exigencies of liberal, Fascist, and republican Italy. The inability to reconcile these competing narratives has led to a divided society and to a tenuous formation of national identity.

Prelude to War

On March 27, 1861, ten days after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy, the parliament met in Turin and declared Rome the nation’s capital. The declaration was premature: the Holy See controlled the region of Lazio and enjoyed both Napoleon III’s political support and the French garrison’s military protection. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War on July 19, 1870, however, shifted the balance of power. In need of both reinforcements and Italian neutrality, Napoleon III recalled his troops from Rome on July 27, 1870. The move proved futile. Napoleon

⁴ *Il Parlamento*, 122–23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁶ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista: l’organizzazione dello stato fascista, 1925–1929* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 382–83. For the Lateran Treaty, see Vincenzo Del Giudice, *La questione romana e i rapporti tra Stato e Chiesa fino alla Conciliazione: con considerazioni sui Patti Lateranensi e sull’Art. 7 della Costituzione repubblicana* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1947); David Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pope Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe* (New York: Random House, 2014), 98–113; Francesco Margiotta Broglio, *Italia e Santa Sede dalla grande guerra alla conciliazione: aspetti politici e giuridici* (Bari: Laterza, 1966); Renato Moro, “Azione Cattolica, clero e laicato di fronte al fascismo,” in *Storia del movimento cattolico in Italia*, vol. 4, *I cattolici dal Fascismo alla Resistenza*, ed. Francesco Malgeri (Rome: Poligono, 1981), 87–378; Francesco Pacelli, *Diario della Conciliazione: con verbali ed appendice di documenti*, ed. Michele Maccarrone (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1959); John F. Pollard, *The Vatican and Italian Fascism, 1929–32: A Study in Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–74. The text of the Lateran Treaty is available online, in the [original Italian](#) and in [English translation](#), as are the [Italian laws](#) executing the Lateran Pacts.

III's surrender at the Battle of Sedan—along with his subsequent deposition—and the Second French Empire's collapse removed the diplomatic obstacles that had prevented King Vittorio Emanuele II from letting slip the dogs of war.

Although the king approved the invasion of the Papal States on September 6, 1870, he made one last token appeal for a peaceful resolution. Two days later, he sent Count Gustavo Ponza di San Martino to Pope Pius IX with a plea to allow Italian troops to occupy the Holy See to protect the pontiff. The count also delivered a list of ten articles—prepared by then President of the Council of Ministers Giovanni Lanza—as the foundation for a treaty. The pope's response was a predictable, resolute no. According to Raffaele De Cesare's colorful account, the pope agreed to meet with San Martino on the morning of the tenth:

L'accoglienza fatta dal Papa al San Martino fu ostile. Pio IX si lasciò vincere da scatti addirittura violenti. Buttando la lettera del Re sopra un mobile, uscì in queste parole: “Bella lealtà! siete tutti un sacco di vipere, sepolcri imbiancati e mancatori di fede”, alludendo forse ad altre lettere ricevute dal Re; ma poi, riprendendo la calma, esclamò: “Non sono profeta né figlio di profeta, ma vi assicuro che in Roma non entrerete!” Il San Martino ne fu così mortificato che lasciando il gabinetto del Papa, non trovava la via d'uscita.

The Pope's reception of San Martino was hostile. Pius IX allowed himself to be overcome by violent outbursts. Throwing down the King's letter on a piece of furniture, he uttered these words: “Fine loyalty! You are all a nest of vipers, [a host of] whitened tombs, and are lacking in faith.” He was perhaps alluding to other letters he had received from the King. But then, regaining his composure, he exclaimed: “I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I promise that you will never enter Rome!” San Martino was so mortified that upon leaving the Pope's chamber he could not find the way out.⁷

Pius IX's response to Vittorio Emanuele II was equally forceful if slightly less melodramatic:

Sire, Il conte Ponza di San Martino mi ha consegnato una lettera, che a V. M. piacque dirigermi; ma essa non è degna di un figlio affettuoso che si vanta di professare la fede cattolica, e si gloria di regia lealtà. Io non entrerò nei particolari della lettera, per non rinnovellare il dolore che una prima scorsa mi ha cagionato. Io benedico Iddio, il quale ha sofferto che V. M. empia di amarezza l'ultimo periodo della mia vita. Quanto al resto, io non posso ammettere le domande espresse nella sua lettera, né aderire ai principii che contiene. Faccio di nuovo ricorso a Dio, e pongo nelle mani di Lui la mia causa, che è interamente la Sua. Lo prego a

⁷ Raffaele De Cesare, *Roma e lo Stato del Papa: dal ritorno di Pio IX al 20 settembre 1850–1870* (Milan: Longanesi e C., 1970), 714. For a detailed description of the days leading up to Rome's capture, see *Ibid.*, 705–727; David Kertzer, *Prisoner of the Vatican: The Pope's Secret Plot to Capture Rome from the New Italian State* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 33–49; Hubert Heyriès, *La breccia di Porta Pia: 20 settembre 1870* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2020), 45–93; Claudio Fracassi, *La Breccia di Roma: 1870; le passioni, gli inganni, il papa, il re* (Milan: Mursia, 2020), 38–66. For partisan perspectives, see Raffaele Cadorna, *La liberazione di Roma nell'anno 1870 ed il plebescito: narrazione politico-militare*, 2nd ed. (Turin: L. Roux e C., 1889), 1–57, and the papist account of Patrick Keyes O'Clery, *The Making of Italy, 1856–1870* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1892), 464–88.

concedere abbondanti grazie a V. M. per liberarla da ogni pericolo, renderla partecipe delle misericordie onde Ella ha bisogno.

Sire, Count Ponza di San Martino has delivered me a letter that Your Majesty saw fit to address to me, but is unworthy of an affectionate son who boasts of professing the Catholic faith and takes pride in royal loyalty. I will not go into the details of the letter to avoid renewing the pain that its first reading caused me. I bless God, who has permitted that Your Majesty should fill the last years of my life with bitterness. As for the rest, I cannot accept the requests expressed in your letter, nor adhere to the principles it contains. I once more turn to God and place my cause, which is His, entirely in His hands. I pray that He may grant abundant grace to Your Majesty to deliver you from every danger and accord you that mercy of which you have so great a need.⁸

The king's perfunctory solicitation elicited the pope's requisite retort. Indeed, on the same day that San Martino met with the pope, Italy's ambassador to France, Costantino Nigra, telegraphed Emilio Visconti Venosta, minister of foreign affairs, with the news that France's new anticlerical Government of National Defense, installed on September 4, 1870, was essentially granting Italy *carte blanche* to resolve the Roman question: "Jules Favre mi ha annunciato che nella questione romana il governo francese preferirebbe lasciarci fare e anche che ci lascerebbe fare con piacere" (Jules Favre [France's minister of foreign affairs] has informed me that regarding the Roman question the French government would prefer to let us handle it, and that they would be pleased to let us handle it).⁹ Hence military preparations for the invasion had begun well before the final attempt at a diplomatic reconciliation. On September 11, Italian troops crossed the frontier to subjugate the pontifical state.

Prelude to the Capture of Rome

Lieutenant General Raffaele Cadorna served as the supreme commander of the Italian army massed along Lazio's borders. Patrick Keyes O'Clery estimated that "it had a nominal force of 81,000 men; its effective force, after making various deductions, was about 65,000 men, and reinforcements to the amount of 10,000 more crossed the frontiers while this army was marching on Rome."¹⁰ Cadorna divided the troops into five divisions led by Generals Diego Angioletti, Nino Bixio, Enrico Cosenz, Emilio Ferrero, and Gustavo Mazé de la Roche. The pontifical forces, under the command of General Hermann Kanzler, found themselves outnumbered by more than five to one. Keyes O'Clery provided rather precise assessments: "General Kanzler had at his disposal an army of the effective strength of about 12,000. The nominal strength was 13,624."¹¹

Resistance, if not futile, was largely symbolic. Following the occupation of Civitavecchia on September 16, Cadorna, at the behest of Vittorio Emanuele II, appealed to Kanzler "di non voler opporre resistenza alla occupazione militare di Roma. [...] Spero che l'E. V., convinta come la

⁸ Letter from Pius IX to Vittorio Emanuele II, 11 September 1870, Archivio Segreto Vaticano (ASV), Archivio Particolare di Pio IX, Sardegna, Sovrani, no. 83.

⁹ Letter from Constantino Nigra to Emilio Visconti Venosta, Paris, 10 September 1870, in *Documenti diplomatici italiani*, prima serie, XIII, no. 732, 516, cited in Heyriès, *La breccia di Porta Pia*, 63.

¹⁰ Keyes O'Clery, *Making of Italy*, 489.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 490.

mia proposta può muovere da ragioni militari, vorrà riflettere a tutta la responsabilità che accompagnerebbe un rifiuto alla medesima, sebbene io la rivolga in nome dell'umanità e della ragione" (to offer no resistance to the military occupation of Rome. [...] I hope that Your Excellency, convinced that my proposal comes from military reasons, will want to consider all the responsibility that would accompany a refusal to it, even though I address it to you in the name of humanity and reason).¹² Kanzler's reply was immediate:

Ella fa appello ai sentimenti di umanità, che certamente a niuno stanno più a cuore che a coloro i quali hanno la felicità di servire la Santa Sede, ma non siamo noi che abbiamo in qualche modo provocato il sacrilegio attacco di cui siamo vittime. A lei quindi spetta il mostrarsi animato da tali sentimenti umanitari, desistendo dall'ingiusta aggressione. [...] Io pure spero che V. E. rifletterà, quale immensa responsabilità incontra innanzi a Dio ed al Tribunale della Storia spingendo fino all'ultimo la già troppa inoltrata violenza.

You appeal to humanitarian sentiments, which surely are no dearer to anyone than to those who have the pleasure of serving the Holy See. We are not the ones, however, who in any way provoked the sacrilegious attack of which we are the victims. Thus it is up to you to show that you are moved by these humanitarian sentiments by refraining from this unjust aggression. [...] I too hope that Your Excellency will reflect upon the immense responsibility that lies before you when facing God and the Tribunal of History, in pushing this already too advanced violence to its extreme end.¹³

The concerns of the pope and the king were somewhat at odds with this posturing between generals whose principal concern was military honor. Given the absence of international succor and his forces' military inferiority, Pius IX recognized the impossibility of retaining the papal territories; however, conceding the Eternal City's sovereignty reeked of acquiescence. The pope, dreading inexorable defeat, and the king, anticipating complete victory, redefined the Roman question into one of optics. The former risked moral capital while the latter risked diplomatic fallout should the conflict escalate to dramatic bloodshed and substantial loss of life. The theatrical solution: a subtle ploy to balance a papal play of determined resistance against an Italian display of reticent force.

Two days later, Cesare Ricotti-Magnani, Italy's minister of war, sent Cadorna a telegram with instructions to attack: "Essendo esauriti i mezzi conciliativi, Governo del Re ha deciso, che le truppe operanti sotto i di lei ordini debbano impadronirsi di forza della città di Roma, salva sempre la Città Leonina [...] Nel comunicarle questo ordine, mi limito a rammentarle, che le condizioni politiche richiedono più che mai prudenza, moderazione e prontezza" (Since all conciliatory means have been exhausted, the Government of the King has decided that the troops operating under your orders must forcibly take possession of the city of Rome, except for the Leonine City [...] In conveying this order to you, I would remind you that the political conditions require, more than ever, prudence, moderation, and readiness).¹⁴

Vittorio Emanuele II's concern was not capturing the city, which was a given, but rather that this military action could deteriorate into a battle that would draw the ire of the international

¹² Cadorna, *La liberazione di Roma*, 159–60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 160–61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

community. For different reasons, Pius IX called for caution and restraint. He feared that bloodshed would irredeemably stain the moral fabric of the Church. Hence he called for resistance, but only to the degree necessary to make it clear that Cadorna would have to take the city by force.

The pope's initial orders to Kanzler were to surrender when the Italian troops attacked, but the general implored the pontiff to allow for a token defense to preserve military honor. Pius IX assented to Kanzler's request and, on September 19, stipulated:

[O]ra che si va a consumare un gran sacrilegio e la più enorme ingiustizia, e la truppa di un re cattolico senza provocazione anzi, senza nemmeno l'apparenza di qualunque motivo cinge di assedio la capitale dell'Orbe Cattolico, sento in primo luogo bisogno di ringraziare Lei, signor generale, e tutta la truppa nostra [...] In quanto poi alla durata della difesa, sono in dovere di ordinare che questa debba unicamente consistere in una protesta, atta a constatare la violenza e nulla più, cioè di aprire trattative per la resa ai primi colpi di cannone. In un momento in cui l'Europa intera deplora le vittime numerosissime, conseguenza di una guerra fra due grandi nazioni, non si dica mai che il Vicario di Gesù Cristo, quantunque ingiustamente assalito, abbia ad acconsentire a qualunque spargimento di sangue. La causa nostra è di Dio, e noi mettiamo tutta nelle sue mani la nostra difesa.

Now that a great sacrilege and the most enormous injustice are taking place, and the troops of a Catholic king—without provocation, or rather without even the appearance of any reason—lay siege to the capital of the Catholic world, I feel first the need to thank you, General, and all our troops. [...] As for the duration of the defense, I am obliged to order that it must consist solely of a protest to verify the violence and nothing more. That is to say, begin negotiations for surrender at the first cannon shots. At a time when the whole of Europe deplores the large numbers of victims resulting from a war between two great nations [France and Prussia], let it never be said that the Vicar of Jesus Christ, although unjustly attacked, has consented to any shedding of blood. Our cause belongs to God, and we place our defense entirely in his hands.¹⁵

This slight shift in the defensive strategy—from surrendering at first shot to first breach—had the unintended though predictable entropic consequence of increasing battlefield chaos and, therefore, the unnecessary loss of life.¹⁶

The Mythography of the Capture of Rome in Print

The capture of Rome proved to be far bloodier than expected. On the eve of the battle, Cadorna laid out a coordinated plan of attack:

[D]omani 20 si darà l'attacco a Roma da ciascuna divisione, nella zona di terreno ad essa assegnata [...] Apriranno il fuoco alle ore 5.15 antimeridiane le divisioni Angioletti e Ferrero, destinate soltanto ad attirare sopra di loro l'attenzione del

¹⁵ De Cesare, *Roma e lo Stato del Papa*, 726.

¹⁶ See Giacomo Martina, *Pio IX (1867–1878)* (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1990), 239–43.

difensore; ma agiranno tuttavia a fondo anch'esse, presentandosene l'occasione. Il vero attacco sarà fatto alle porte Pia e Salara, cioè dalle divisioni Mazé e Cosenz.

Tomorrow, the twentieth, the attack on Rome will be launched by each division, in the territorial zone assigned to it [...] The Angioletti and Ferrero divisions will open fire at 5:15 a.m., intended only to draw the defender's attention to them; however, they will also act decisively if the opportunity presents itself. The real attack will be made at the Pia and Salara gate by the Mazé and Cosenz divisions.¹⁷

While not choreographed, the attack bore a whiff of theatricality. The offense and the defense both had pre-established constraints on their actions. Both sides agreed that Rome would fall, but, with the eyes of the world upon them, the fall would come with a whimper not a bang.

The entire event was carefully chronicled and became a spectacle. Conscious of the momentous undertaking, Lanza had journalists embedded with the troops despite Cadorna's reservations. The general was not fond of having the press corps follow the campaign. He described them as that "nugolo di corrispondenti di giornali, e qualcuno pur troppo raccomandato dai ministri stessi e che, avidi di notizie, spiavano qualunque passo del generale e del suo stato maggiore, assediavano, molestavano con domande indiscrete, e quando scarseggiavano di notizie ne inventavano, e sovente senza saperlo" (swarm of newspaper correspondents, some unfortunately recommended by the ministers themselves, who, greedy for news, stalk the every move of the general and his staff, besieging and harassing us with indiscreet questions, and, when they are short of news, make it up, often without even knowing it).¹⁸

Some of the journalists who buzzed around the troops included: Edoardo Arbib, writing for the Florentine daily *Gazzetta del Popolo*;¹⁹ Carlo Arrivabene, a correspondent for the London paper *The Daily Telegraph*;²⁰ a twenty-three-year-old named Edmondo De Amicis who wrote for both the army's *Italia Militare* and Florence's *La Nazione*;²¹ Giuseppe Luciani, a correspondent

¹⁷ Antonio Di Piero, *L'ultimo giorno del Papa Re, 20 settembre 1870: la breccia di porta Pia* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), 81. Di Piero reconstructs in quasi-reportage fashion an hour-by-hour account of the day's events.

¹⁸ Cadorna, *La liberazione di Roma*, 146–47.

¹⁹ Edoardo Arbib (1840–1906) was born in Florence to a Jewish family from Livorno. He fought in the Second Italian War of Independence and then joined Giuseppe Garibaldi in Sicily in 1861. Arbib became editor of the Florentine daily *La Nazione* in 1863, and he founded the politically moderate Roman paper, *La Libertà*, shortly after the city's capture in 1870. He later served in Parliament as a deputy and then as a senator. He authored several political works including the four volume *Cinquant'anni di storia parlamentare del Regno d'Italia*, 4 vols. (Rome: Tipografia della Camera dei Deputati, 1898–1907), as well as five feuilletons. See Bruno di Porto, "Edoardo Arbib deputato di Viterbo," *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, terza serie, 39, no. 7/8 (July–August 1973): 429–43.

²⁰ Carlo Arrivabene Valenti Gonzaga (1824–1874) fought in the First Italian War of Independence, after which, to avoid capture by the Austrian police, he went into exile in England where he served as a correspondent for the *Daily News* during the 1866 campaign. He then became a correspondent for *The Daily Telegraph* for the Rome campaign. Arrivabene was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in the IX, X, and XI legislatures. See Robert O. J. Van Nuffel, "Carlo Arrivabene Valenti Gonzaga combattente, e testimone," *Bollettino Storico Mantovano* III (1958): 327–41.

²¹ Edmondo De Amicis (1846–1908) is best remembered for the children's novel *Cuore* (Milan: Treves, 1886) and the non-fiction travelogue *Costantinopoli* (Milan: Treves, 1877), but he began his career first as a soldier before becoming a journalist. He attended the Accademia Militare di Modena until 1865, and he fought in the battle of Custoza (24 June 1866). Preferring the pen to the sword, in 1867 he began to write for *L'Italia militare*, the official journal of the Ministry of Defense. The following year, he also became a correspondent for the Florentine daily *La Nazione*. In 1871, De Amicis retired from the military to dedicate himself to journalism and writing.

for the Turinese paper *Gazzetta del Popolo*;²² Ugo Pesci, who also wrote for a Florentine paper, *Fanfulla*;²³ and Roberto Stuart, a correspondent for London's *The Daily News*.²⁴ Florence, as the Kingdom of Italy's capital, served as the informational epicenter for the transmission of news; London—as the capital of a non-Catholic country that had provided moral and physical succor to Risorgimento exiles—served as the international news outlet to frame and curate the historical enterprise.

The battle lasted five hours. The assault focused on establishing a breach, but not every general followed Cadorna's commands to the letter. Nino Bixio fired cannons over the Aurelian Walls in the vicinity of the San Pancrazio gate, putting civilians in peril and intensifying the uncertainty and tension that would lead to tragic errors and unnecessary deaths. When the fighting ended, the loss of human life far exceeded what either side had originally anticipated: 69 dead (49 Italian soldiers and 20 Papal Zouaves) and another 192 wounded (143 Italian soldiers and 49 Papal Zouaves).²⁵

While the capture of Rome could not be televised, the embedded pro-Italy journalists portrayed the campaign as embodying a heroic and epic impetus. With literary and romantic flare, Ugo Pesci rendered the day's first light: "Gli albori del crepuscolo mattutino cominciavano a tingersi del croceo color dell'aurora sul quale si disegnava già chiaramente la bruna massa delle mura di Roma. [...] L'aria era pura, odorosa, la mattinata bellissima, senza una nuvola nel cielo" (The dawn of morning's first light was beginning to be tinged with the crocus-color of daybreak on which the brown mass of Rome's walls was already clearly visible. [...] The air was clean, fragrant, the morning was beautiful, without a cloud in the sky).²⁶ Yet, even as Pesci formulated a compelling narrative, his description of the day underscored the performative aspects of the battle. Rather than fear and trepidation, the siege of the city elicited a bread-and-circuses curiosity that drew people out of their homes to view it:

Il sole, levatosi in tutto il suo splendore, tingeva di magnifici colori la campagna romana. [...] Spettatori ne sono usciti fuori da tutte le parti, precisamente come alle

²² Giuseppe Luciani (1843–1899), who had fought with Garibaldi, is now remembered for the cause célèbre of the day: ordering the murder of his former friend and associate, the journalist Raffaele Sonzogno on February 6, 1875.

²³ Ugo Pesci (1846–1908), a constitutional monarchist, was an official in the grenadiers and fought in the Third Italian War of Independence. He served as a correspondent for the Florentine paper *Fanfulla* and wrote two memoirs on the conquest of Rome: *Come siamo entrati in Roma: ricordi*, preface by Giosuè Carducci (Milan: Treves, 1895) and *I primi anni di Roma capitale (1870–1878)* (Florence: Bemporad, 1907). See Costanza D'Elia, "Pesci, Ugo," *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 82 (2015), [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ugo-pesci_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ugo-pesci_(Dizionario-Biografico)/).

²⁴ Roberto Stuart (Robert Pietro Stuart; 1846–1892) was the son of a Scotsman, James Montgomery Stuart, and a Florentine, Maria Gherardini. He was a journalist, novelist, and translator. Politically conservative, he published a booklet, *Il partito Conservatore in Italia* (Milan: Treves, 1878), which, modeled on British conservatism, argued for the historical necessity of conciliation between Catholicism and moderate liberalism. He translated *Lothair* by Benjamin Disraeli into Italian and wrote feuilletons including *Il Marchese del Cigno* (Milan: Treves, 1875) and *La Marchesa di Santa Pia* (Milan: Treves, 1877). He wrote for the Roman dailies *Gazzetta del popolo* and *Il Conservatore*, the latter of which he founded and edited. See Simonetta Berbeglia, "James Montgomery Stuart: A Scotsman in Florence," in *Exiles, Emigrés and Intermediaries: Anglo-Italian Cultural Transactions*, ed. Barbara Schaff (Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2010), 117–30.

²⁵ Livio Ciancarella, "Le operazioni militari del 1870," in *La breccia di Porta Pia: raccolta di studi nel 150° anniversario (1870–2020)*, ed. Francesco Anghelone, Pierantonio Piatti, and Emilio Tirone (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), 35.

²⁶ Pesci, *Come siamo entrati in Roma*, 106–7. See Francesco Perfetti, "XX settembre 1870, un giorno tra cronaca, memoria e storia," in Anghelone, Piatti, and Tirone, *La breccia di Porta Pia*, 19–26. Pesci gathered his articles and recollections to publish his memoir of Rome's capture on its twenty-fifth anniversary.

grandi manovre. Sono emigrati, erano abitanti dei paesi più vicini della Sabina: fatto sta che aumentavano sempre di numero e d'audacia, si che fu necessario obbligarli a restare indietro. Dietro le batterie di villa Macciolini passeggiavano, l'una a braccetto dell'altra, due giovani donne. Le batterie della 12^a divisione vanno a collocarsi ancora più avanti. Seguiamo quel movimento: tutti gli spettatori lo seguono. Pochi minuti dopo una granata cade a non molta distanza. Lo sbandamento degli spettatori è precipitoso, le due giovani donne gridano come disperate. Ma, poiché nessuno è rimasto offeso, la quiete ritorna, gli spettatori si fanno coraggio e vanno di nuovo ai loro posti di poca prima. Scorsi altri pochi minuti passa vicino a noi una lettiga portata da quattro soldati del 41° fanteria. Vi giace un artigliere ferito e lo accompagna un medico militare. La vista di quel primo ferito produce anche maggiore impressione di quella prodotta dalla granata caduta. Gli spettatori si diradano: le due giovani donne spariscono.

The sun, having risen in all its splendor, painted the Roman countryside with magnificent colors [...] Spectators came out from everywhere, just like for the big military maneuvers. These people had come to Rome from the nearest Sabine villages. They numbered so many and were so increasingly bold that it was necessary to force them back. Behind the Villa Macciolini artillery two young women were strolling arm in arm. [...] The 12th Division is moving its artillery further forward. We follow this movement: all the spectators follow it. A few minutes later a shell falls a short distance away. The crowd of spectators scatters in haste, and the two young women scream wildly. However, since no one was injured, calm is restored, the spectators summon their courage and return to their places as before. After a few minutes, a litter carried by four soldiers of the 41st Infantry passes near us. The sight of that first casualty produces a greater impression than the impression produced by the artillery shell that fell. The spectators disperse, and the two young women disappear.²⁷

Like bleating curious sheep, residents from the surrounding towns flocked to view the battle, only to flee at a sudden noise or at an unwelcome sight. Oblivious to their own obstructionism, they pressed forward, craning their necks, and, if not for their precipitous flight, could be said to have ruminated in nescience.

The correspondents suitably lauded the triumph of Cadorna's troops and the enthusiasm of what they described as the liberated populace. Roberto Stuart dispatched his *avant la lettre* New Journalism impressions, entitled "The Capture and Occupation of Rome," to London:

What a glorious day! History will record the overthrow, on September 20th, of a despotic Government which was a scandal to Europe. [...] I never saw such enthusiasm in the whole course of my life: old men with tears in their eyes jumping about and waving their hats and their handkerchiefs; the windows crammed with ladies waving tricolour flags and ribbons, and deafening cries of exultation. [...] The general commanding one of the brigades was besieged by men, women, and children, kissing his hands, and the very legs of his horse, and crying, "Long live our liberators!" Some fifty men ran up the staircase and broke the door open. After

²⁷ Pesci, *Come siamo entrati in Roma*, 111.

a few minutes they were covering the steeple and were hoisting the Italian flag on the tower of the Capitol. That event, foretold by Count Cavour, and which inspired every act of the Italians during eleven years, was now fulfilled, and I was fortunate to see it. The bells began pealing, the military band playing the Royal March, and thousands of voices crying “Long live Victor Emmanuel in the Capitol!”²⁸

Pesci framed the importance and solemnity of the event as an act of liberation and as the teleological culmination of the Risorgimento. Nevertheless, his own actions betrayed a certain nonchalance about the momentous gravity of the occasion. Rather than continue to document the dramatic situation on the night of the breaching of Rome’s walls, he opted to lay down his notebook and pick up his Baedeker to go sightseeing with Edmondo De Amicis.

Indeed, De Amicis, after the initial exaltation, subordinated the day’s military, diplomatic, and political events to satisfy his bucket list. At 11 p.m., he hailed a carriage and went to visit the Colosseum:

È notte fitta, e il classico lume di luna sul Colosseo non risplende ancora. Non importa; il cielo è stellato, e vedrò del sublime monumento almeno i contorni. Da tanti anni ardevo di vederlo! [...] Sguardo e pensiero si levano più in alto, e dal profondo del cuore, col più ardente palpito che potrà mai destare in me l’amor di patria, sciolgo un ringraziamento a quella Giustizia nel cui nome l’Italia [...] è entrata oggi in Roma e ha inalberato sulla torre del Campidoglio la sua bandiera gloriosa, benedetta ed amata.

Thick is the night, and the classic moonlight does not yet shine upon the Colosseum. It does not matter. The sky is filled with stars, and I will see at least the outlines of the sublime monument. I have been longing to see it for so many years! [...] My gaze and thoughts rise higher, and from the depths of my heart, with the most fervent beating that love of country could ever stir in me, I offer thanks to that Justice in whose name Italy [...] has entered Rome today and has raised its glorious, blessed, and beloved flag on the Capitoline tower.²⁹

Ever attentive to the moral connotations of that to which he bore witness, De Amicis inextricably fused the personal with the public. In reimagining the Flavian Amphitheater as a symbol of national unity, he transmuted what was a personal desire to visit the Colosseum into the fulfillment of a national patriotic dream.

Perhaps no other writer did more than De Amicis to memorialize Rome’s capture and to lionize the Bersaglieri troops in the popular imagination.³⁰ For example, in the children’s novel

²⁸ Roberto Stuart, “The Capture and Occupation of Rome,” *The Daily News* [London], September 28, 1870, 6.

²⁹ Edmondo De Amicis, *Impressioni di Roma*, 2nd ed. (Florence: Tipografia P. Favero e comp., 1870), 56–57. De Amicis collected and republished his articles on the capture of Rome in this volume. Cf. Edmondo De Amicis, *Le tre capitali: Torino, Firenze, Roma* (Catania: Giannotta, 1898), 103–235.

³⁰ In addition to his reportage, De Amicis treated the events of September 20 and the Bersaglieri in his fiction and poetry. See, for example, the episodes in *Cuore* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1906), the short story “Un gran giorno,” in *Novelle: nuova edizione riveduta e ampliata dall’autore* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1878), 271–300, and the poems “Il 20 settembre 1870,” “Sotto le mura di Roma (prima del 20 settembre),” and “Il bersagliere,” in *Poesie* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1882), 119–20, 213.

Cuore (1886), set in Turin in 1881–82, the narrator, eleven-year-old Enrico Bottini, recorded his impressions of the military parade held on June 11:

Sfilavano ancor gli alpini, che corse un fremito nella folla, e i bersaglieri, l'antico dodicesimo battaglione, i primi che entrarono in Roma per la breccia di Porta Pia, bruni, lesti, vivi, coi pennacchi sventolanti, passarono come un'ondata d'un torrente nero, facendo echeggiare la piazza di squilli acuti di tromba che sembravan grida d'allegrezza.

The Alpine troops were still parading when a quiver ran through the crowd, and the Bersaglieri, the old Twelfth Battalion, the first to enter Rome through the breach of Porta Pia, dark, alert, quick, with their plumes fluttering in the wind, passed like the wave of a black stream, making the piazza ring with high-pitched trumpet blasts that seemed like shouts of joy.³¹

The episode not only served to commemorate the Bersaglieri's role in capturing Rome, but it also provided a bookend to the story, *La piccola vedetta lombarda* (The Little Lombard Lookout), which young Bottini related in the entry of November 26. In this short narrative text, the Bersaglieri paid tribute to a nameless child-patriot who died for his country. Together these stories contributed to a Bersaglieri hagiography that was also captured on canvas.

The Mythography of the Capture of Rome in Painting

Artistic interpretations of the events of September 20 tended to focus on the breach of the Aurelian Walls, the heroic depiction of Major Giacomo Pagliari (the commander of the Bersaglieri's Thirty-Fourth Battalion), and the Bersaglieri as the military embodiment of the Kingdom of Italy.³² Representative of this last theme was the romantic and dynamic brushwork of the Neapolitan painter Michele Cammarano (1835–1920), who glorified the Bersaglieri in *Carica dei bersaglieri alle mura di Roma* (1871) and portrayed them in at least three other paintings, including *Bambini bersaglieri* (1875), *Bersaglieri* (1884), and *I bersaglieri (Il 19 settembre 1870)* (1914).

Cammarano was not an eyewitness to the breach; however, *Carica dei bersaglieri alle mura di Roma*, which depicts the fortitude of the charge as a reflection of the nation's determination, was an early and influential depiction of the attack. Subsequent visual representations, such as *La breccia di Porta Pia* (1880) by the Florentine artist Carlo Ademollo (1824–1911) and *La breccia di Porta Pia con la morte del maggiore dei bersaglieri Giacomo Pagliari* (1882) by Archimede Tranzi (1851–1941), reinforced Cammarano's visual narrative that the first to storm the breach were the Bersaglieri. Their assault on the city's fortifications became part of their legend and found

³¹ De Amicis, *Cuore*, 300–1.

³² For an overview of art representing Risorgimento battles, see Fernando Mazzocca, "La rappresentazione della guerra nella pittura risorgimentale," in *Storia d'Italia: Il Risorgimento; Annali 22*, ed. Alberto Mario Banti and Paul Ginsborg (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), 721–43; Caterina Bon Valsassina, "Il Concorso Ricasoli nel 1859: le opere di pittura," *Ricerche di storia dell'arte* 23 (1984): 4–32; Ettore Spalletti, *Gli anni del Caffè Michelangelo (1848–1861)* (Florence: Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, 1985), 180–91; Caterina Bon Valsassina, "La pittura a Roma nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento," in *La pittura in Italia: L'Ottocento*, ed. Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Pirovano (Milan: Electa, 1991), 431–68.

testimonials in the accounts of Ugo Pesci, Roberto Stuart, and De Amicis, whose chronicle, while imprecise, did not preclude such a reading.³³

Similarly, the death of Giacomo Pagliari (1822–1870) at the foot of the Aurelian Walls contributed to the mythography of both September 20 and the Bersaglieri. Pagliari led the Thirty-Fourth Battalion and fell while approaching the breach. Although celebrated as a martyr for the cause—he was awarded the Gold Medal of Military Valor posthumously by royal decree on December 11, 1870—Pagliari may well have succumbed to friendly fire rather than to that of the Papal Zouaves.³⁴ Although not named, he figured prominently in an early pictorial representation of the assault, *La breccia di Porta Pia*, by the Dutch artist Carel Max Quaedvlieg (1823–1874). In addition to being the central subject of Quaedvlieg’s, Ademollo’s, and Tranzi’s paintings, Pagliari was also the focus of a fresco by Giuseppe Vizzotto Alberti (1862–1931), *La morte del maggiore Giacomo Pagliari presso la Porta Pia* (post-1892), located on the top floor of San Martino della Battaglia’s monumental tower, which was intended to represent the culmination of a memorial continuum of the Risorgimento journey. The fresco depicted Pagliari while in the throes of death, heroically urging his comrades onward into the breach. Less dramatically, in Rome’s Gianicolo Park, a **bust** (1895) by the Roman sculptor Adolfo Pantaresi (1830–1927) and a plaque (1903) commemorated the major in marble among other heroes of the Risorgimento.

Together, these artists infused gravitas and martyrdom into Rome’s capture while also producing and reinforcing a hagiography of Giacomo Pagliari. Yet painting is a time-consuming and spatially constrained art. To speak to the historical moment, publicize the iconography of the Risorgimento, and reach a broad audience simultaneously required a different medium: photography.

The Mythography of the Capture of Rome in Photography

One of the most celebrated photographs of the breaching of the Aurelian Walls altered the location to Porta Pia to create a visually striking and readily identifiable focal point for viewers. The photographer, Gioacchino Altobelli (1814–post-1878), had received written authorization from General Cadorna to stage the Bersaglieri at the city gate in order to recreate a dynamic and history-defining moment.³⁵ Even in 1870, a candid shot held monetary value. Altobelli reinterpreted and shot *Assalto alle barricate e alla breccia di Porta Pia, 1870* on September 21. Despite its static mise-en-scène and engineered production, the image captured the public imagination as the iconic representation of the event. Transformed into a souvenir postcard with the date September 20, 1870 printed below the title, the photograph achieved wide circulation and served as the government’s official depiction of the event. Yet alongside Altobelli’s popular postcard a retouched version began to circulate. Apparently dissatisfied with the number of soldiers provided for the occasion, an anonymous prankster opted to replicate them in an implausible **photomontage** to almost comical effect. If this photograph were to serve as documentary evidence for the capture of Rome, then conspiracy theorists would well be justified in questioning whether the event ever took place. Rather than document Rome’s capture, these manipulated images rhetorically

³³ Pesci, *Come siamo entrati in Roma*, 120–26; Stuart, “The Capture and Occupation of Rome,” 6; De Amicis, *Impressioni di Roma*, 42.

³⁴ See Società Storica Cremonese, ed., *Dizionario biografico del Risorgimento cremonese* (Cremona: Camera di commercio, industria, artigianato e agricoltura, 2013), 424–25; Massimo Pagliari and Liliana Ruggeri, eds., *Giacomo Antonio Innocente Pagliari (1822–1870): l’uomo, il bersagliere, il veterano delle storiche battaglie dell’unità d’Italia* (Rome: Studium, 2020).

³⁵ See <https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/PhotographicHeritage/1201350187>.

celebrated it. Altobelli did not necessarily intend to alter history: indeed, he also photographed the actual **breach**. However, perhaps because the rubble was less monumental than the gate, the former was rarely reprinted.

Fortunately, Lodovico Tuminello (1824–1907) provided a detailed photographic reportage of what transpired in the days following the battle. Merging three shots to compose a **panoramic image** of the Aurelian Walls, Tuminello corrected the myopic and misleading impression created by Altobelli's staging.³⁶ Taken as well on September 21, the panorama clearly showed the breach's actual location, which was approximately fifty meters to the right of Porta Pia.

Whether anyone managed to take an action shot of the assault is unlikely. A rather low-quality **picture**, which Wladimiro Settimelli attributed to the renowned Roman photographer Tommaso Cuccioni, purportedly captured the moment.³⁷ If it were indeed taken on September 20, it must have been shot after the battle, given the proximity of the tripod and the few soldiers in the frame. Furthermore, the attribution made by Settimelli is clearly incorrect inasmuch as Cuccioni died on August 23, 1864. Regardless of whether this shot was taken in medias res, it contributed to a growing photographic corpus that visually memorialized the event.³⁸

Unlike painting, photography connoted modernity. These images, which seemed to capture reality, focused on a new Italy and relegated the past to the dustbin of memory. Together these paintings and photographs—particularly, those of Ademollo and Altobelli—coalesced to construct a lasting visual patrimony in the public memory.

The Mythography and Demythologization of the Capture of Rome in Film

Both Altobelli's and Tuminello's photos benefitted from cross-marketing. Altobelli's acquired an aura of officiality because they illustrated Raffaele Cadorna's memoirs. In contrast, those taken by Tuminello served as a referent for Filoteo Alberini when he shot what became known as Italy's first narrative film, *La presa di Roma* (1905).

Projected onto a screen placed in front of Porta Pia on September 20, 1905, *La presa di Roma* not only commemorated the thirty-fifth anniversary of Rome's capture, but also aesthetically and commercially integrated the seventh art into Italy's national identity formation process. The confluence of these diverse factors (that is, projection location, film topic, projection date, film status) contributed to *La presa di Roma*'s symbolic and iconic status in the Italian film industry's history and development. Nevertheless, this integral narrative has a splice: its premiere was not in Rome on September 20 but in Livorno on the sixteenth of that month.³⁹

The patriotic film consists of a sequence of eight shots lasting ten minutes, of which only four minutes have survived. Each shot constituted an autonomous scene. The film begins with General

³⁶ Photographers frequently retouched pictures, but Tuminello was somewhat of a purist and seems to have strongly opposed this practice. Apparently, at his studio in 21 Via dei Condotti in Rome, he hung a sign that read “Non deturpate dai foto-ritocchi” (Not marred by photo retouching). See Silvio Negro, *Seconda Roma 1850–1870* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1966), 456.

³⁷ Wladimiro Settimelli, *Storia avventurosa della fotografia* (Rome: Fotografare, 1970).

³⁸ Other photographers of the Porta Pia events include Enrico Verzaschi (1814–1878), Enrico Valenziani (1842–1908), and the brothers Antonio D'Alessandri (1818–1893) and Paolo Francesco D'Alessandri (1824–1889). See Lamberto Vitali, *Il Risorgimento nella fotografia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979); Piero Becchetti, *Roma nelle fotografie dei fratelli D'Alessandri 1858–1930* (Rome: Editore Colombo, 1996).

³⁹ Renato Bovari and Rosalia Del Porro, *La macchina delle meraviglie: gli albori del cinema a Livorno (1895–1915)* (San Giuliano Terme: Felici Editore, 2005), 159–63. For a broad analysis of the film, see Michele Canosa, ed., *1905: la presa di Roma. Alle origini del cinema italiano* (Bologna: Le Mani-Cineteca di Bologna, 2006).

Carchidio and his failed attempt to convince General Kanzler to surrender, and concludes with Pius IX ordering Kanzler to raise the white flag. The final image, known as the apotheosis, depicts Italy as a young woman with Camillo Cavour and Vittorio Emanuele II to her left and Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi to her right. *La presa di Roma* remains the only film produced to date that focuses exclusively on the events of September 20, 1870

In 1923, Silvio Laurenti Rosa (1892–1965) directed *Dalle cinque giornate alla breccia di Porta Pia*. This 62-minute patriotic and episodic film presented the leading personalities and events of the Risorgimento, beginning with the Milanese insurrection of 1848 and culminating with a reenactment of the breaching of Porta Pia. Ideologically inconstant, Laurenti Rosa sought to integrate himself into the emergent socio-political order by projecting a revisionist historical account of the nation-building process that found its culmination in Fascism’s March on Rome. Forgettable and largely forgotten, the film returned to public consciousness when it was screened at the 1994 edition of Pesaro’s *Mostra internazionale del nuovo cinema* and later restored by the Cineteca Nazionale in 2006. After *Dalle cinque giornate alla breccia di Porta Pia*, moviegoers would have to wait almost fifty years for Rome’s capture to return to the screen.⁴⁰

In fact, of all the Italian films produced since 1923, only five films and two made-for-television movies have addressed Rome’s capture. Their preferred *modus praesentandi* was comedy, as attested by *Mio padre monsignore* (dir. Antonio Racioppi, 1971), *Arrivano i bersaglieri* (dir. Luigi Magni, 1980), *Superfantozzi* (dir. Neri Parenti, 1986), and the made-for-television *La notte di Pasquino* (dir. Luigi Magni, 2003). Indeed, this comedic projection reached its apex, or nadir, with *Superfantozzi*, a parody of the historical spectacular in the style of Mel Brooks’s *History of the World, Part I* (1981). In the shortest of the film’s twelve episodes, Ugo Fantozzi (played by Paolo Villaggio), a modest papal employee, sees the house he has just purchased destroyed by “piemontese” cannonballs and the Bersaglieri streaming through the breach in his kitchen. At the scene’s conclusion, the voice-over declaims: “Con l’annessione della città di Roma al Regno d’Italia era cambiata l’amministrazione ma non la vita di Fantozzi” (With the annexation of the city of Rome to the Kingdom of Italy, the administration changed but not the life of Fantozzi). In substituting “Italians” for “Fantozzi”—who embodies the tragic archetype of the middle class—the film yields the at once cynical and resigned interpretation of what unification meant to the general populace.

The films and TV miniseries that treated Rome’s capture in dramatic fashion, such as *Correva l’anno di grazia 1870* (dir. Alfredo Giannetti, 1972), *Rapito* (dir. Marco Bellocchio, 2023), and *L’ultimo papa re* (dir. Luca Manfredi, 2013), have tended to relegate the event to the background as a non-diegetic historical referent for the primary plotline. *Correva l’anno di grazia 1870* utilized a familial drama as a stand-in for the national drama. *L’ultimo papa re* drew on Gaetano Sanvittore’s novel *I misteri del processo Monti e Tognetti* (1869), which also served as source material for the film *In nome del papa re* (1977), to explore political intrigue in the period leading up to September 20, like *Correva l’anno di grazia 1870*. *Rapito*’s subject was the infamous Edgardo Mortara case, in which Rome’s conquest served as a historical turning point in the emotional narrative.

⁴⁰ For an overview of Laurenti Rosa’s political and artistic trajectories, see Silvio Alovio and Luca Mazzei, “‘Il poi è sempre peggiore’: le memorie non riconciliate di Silvio Laurenti Rosa,” in *Silvio Laurenti Rosa: un regista che si confessa*, ed. Sergio Taffetti (Rome: Edizioni di Bianco e Nero; Iacobelli editore, 2016): 145–175.

The preeminent visual art form of the twentieth century failed to find a compelling storyline in the Risorgimento's culminating event. The reasons for this uninspired neglect can be traced to the historical reception and recognition of September 20 in the years following *La presa di Roma*.⁴¹

Fêting and Forgetting September 20

In the immediate aftermath of Rome's capture, the date was solemnly celebrated throughout the country. Thanks to Francesco Crispi's efforts, its importance was formalized with its designation as a national holiday in 1895.⁴² In this period, a slew of overwrought patriotic literature transmogrified the victors into paladins. Today, the portrayal in this literature of the battle as an epos reads instead as a mock epic with more bathos than pathos. In what may be a first, literary critics are unanimous in their judgment that these creative efforts have no merit.

By 1910, the holiday had already lost its unifying appeal as political factions imbued it with partisan significance. This shifting meaning and evolving historical circumstances explain why filmmakers neglected the subject. *L'Inferno* (Milano Films, 1911) signaled the dawn of the feature-length film, but the Great War and the ensuing political and economic crises plunged Italy's film producers into the depths of bankruptcy. Just as cinema was developing the language and technology to reimagine Rome's capture, the holiday appeared increasingly passé. Antonio Gramsci noted as much:

Ogni nuova élite che si affaccia alla soglia della storia, o si crea le sue feste, le sue giornate memorabilia, o continua a celebrare quelle che la tradizione ha tramandato, mutando il loro significato insensibilmente, svuotandole del vecchio contenuto, sostituendo nuovi evviva ai vecchi evviva, nuovi abbasso ai vecchi abbasso. Il XX Settembre è una di queste giornate, una di queste feste. [...] È nei piccoli paesi di provincia che il XX Settembre ha avuto maggior fortuna e si è radicato profondamente. [...] Chi non ricorda qualcuna di queste giornate, sorridendo al ricordo, sentendo ora tutto il ridicolo di quelle dimostrazioni. [...] [A]nche nei paesi di campagna il XX Settembre è ridiventato per loro un qualunque giorno del calendario.

Every new élite that emerges at the threshold of history either creates its own celebrations, its memorable days, or continues to celebrate those that tradition has passed down, subtly changing their meaning, emptying them of their old content, replacing new cheers with the old ones, new jeers with the old ones. September 20 is one of these days, one of these celebrations. [...] It is in the small provincial towns that September 20 has had the greatest success and has taken deep root. [...] Who

⁴¹ See Giuseppe Pardini, "L'evoluzione delle celebrazioni del XX settembre nella storia d'Italia (1870–2020)," in Anghelone, Piatti, and Tirone, 433–73.

⁴² Niccolò Gallo (1849–1907) first proposed the national holiday to the Chamber of Deputies on May 16, 1889. Nicola Vischi (1849–1914) advanced a similar proposal on December 3, 1891. The holiday was seen as duplicating the meaning of the Festa dello Statuto, which was celebrated on the first Sunday in June. Vischi repropoed the holiday on July 4, 1895. The president of the council, Francesco Crispi (1818–1901), championed the passage of the law through the senate. King Umberto I promulgated the law, no. 401, on July 19, 1895. For an analysis of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations, see Laura Francescangeli, "Il 'Comitato generale per solennizzare il XXV anniversario della liberazione di Roma' e il suo archivio," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome: Italie et Méditerranée* 109, no. 1 (1997): 185–276.

doesn't remember one of these days, smiling at the memory, now feeling all the ridiculousness of those demonstrations. [...] Even in the countryside, September 20 has become just another day on the calendar for them.⁴³

Gramsci was critical of the Masonic and anticlerical undercurrents of these demonstrations, which he interpreted as being in the service of the liberal elite.

Under Fascism, the government downplayed the holiday's significance and then suppressed it in 1930. Although present at the 1924 ceremonies, Mussolini did not participate in them or in any future ones. This deemphasis of September 20 was counterbalanced by the celebration of October 28 to commemorate the March on Rome. Behind this rhetorical strategy lay the idea that 1922, not 1870, marked the true culmination of the Risorgimento with those pesky fifty-two in-between years amounting to a forgettable interregnum. While Rome as capital was a necessary historical passage in the nation's construction, it was also a reminder of the triumph of the liberal monarchy and of rekindled tensions with the Church. Fascism professedly inaugurated a new nation and the new era, consecrated by a new calendar, born on day one of *Anno I* (October 29, 1922) with Mussolini's accession to the office of prime minister.

From 1931 until 1945, September 20 went unacknowledged in any official capacity for pragmatic reasons. The regime had consolidated its power by putting a lid on the Roman question with the Lateran Treaty. In those negotiations, Pius XI had made clear that he wanted the holiday suppressed and replaced with one on February 11 to commemorate the signing of the Lateran Accords.⁴⁴ Mussolini vacillated, but then advanced a faux-Solomonic four-part proposition: 1) acknowledge October 28 as a national holiday; 2) acknowledge March 23, the anniversary of the 1919 founding of the Fascist organization *Fasci di Combattimento*, as a day of civic celebration; 3) suppress September 20 as a holiday; and 4) recognize February 11 as a day of civic celebration.

On November 24, 1930, Mussolini presented the Chamber of Deputies with a bill redesignating the holidays. He encountered resistance during the deliberative session held on December 12, 1930. The impassioned plea in defense of September 20 by Giuseppe Garibaldi's grandson, Ezio Garibaldi, drew such strong applause in the chamber that Mussolini felt obliged to respond:

Il 20 settembre, negli ultimi anni era diventato una parata massonica, inutile e malinconica. [...] Quindi portiamo l'accento sull'11 febbraio, cioè sull'avvenimento, sull'atto che ci riconosce il legittimo pacifico possesso di Roma, perché questo non era mai accaduto prima. Ora, se si continuasse a festeggiare il 20 settembre, noi saremmo semplicemente illogici.

In recent years, September 20 had become a Masonic parade, pointless and melancholic. [...] So let us focus on February 11, on the event, on the act that recognizes our legitimate peaceful possession of Rome, because this had never

⁴³ Antonio Gramsci, "Scenari vecchi e nuovi: XX Settembre," *Avanti!*, September 20, 1916, cited in Antonio Gramsci, *Cronache torinesi, 1913–1917*, ed. Sergio Caprioglio (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 551–52.

⁴⁴ See Francesco Borgongini Duca (Apostolic Nuncio in Italy) to Mussolini, 12 September 1929, ASV, Archivio Nunziatura Italia, pos. 22, fasc. 10, ff. 2r–3r. For an analysis of the negotiations between Pius XI and Mussolini regarding the September 20 holiday, the importance of which is somewhat overstated, see Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 134–42.

happened before. Now, if we were to continue celebrating September 20, we would simply be illogical.⁴⁵

Mussolini's retort, which echoed Gramsci's critique, drew a standing ovation. Further resistance was futile. The bill passed unanimously 271 to 0, and Vittorio Emanuele III promulgated the law, no. 1726, on December 27, 1930.⁴⁶ It went into effect upon its publication in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia* on January 13, 1931.⁴⁷ Porta Pia's breach had become an uncomfortable memory best forgotten.

After World War II, a fractured and fragmented society could not rally behind a defunct holiday's unifying symbolism. Although leftist parties did tend to acknowledge September 20, albeit with little fanfare, the new republic's governing parties, the Democrazia Cristiana (DC) or Christian Democrats *in primis*, opted to ignore the date. In 1947, *L'Unità*, the paper of the Italian Communist Party, and *Il Popolo*, the DC's organ, ran almost identical blurbs without commentary acknowledging the public ceremony held at Porta Pia.⁴⁸ *L'Unità* continued to mark the date in the ensuing years, while *Il Popolo* devoted not a word to the topic until 1957.⁴⁹ When, perhaps influenced by the evolving geopolitical situation following the Hungarian Revolution, the DC unexpectedly advocated rehabilitating the holiday by reframing it within a broad context of Catholic contributions to the Risorgimento.⁵⁰

Furthermore, on the eve of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, the archbishop of Milan and future Pope Paul VI, Giovanni Battista Montini, expounded on the significance and consequences of the papacy's loss of temporal power:

Parve un crollo; e per il dominio territoriale pontificio lo fu [...]. Ma la Provvidenza, ora lo vediamo bene, aveva diversamente disposto le cose, quasi drammaticamente giocando negli avvenimenti. Il Concilio Vaticano I aveva infatti da pochi giorni proclamata somma ed infallibile l'autorità spirituale di quel Papa che praticamente perdeva in quel fatale momento la sua autorità temporale. [...] [M]a com'è noto fu allora che il Papato riprese con inusitato vigore le sue funzioni di Maestro di vita e di testimonia del Vangelo, così da salire a tanta altezza nel governo spirituale della Chiesa e nell'irradiazione morale sul mondo, come prima non mai.

It seemed like a collapse, and for the papal territorial domain, it was indeed one. [...] But Providence, as we can now clearly see, had arranged things differently, almost dramatically playing a role in the events. The First Vatican Council had, in

⁴⁵ Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 24, *Dagli accordi del Laterano al dodicesimo anniversario della fondazione dei fasci (12 febbraio 1929–23 marzo 1931)*, ed. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel (Florence: La Fenice, 1958), 308–9.

⁴⁶ The senate vote, by secret ballot, passed the bill with 144 in favor and 15 against.

⁴⁷ In truth, the holiday's demise had already been ordained. A newspaper article, published on September 20, 1930, announced that this would be the last year the date would be celebrated. See "XX Settembre," *La Stampa* [Turin], September 20, 1930, 6.

⁴⁸ See "Una corona del Comune sulla breccia di P. Pia," *L'Unità* [Rome], 21 September 1947, 2; *Il Popolo*, "Una corona del Comune alla breccia di Porta Pia," *Il Popolo* [Rome], September 21, 1947, 2.

⁴⁹ See, for example, "Il manganello del gesuita," *L'Unità* [Rome], September 22, 1948, 2; "Domani sera alle 18.30 la celebrazione del XX Settembre: A 87 anni dalla breccia... di Porta Pia," *L'Unità* [Rome], September 19, 1957, 4.

⁵⁰ See "Del Bo e Bucciarelli replicano alle speculazioni del XX settembre," *Il Popolo* [Rome], September 21, 1957, 1.

fact, proclaimed just a few days earlier the supreme and infallible spiritual authority of that Pope who practically lost his temporal authority at that fateful moment. [...] As is well known, it was then that the Papacy resumed its roles as a Teacher of life and a witness to the Gospel with unprecedented vigor, rising to such heights in the spiritual governance of the Church and in its moral influence on the world as never before.⁵¹

The subsequent promulgation of the *Dignitatis humanae* (*Of the Dignity of the Human Person*) doctrine, which made explicit the Church's support for the protection of religious liberty, added substance to Montini's statement and further abated the date's significance for the Holy See.⁵² Nevertheless, news coverage of these festivities relegated the stories to the local chronicle page until the commemoration of the hundredth anniversary in 1970.

20 Settembre Today

The centennial celebrations, including a proclamation from the president of the republic, Giuseppe Saragat, were one and done.⁵³ Silence and neglect continued from official quarters for the next fifty years until the sesquicentennial necessitated another tribute. In that time span, any efforts from the political margins to legislate the date as an affirmation of the principle of a secular state received scant attention. For example, on September 18, 2002, Green Party Deputy Pier Paolo Cento presented law proposal no. 3162 to the chamber to recognize September 20 as a civic festival.⁵⁴ Although the sole requirement would have consisted in displaying the national flag on public buildings, the chamber did not deliberate on the proposal. As with all other legislative efforts to acknowledge the anniversary of Rome's unification to Italy, it fell into oblivion.⁵⁵

The 2020 sesquicentennial celebrations attracted considerable academic attention, but the COVID pandemic limited official and public participation.⁵⁶ In the new millennium, the Holy See was no longer an obstacle, but, instead, a celebrant of the Eternal City's status. In fact, Pope Francis, inaugurating the 150th anniversary of Rome as the capital, quoted from Montini's December 10, 1962 statement and further elucidated: "La proclamazione di Roma Capitale fu un evento provvidenziale, che allora suscitò polemiche e problemi. Ma cambiò Roma, l'Italia e la

⁵¹ Card. Giovanni Battista Montini, "Roma e il Concilio," in *Studi romani* 10, no. 5 (September–October 1962): 503–4.

⁵² *Acta synodalia: Sacrosancti concilii oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. 4, *Pars VII* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1978), 859–60.

⁵³ Antonio Saragat, "Per il Centenario dell'unione di Roma all'Italia," in *Discorsi e messaggi del Presidente della Repubblica Giuseppe Saragat*, ed. Roberto Gallinari (Rome: Quaderni di Documentazione, 2005), 53–69.

⁵⁴ Law no. 260 (27 May 1949) was reaffirmed by no. 336 (20 November 2000), which established June 2, the Festa della Repubblica, as the sole national holiday.

⁵⁵ See law no. 54 (5 March 1977). In addition, see Giorgio Giannini, "Come il XX settembre divenne festa nazionale," *In Storia: Rivista online di storia e informazione* 172, no. 141 (September 2019), <http://www.instoria.it>.

⁵⁶ For example, the academic conference, "La breccia di Porta Pia: convegno internazionale di studi nel 150° anniversario (1870–2020)," which included the broad collaboration and sponsorship of entities (such as the Esercito Italiano SME–Ufficio Storico, Pontificio Comitato di Scienze Storiche, Istituto di Studi Politici S. Pio V, LUMSA Università, and Senato della Repubblica), was live streamed and resulted in the publication of *La breccia di Porta Pia: raccolta di studi*. For a description of the celebrations in Rome and the impact of COVID, see Lilli Garrone, "Festeggiamenti in sordina per i 150 anni della breccia di Porta Pia," *Corriere della Sera* [Rome], September 5, 2020; Paolo Conti, "Il virus spazza via la memoria: la Capitale dimentica il suo anniversario," *Corriere della Sera* [Rome], September 5, 2020.

stessa Chiesa: iniziava una nuova storia” (The proclamation of Rome as the capital was a providential event, which at the time raised controversy and problems. But it changed Rome, Italy, and even the Church: it launched a new history).⁵⁷

Notwithstanding the Holy See’s repositioning on the question of Rome, Chigi Palace, regardless of the occupant, has remained mute. Gramsci’s intuition was prescient: the Church has redefined itself within a providential reinterpretation of its loss of temporal power, while the State has instead defined itself by disassociating Rome’s capture from the nation’s identity. Hence, even today, Cavour’s hopeful dictum—“libera Chiesa in libero Stato”—vacillates between deferred and defunct.

⁵⁷ Pope Francis [Jorge Mario Bergoglio], “Messaggio del Santo Padre Francesco all’apertura delle celebrazioni dei 150 anni di Roma capitale,” February 3, 2020.