Richard Bosworth looks at the Vittoriano, the Italian capital’s century-old monument to Victor Emmanuel II and Italian unification and still the focus of competing claims over the country’s history and national identity.

ROME’S MONUMENTISSIMO

The inauguration of the Victor Emmanuel monument on Capitol Hill in Rome. The caption accompanying this picture in The Sphere of June 10th, 1911 claimed ‘Imperial Rome seemed to be living again...’

The most flamboyant concrete marking of Italian unification, the Vittoriano, or monument to Victor Emmanuel II, is inescapable in most Roman vistas. Within the cityscape it is as visible as St Peter’s and the Vatican and in some respects dominates these religious sites. Labelled sardonically by its critics the monumentissimo, because of its glaring whiteness, vast size and positioning, this over-the-top edifice remains a landmark for any tourist. It stands on Capitol Hill and beside the Forum of the classical city. It looks down on the Palazzo Venezia from the balcony of which the Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, roared his bellicose speeches. The Winged Victorines that adorn its summit stride across the skyline when viewed from such urban lookouts as the Pincio or the Janiculum. On June 4th, 2011 it will be 100 years since the Vittoriano was inaugurated. This anniversary is worth recalling since the monument still expresses the multiple and contested meanings of Italian Rome.

A century ago visitors from the north thought that in early June it was already too hot in the Italian capital. To accommodate them the official opening ceremony and speech by Giovanni Giolitti, the Liberal prime minister and leading politician of the decade, began at 8.30am and the whole event was over an hour later. Although Baedeker advised against ‘the enervating effects, both on the body and the mind, of the protracted heat’ of a southern summer a number of tourists must have known that malaria remained a scourge of the Campagna, the flat damp countryside outside the Aurelian Walls, and was not unknown in the city. In fact the more pressing medical anxiety of 1911 was the return of cholera to Naples and Venice. Giolitti, testing the limits of his liberalism, tried hard to suppress all news of this event, which provides the background to Thomas Mann’s novella Death in Venice (1912).

Giolitti was anxious about the hygienic image of Italy because throughout 1911 the Italian nation was celebrating its Cinquantennio, the 50th anniversary since unification, with cultural events scattered across the country, though concentrated in Rome. Apart from the Victor Emmanuel monument the legacy of the anniversary can still be traced in the city: for example, at the Zoo (opened in January 1911), the Gallery of Modern Art (March) and at the Edwin Lutyens’ building that became the British School in Rome (it formed part of a general international exhibition in the Valle Giulia).

The inauguration of the Vittoriano was the pivotal event of the Cinquantennio, the moment when the national past and the hoped for future were ostentatiously fused. Victor Emmanuel II, first king of Italy, had died in January 1878 and been buried with some swank in the Pantheon, a place considered by many as the most perfect classical building remaining from the time of the Caesars. Immediately, however, leading politicians and cultural figures urged a greater apotheosis of the dead king. They saw an opportunity both to harness his memory to the creation of a cohesive national identity behind which the Italian masses could be united and as a chance to uphold a conservative but liberal monarchy as the proper political framework resulting from unification.

These needs were the more pressing given the ambiguities and contradictions of the Risorgimento. Italy had been created in the preceding century amid cultural and even military opposition from the peninsula’s oldest and greatest institution, the Catholic Church, bearer of a glamorous history with which the national version could scarcely compete. Worse, Italy remained a country of many cities, each proud of its heritage and regional identity. After all it was Piedmontese particularism that justified Victor Emmanuel becoming the second of this name to rule in his dynasty, despite the fact that its kingdom’s capital, Turin, was feeble in comparison to the cities of Milan, Venice, Florence, Naples, Palermo or Bologna in its girding with the past. Each boasted historical glories that could almost compete with Rome; Turin by contrast was a provincial backwater. The pull of such regionalism was what justified Camillo Benso di...
Cavour, the nation's first (and Torinese) prime minister, in demanding that Rome become its capital; the only place he believed that naturally rose above such divisions. Yet this city was not wrung from papal rule until September 20th, 1870, a decade after the unification of the rest of the country.

To these fractures inherited from the past were added modern tribulations. In March 1911 Italy's leading socialist daily paper, Avanti!, reviewed the patriotic activities of the Cinquantennio dismissively as a demonstration of how "at a certain moment in its national history, the Italian bourgeoisie feels the need to present itself for the admiration of other national bourgeoisies and of its good self". Italy, in other words, was a site of the belle époque's 'social question' and of a huge and seemingly unbridgeable gap in wealth and culture between rich and poor, whether proletarian or peasant. At least in socialist eyes class mattered more than nation. Gender was another chasm separating Italians and one scarcely bridged by the organisation in Rome in 1911 of the country's first beauty contest. This event involved the election of Palmira Ceccani, a young woman from the Roman district of Trastevere, who was rewarded with the huge sum of 3,000 lire, a diadem and a ruby and diamond brooch. She was attended by 19 other 'princesses' of the rioni or suburban areas of the capital, who themselves each won 300 lire (a hundred times the average daily wage).

The other issue that dogged the nation, more menacingly perhaps, was Italy's position in Europe, where that continent's self-confidently imperial worldview and its pervasive Social Darwinism assumed life was a global struggle of the fittest. History in general, then, and that of Rome in particular demanded conquest and grandeur. Yet every economic and social index placed Italy as no more than the 'least of the Great Powers'. Amid the tightening alliances of what we now know was the prelude to the First World War Italy sought to be tied diplomatically to Germany and Austria-Hungary – an arrangement which, since 1882, was formalised in the Triple Alliance – while simultaneously remaining friends with Britain, France and Russia, the partners of the Triple Entente. Not for
nothing did Giolitti talk carefully in his speech of June 4th about his pleasure at the presence of delegates from 'allied and friendly nations', while pledging his nation's dedication to 'peace and civilisation' in the spirit of 'the glories and greatness of Rome'. This last may have been the most powerful message since, through the spring and summer of 1911, a crisis rumbled between Italy and Turkey over the vilayets of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. On September 29th, without the bother of declaring war, Italian forces invaded these territories in what is now known as Libya. With this victorious war, nationalists boasted, Italy would 'reclaim' an empire and the Mediterranean could return to its destiny as mare nostrum (our sea).

Homage to the Third Italy
With its mock classical architecture, pillars and statues, as well as its striking position next to the grandest ancient sites, the Vittoriano proclaimed that what was being called the 'Third Italy' must stand higher in the world. Yet just as social, regional, political and religious disputes simmered not far beneath the surface so the construction of the monument had not proved a simple or easily agreed process.

When an international competition was launched in 1880 to commemorate the dead monarch, Carlo Dossi, a young writer and future diplomat, mocked the entrants as prey to 'a holy madness'. He deemed 300 of the several hundred entries 'insane' and 35 'utterly cretinous'; grammatical howlers and errant Latin studded their texts. Too few aspirant monument-makers had mastered mathematics or architectural design. The grandiose and the excessive predominated; one contestant suggested portraying the king in an assumption to heaven modelled on that of the Madonna. A large number aimed to revivify Roman remains: one entrant suggested the monument to the king should crown Castel Sant'Angelo (the burial place of the Emperor Hadrian) and added a statue of Christ with its back turned on the nearby Vatican to symbolise Liberal Italy's modern surpassing of clericalism and superstition, thus hoping to signify progress.

The winner was first announced as a Frenchman, Henri-Paul Nénot, for his plan to erect a stately column at the top of the Via Nazionale in front of the railway station. Nénot proposed the column to be surmounted by a statue of Victor Emmanuel with an arm raised in what Fascists would later call a 'Roman salute'. But the Liberal elites soon realised that this choice was a mistake: a foreigner was an inappropriate architect for such an important national edifice and there was possibly also disappointment that Nénot offered no evocation of the (imperial) 'glory that was Rome'. Reasons were found to withdraw the offer to place it was transported on five carriages each pulled by eight horses and weighed in total 50 tonnes.

In 1890 it was decided to drop the idea of smaller statues of Mazzini and Garibaldi from the scheme. Their representations, it was thought, might detract from the glory of the king and expose past and continuing political divisions, especially since Mazzini had gone to his grave a convinced republican and his political heirs had not all renounced his stance. Although a statue was cast in the 1890s Mazzini did not in fact achieve tangible public honour in the capital until 1949, the centenary of his revolutionary republic. For his part Garibaldi was celebrated with an imposing equestrian statue erected on the Janiculum and unveiled with Crispi's blessing and some fanfare on September 20th, 1895. Its positioning, seeming to stare down on St Peter's and all it represented, was subsequently a source of resentment to the Vatican.

The 1890s was a bad decade for Liberal Italy with the economy battered by a banking crisis and the nation's imperial dreams and international stature,
severely checked by the forces of the Ethiopian emperor, Menelik II, decisively defeating the Italian invasion at Adwa in March 1896. Sacconi's brother fought there and for a while was feared captured by the Ethiopians. Other European powers had lost battles in Africa. But until Fascist revenge in 1935 the Italians were alone in meekly accepting defeat, abandoning for a generation their ambition to share the White Man's Burden with the apparent corollary that Italy was unfit to hold its head high as a genuine great power.

As a result of this turbulence funding for the Victor Emmanuel monument dried up and, as late as Sacconi's death in 1905, little further work took place. It was only the approaching Cinquantennio and the revival of the national budget under Giolitti that spurred the decision to ready the Vittoriano for official opening (while hiding parts that remained unfinished). Activity became especially rapid after 1907, when Ernesto Nathan was elected city mayor commanding a left liberal (but not socialist) junta that ruled until 1913. Nathan was both a leading Freemason and a Jew, the latter unusual for someone of his political prominence in pre-1914 Europe. (Rome had in fact acquired a large new synagogue, erected in July 1904 beside the Tiber at the entry to what had once been the ghetto, a few hundred metres from the Victor Emmanuel monument. Victor Emmanuel III, happy to be anti-clerical, liked to say that it was the only new religious edifice in the city that he had visited.) Nathan, too, was no friend of the Vatican, at the time presided over by Pius X, a pontiff celebrated for his 'anti-modernism'. Now sanctified, he remains the figurehead of the ultra-traditionalist Society of St Pius X, rallying point of Catholic reaction.

In September 1910, on the 40th anniversary of Kingdom of Italy's capture of Rome from papal control, the mayor and pope had a public spat over the meaning of the city, with Nathan proclaiming his administration's devotion to all that was modern, rational and scientific, as well as Italian and national, thereby earning the anathema of the Catholic Church, which did not hesitate to draw attention to the fact that the mayor was a blaspheming Jew. During the Cinquantennio the Church stayed conspicuously apart from any national celebration. The Jesuit journal Civita Cattolica urged repentance on those Italians who had turned their backs on the true religion, while also pointedly highlighting moments when the crowds were fewer than expected and the planning far from smooth.

For government officials doing their best to ignore such carping, the Victor Emmanuel monument represented the survival and the flourishing of a liberal nation that had cast off religious superstition and was readying for a greater political future, one destined to make the name of Rome glorious again. Yet, when the excitement of the inauguration had died down, the lingering disunity of Italy could scarcely be disguised. What was to be done with the rising socialist movement that seemed to reject all talk of the nation as it dreamed of workers uniting across the world? What about the Church? Should and could the Italian state war with it eternally? And what about the brash new generation of intellectuals who demanded that Italy be more rapid and uncompromising in the nationalisation of its people and more aggressive in its imperialism. It was one of these, Giovanni Papini, who damned the Victor Emmanuel monument as a 'high-class urinal', while his Futurist friends imagined a happy way ahead after Rome and all the country's historic cities had been bombed into dust thus freeing the nation to become really modern.

Fascist memorials

Not far over the horizon loomed the two world wars and Fascist dictatorship, changes that would require the imprinting of different historical messages on to what was now usually known as the National Monument. On November 4th, 1921, a year before Mussolini marched on Rome, the Vittoriano became the site for Italy's Unknown Soldier, solemnly transported from a northern battlefield. In a stately ceremony his remains were interred in the Altare della patria (Nation's Altar), an addition to the structure of the monument. November 4th was the anniversary of Italy's 1918 victory at the battle of Vittorio Veneto against the forces of the collapsing Habsburg Empire. To nationalists it was a triumph that signified the primacy of the Italian war effort.
Once Fascism was installed, the regime, anxious to impose its own 'totalitarian' history on the people, continued work on the unfinished monument, ruthlessly demolishing in 1928 any surviving housing that interrupted the area between it and the Capitol. Over the following years, bas-reliefs that had originally been planned to record the lives of famous men were instead made to celebrate the new provinces of Trento, Trieste, Gorizia, Pola, Zara and Fiume, the territories that Italy had won in the First World War. National history was also implanted within the monument with the opening of a patriotic museum in its vast interior. The Museo del Risorgimento housed some relics of that event as well as regimental flags arranged to laud Italy's military victories.

A display of classical remains on the Capitol (first assembled during the Cinquantennio) was now refurbished and named the Museo Mussolini. The Duce also began to use the monument to frame and reinforce his personality cult. Between 1928 and 1943 the Vittoriano appeared 249 times as a backdrop to the official newsreel, Cinegiornale. The dictator attended 14 public ceremonies on the steps of the monument during this time (and Victor Emmanuel III eight). A notable example occurred on December 18th, 1935, when the monument became the site where ‘gold for the patria’ was collected. In this initiative ordinary women and men were persuaded that the donation of their wedding rings would defeat the ‘iniquitous sanctions’, imposed by 52 member states of the League of Nations against Italian aggression in Ethiopia. Queen Elena and Rachele Mussolini set an example by publicly surrendering their tokens of marriage to the Fascist party.

The historian Bruno Tobia argues that the Fascist regime thus took possession of the historical meaning of the monument but the exposure of the hypocrisy and inadequacy of the dictatorship during the Second World War ended up ‘annulling’ any power that the Vittoriano’s expression of the Risorgimento possessed. It is true that there have been occasions since 1945 when commentators have asked if the braggadocio of the place could only be checked by demolition or other drastic changes to its nature. At the end of the 1980s architects from Milan wondered if it would look better and reflect a truer history of the nation as a ruin or ‘kitsch museum’. Yet the Vittoriano has survived and prospered. In 1958 the Museo del Risorgimento added flags from the anti-Fascist Resistance to its holdings, while the presence of the unknown soldier ensured that patriotic ceremonies continued to be held at the monument since, whatever had been the case in the Second World War, the First was still automatically referred to as a ‘triumph of the nation’.

The Rome-based historian Emilio Gentile has defended the Vittoriano against facile irony and sarcasm. Its grandiosity, he claims, was common to many European societies of its era. In practice it had resisted Fascist takeover, continuing to express a
'religion of the nation', one that remains 'a monumental materialisation of a nation alive with human lives'. A certain kind of adaptability was illustrated when the nation celebrated its 150th anniversary (Rome's 140th) with the opening of a new Emigration museum in the Vittoriano in October 2010. Its exhibits commemorate the successful foreign encounters of the many different 'Italies', as distinct from the disasters of official diplomacy and war. It was formally opened by ex-Communist President Giorgio Napolitano, who took the occasion to stress the suffering and sacrifice of Italian emigrants and to request that such endurance be recalled today when Italians had to confront the wave of immigrants being propelled into the country by globalisation.

The sentiment was humane. The reality may be less so. The museum's display on immigration is vague and meagre, while the current mayor of Rome, the neo-fascist, Gianni Alemanno, is a strident critic of the Gypsy presence in the city and firmly demands that all new settlers integrate fully into old Rome, thereby surrendering their own cultures and history. At the same time contemporary Italy is not finding it easy to agree on today's meaning of the Risorgimento and of the nature of national unification it achieved. Already the country has three rival days to commemorate its Second World War: April 25th (associated with anti-Fascism but also with the idea that Italy liberated itself), January 27th (along with other European states, recalling the Holocaust but with little acknowledgement that Italy was Germany's ally in it) and February 10th (favoured by 'anti-anti-Fascists' as the anniversary of Italy's forced signature of the Treaty of Paris in 1947, now made to commemorate Yugoslav and Communist killings on the north-eastern border in 1945, thereby converting Italy in wartime memory from an aggressor to a 'victim').

The anniversary of national unification is equally hard to celebrate in unison, especially given that the Lega Nord, indispensable ally of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, campaigns loudly for a federal Italy. For many leghisti Garibaldi is a national villain not a hero, a bloodthirsty bandit more than an austere nationmaker. As the anniversaries of one event after another in 1859-61 have passed, patriotic ceremony has often been contested, with one spokesman of the Lega declaring that June 2nd, Italy's national day marking Garibaldi's death in 1882, offers the good people of 'Padania' (the invented territories in the Po valley where the league flourishes) nothing to cherish and hail. Umberto Bossi, the Lega's chief, has even argued that Cavour 'really' was a federalist but had his plans disrupted by the authoritarian king, Victor Emmanuel II. A worthy expert committee advising politicians on how best to record national history has split. The Vittoriano may look massive and imposing. Yet, as a site of history, it still carries more than one message. As the centenary of June 4th, 1911 fast approaches Italy, it is plain, remains a country of contested memories.

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