

The meaning of monuments: remembering Italo Balbo in Italy and the United States

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This article examines the meaning of monuments in Italy and the United States (Chicago) dedicated to the Fascist gerarch Italo Balbo. A hugely popular personality in Fascist Italy, Balbo cemented his reputation in the early 1930s as the commander of mass-formation transatlantic flights to Brazil (1930-1931) and the United States (1933). Chicago's monuments – a road (Balbo Drive) and a column (the 'Balbo monument') – are a legacy of Balbo's triumphant arrival in the city in 1933. Italy's monuments date from the postwar and contemporary periods. The article examines why Balbo Drive and the Balbo monument in Chicago have become more controversial over time, especially in recent decades, and why, despite calls for their removal, both remain. It contrasts the Chicago case with the situation in Italy where, since the 1990s, Balbo has been commemorated in numerous ways.

Keywords: Italo Balbo; Chicago; monuments; Fascism; memory; critical toponymy

Introduction

This article examines the meaning of monuments in Italy and the United States (Chicago) dedicated to Italo Balbo, one of Fascism's 'most glamorous and competent leaders' (Segrè 1987, 148). Balbo rose to prominence in the early 1920s as the leader of Fascist squad violence around Ferrara. In October 1922, he was one of the four *quadrumvirs* of the March on Rome. An enormously popular figure in Fascist Italy, Balbo became a national hero while air force minister in the early 1930s, leading unprecedented mass-formation military flights to Brazil (1930-1931) and the United States (1933). Undertaken in seaplanes, these 'great cruises' also made Balbo an international celebrity. Mussolini subsequently appointed Balbo governor of the Italian colony of Libya. He was killed by Italian friendly fire over Tobruk in June 1940.

Chicago's monuments – a road (Balbo Drive) and a column (the 'Balbo monument') – are legacies of Balbo's triumphant arrival in the city in 1933 as commander of the second Atlantic cruise.¹ The 'right' of these 'Fascist' monuments to exist has been the subject of public debate in Chicago on numerous occasions since 1945 (1946, 1981, 1983, 1990, 1993, 2001, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2017-2018). Despite the mounting frequency – and intensity – of these debates over recent decades, the monuments remain. Monuments to Balbo in present-day Italy are of more recent vintage. Balbo's death was commemorated across Italy, primarily through the renaming of streets and squares in his honour. These mostly disappeared in the purges of Fascist street names that accompanied the fall of Mussolini (1943) and the final defeat of Fascism (1945). Balbo has since

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returned to the Italian commemorative landscape. The first postwar monument to Balbo, a memorial stone in Orbetello, Tuscany (the location of the seaplane base used to train crews for the long-distance cruises, and the departure point for both transatlantic flights) dates from 1960. The most recent, a road dedicated to Balbo in the Marchigian coastal town of Civitanova Marche, dates from 2010. Acts of commemoration involving Balbo, in the form of new monuments or other non-permanent commemorative practices, have become more common since the early 1990s: Balbo has had a road and two squares named after him, he has been immortalised in bronze (a bust) and gold (a commemorative medal), he has been remembered in several exhibitions, and portrayed on stage. The contrast with Chicago, where anti-Balbo protests have become more frequent over the same period, was brought into focus following the Charlottesville riots (August 2017). As calls grew in Chicago to rename Balbo Drive and remove the Balbo monument, newspapers in Italy reported that several local councils and business groups were keen to repatriate the column, should the opportunity arise (*Corriere della Sera* [hereafter *CdS*] 20 September 2017; *Il Giunco* 27 September and 4 October 2017).

Physical monuments such as statues, columns and buildings, are designed to represent and fix in the public space (and collective mind) a particular memory of an individual, group, event or achievement. They also express political, social and cultural power, ‘designed and planned, with all of the narrative choices and biases this entails, by those who have the time, resources, and most importantly, the state mandate to define the past’ (Dwyer 2002, 32). Once established, though, monuments “‘become” rather than “exist”” (Saunders 2018, 18). As the world around a monument changes, so the meanings and memories attached to the monument can change too. Frequently, they lose their meaning altogether. But they can also become ‘invested with multiple meanings and memories that are often far from intended at the moment of their construction’ (Saunders 2018, 2). Where these memories are irreconcilable, conflict can result. Spatial monuments such as commemorative street names carry similar baggage. As Alderman and Inwood (2013, 12) note, commemorative street naming is a political act, ‘expressive and constitutive of the politics of citizenship, conferring a greater degree of belonging to certain groups over others’. They can also serve to naturalise specific readings of the past (those of the dominant social group), justifying and reinforcing existing power relations and hierarchies (Azaryahu 1996). As with physical monuments, however, the meaning of spatial monuments is not fixed. Time can turn a commemorative street name into a mere ‘spatial designation’ as the original memory attached to the name fades. Revolutions are almost always accompanied by the large-scale renaming of commemorative street names as one reading of the past gives way to another. Slower processes of socio-cultural and political change, meanwhile, can render the urban streetscape a “‘cultural arena” in which different social groups struggle over what histories and whose identities can be recognised or ignored in and through the official city-text’ (Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu 2018, 11). In these circumstances, even apparently ‘dead’ street names can generate powerful new emotions.

This article examines what Balbo Drive and the Balbo monument have ‘become’ in Chicago since the 1930s, and why over time they have become more, rather than less, controversial. The article also explores why Italian-American groups have opposed all attempts to rename Balbo Drive or remove the column. As the article will demonstrate, a key element on both sides of the debate has been the competition between different social groups ‘for the right to name the landscape and cast legitimacy on their political vision, cultural history and identity’ (Alderman and Inwood 2013, 215). The case in Italy is somewhat different: here, the issue is the meaning and memory attached to ‘new’ rather than ‘old’ monuments. Unsurprisingly, postwar moves to commemorate Balbo have often originated with, or been supported by, the far right – and opposed by the antifascist left. What makes the Italian case interesting is that his memorialisation has not

been driven solely or even primarily by the right. Balbo's greatest champion since the war has been the Italian air force; since the 1990s, sections of the Italian left as well as the right have supported his commemoration. The article argues that Balbo's commemorative 'return' in Italy in recent decades has been conditional on a memory that prioritises Balbo *aviatore* over Balbo *fascista* or *squadrista*.

Chicago

On 15 July 1933, 24 Italian Savoia Marchetti SM.55 seaplanes landed on Lake Michigan, Chicago, next to the recently opened Century of Progress World's Fair. The landing marked the penultimate stop on an epic 6088-mile flight across the North Atlantic, which had begun at Orbetello a fortnight earlier and taken the near 100-strong crew to Amsterdam, Reykjavik, Cartwright (Labrador), Shediac (Newfoundland) and Montreal. The arrival of the *stormi* drew huge crowds desperate to catch a glimpse of the aviators and their commander, the 'D'Artagnan of the air' (*Chicago Daily Tribune* [hereafter *CDT*] 17 July 1933), Italo Balbo. In Soldier Field, in front of an estimated crowd of 60,000, Balbo was welcomed by Illinois state governor Henry Horner and Chicago mayor Edward Kelly. After three packed days of public engagements, Balbo and his men flew to New York where they were again given a hero's reception – and taken to Washington to lunch with President Roosevelt – before beginning the return crossing.

The decision to rename a road after Balbo was taken by Chicago city council on 11 July and announced by Kelly in his Soldier Field address (*CDT* 12 July 1933; *Chicago Sunday Tribune* 16 July 1933). The formal dedication of Balbo Drive (previously 7th Avenue) took place two days later (Segrè 1987, 244). The Balbo monument was presented to the city by the Italian government the following July in a ceremony marking the first anniversary of Balbo's landing (*CDT* 16 July 1934). The gift – a first-century column from the ancient Roman port of Ostia – stood on a modern stone base bearing the inscription in Italian and English:

This column twenty centuries old
 erected on the beach of Ostia
 port of Imperial Rome
 to safeguard the fortunes and victories
 of the Roman triremes
 Fascist Italy by command of Benito Mussolini presents to Chicago
 exaltation symbol memorial
 of the Atlantic Squadron led by Balbo
 that with Roman daring flew across the ocean
 in the 11th year
 of the Fascist Era.

The column was placed in front of the Italian pavilion at the World's Fair. An estimated 3,000 people attended the unveiling, which was followed by a live radio address by Balbo from Rome (*CDT* 16 July 1934) (Figure 1).

At one level, the decision to rename a road in Balbo's honour can be read as political opportunism: a relatively easy and low-cost gesture designed to appeal to Chicago's large Italian-American community, which came out *en masse* to celebrate Balbo's achievement. It can also be



Figure 1. Unveiling of the Balbo monument, World's Fair, Chicago, July 1934. Kaufmann & Fabry Co. COP_17_0002_00030_001, Century of Progress World's Fair, 1933–1934, special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

interpreted as something more substantial. Critical toponymy (the study of the politics of place naming) holds that ‘Underlying the politics of commemorative street naming is the question of eligibility. Evaluations of eligibility for public commemoration are concerned with legacy, and are refracted through ideological and moral prisms’ (Azaryahu 2012, 388). Seen in this light, Balbo Drive may be taken as a sign of the American political establishment’s broad endorsement of Fascism in the early 1930s: Mussolini had many admirers in US politics, including the highest reaches of the Roosevelt government (Schivelbusch 2007). The location of Balbo Drive is instructive in this regard. As critical toponymists note, the symbolic significance of a commemorative renaming is linked to the visibility and prominence of the road being renamed (Alderman and Inwood 2013, 214). Although relatively short (approximately half a mile), Balbo Drive was (and is) a busy thoroughfare in downtown Chicago, connecting one of Chicago’s main shopping areas, State Street, to the major expressway Lake Shore Drive. The naming of Balbo Drive, in other words, was a simple gesture invested with deeper meaning, reflecting and reinforcing the ‘hegemonic ideological structures’ and dominant cultural and political world views of the period (Azaryahu 1996, 311; Alderman and Inwood 2013, 212).

Whereas Balbo Drive was gifted by the Chicago authorities to Balbo and Fascist Italy, the Balbo monument was a gift to Chicago from Mussolini. Unsurprisingly, its intended meaning was political: ancient Rome, represented by the column (unearthed during excavations at Ostia in the

late 1920s), had found its heir in Fascism; as imperial Rome had ruled the seas, so Fascist Italy commanded the skies. No one could miss the modern fasces on the stone base. The conflation of the ancient and modern glories of Italy was further emphasised by the column's positioning in front of the Italian pavilion. Shaped like an aeroplane, the pavilion's entrance was dominated by a real aeroplane wing (used as an awning) and a giant modern *fascio*, while the interior contained 'photomontages and a gigantic *Aeropittura* style frieze [which] presented the evolution of Italian progress from the time of the Caesars to the era of the "New Caesar": Mussolini' (Marcello 2017, 104-105).

The Balbo monument was also a means by which the Italian government could double down on Balbo's success in mobilising Chicago's Italian immigrant population the previous year. Almost immediately Italian newspapers had announced that Mussolini would be donating the priceless column to Chicago (*La Stampa della Sera*, 22–23 July 1933). Soon afterwards, the *Tribune* reported that the president of the Order Sons of Italy, the peak body representing Italians in America, had met with Mussolini in Rome and 'informed Il Duce that the order would shortly establish an office in Rome for the purpose of making closer the link with the home country'. According to the *Tribune*, this had coincided with Balbo's return to Italy from America,

and diplomatic observers recalled that both the reports of Italo Balbo and the speech of Mussolini welcoming the flyers back laid special emphasis on the fact that the Italian flight was to awaken patriotism among Italian immigrants in America and renew the grip of the mother country on them so that they can be more easily directed for political action beneficial to Italy. (*CDT* 9 September 1933)

A similar point was made by Prince Ludovico Potenziani, the Italian representative to the World's Fair, on the eve of the monument's inauguration. 'The event will certainly strengthen the Italian pride that the Fascist nation has restored in our co-nationals in America,' he told journalists, 'and add to the lively sympathy that Italy and the Duce enjoy among the generous American people' (*La Stampa della Sera* 28–29 June 1934).

Little over a decade later, at the end of the Second World War, the American view of Italy and Fascism was less benign. On 11 December 1941, Mussolini had declared war on the United States, and American troops had subsequently died fighting Italian forces in North Africa and then Italy itself. It was in this radically different context that the first sustained campaign in Chicago began against the commemoration of Balbo in the city.² In September 1946, businesses along Balbo Drive petitioned the mayor and council to rename the road in honour of an American navy pilot hero killed in the battle of Midway (*CDT* 3 September 1946). Despite vociferous backing from the *Tribune*, and the support of veterans groups, parent-teacher associations, several leading figures in the Chicago Italian-American community, families of local recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor, and a clutch of Democratic aldermen, the petition was blocked on technical grounds – although the suspicion (as articulated by the *Tribune*) was that the proposal had been buried in red tape on the orders of Mayor Kelly (*CDT* 13, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27 December 1946, 7 October 1947). It had been Kelly's decision to rename 7th Avenue after Balbo. Now, the *Tribune* alleged, 'Kelly believes that the change would offend so-called Italian-American organizations, thereby costing the Democratic machine votes in the election' (*CDT* 24 December 1946). 'It is disgraceful,' the paper opined, forgetting its earlier enthusiasm for Balbo, 'to have a Chicago street named for a man who represented and helped found a system of government that Americans despise' (*CDT* 7 October 1947).

A subsequent attempt by the *Tribune* to reignite the campaign against the 'Fascist gangster' and 'Italian scoundrel' (*CDT* 12, 22 January 1948) quickly petered out, after which the issue faded from public consciousness.³ By the early 1950s, Balbo Drive had become, for most Chicagoans, just a road, the Balbo monument merely a 'sorry looking memento' (*CDT* 2 September 1952), the

only *in situ* structure remaining from the World's Fair. By the mid-1960s, the inscription on the monument's base was 'almost illegible' (*Chicago Tribune* [hereafter *CT*] 22 July 1965) due to weathering, effectively rendering the monument mute.

Balbo's memory, however, was preserved in the local Italian community. Fascism had attracted broad support from Italian Americans before the war, functioning as an 'ideology of compensation' for many poor migrants in a country where anti-Italian prejudice ran deep: now they could console themselves 'that their beloved Italy was indeed a world power commanding the respect of other nations' (Pugliese 2018, 352). Balbo's flight was important first-hand evidence of this. Although the war definitively ended Italian-American support for Fascism, and thousands of young Italian Americans were 'Americanised' in the US military (Candeloro 2018, 376–377), Balbo remained an important point of reference after 1945, partly because of the lived experience of July 1933, but also because he had been killed before America entered the war, so had never been an enemy combatant. (In September 1940, over 1,000 members of Italian societies had attended a memorial service in Balbo's honour at Holy Name Cathedral, followed by further ceremonies at the Balbo monument [*CDT* 20 September 1940].) Balbo's death also allowed Italian Americans to detach him from Fascism and Mussolini. Without a convincing official explanation for what had happened, rumours persisted that he had been killed on the orders of the Duce, who regarded Balbo as a rival (Segrè 1987, 403–405). Seen in this context, the opposition of Italian-American organisations to the renaming of Balbo Drive in 1946 is not surprising, similarly the retention of the Balbo name by Sons of Italy Lodges in Chicago and New York, even though the Order had long since repudiated Fascism (Candeloro 2018, 375).

Key anniversaries of the 1933 flight were important opportunities for commemoration. In 1973, 58 *atlantici* (crew from the crossing) participated in the annual Columbus Day parade, accompanied by the mayor and state governor (*CT* 6 June 1973; Segrè 1987, 264–265). In 1983, five Italian officers and 100 cadets from Italy's naval air force flew to Chicago, replicating the original flight. *Atlantici* were again involved, visiting the Balbo monument with local Italian-American club leaders (Candeloro 1999, 76). By the 1990s, however, even many Italian Chicagoans had apparently forgotten Balbo. The 1993 anniversary was marked only by a small exhibition at the Italian Cultural Centre ('Hardly anyone younger than 60 was curious enough to stop', reported the *Chicago Reader* [hereafter *CR*]).⁴ 'Balbo's flight has utterly no meaning to today's Italian-Americans', complained the president of the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans (JCCIA), the umbrella organisation of Italian-American groups in Chicago, in 1998:

It's not that they know all about it but choose to reject its commemoration on philosophical grounds (because of the fascist connection). It's that they simply don't know and don't care. If you do inform them about it (as I have often tried), they still don't care.⁵

At the same time as intergenerational Italian-American memory of Balbo was weakening, complaints about the monuments re-emerged. A 1981 article by the influential African-American *Tribune* journalist Vernon Jarrett on Chicago's failure to commemorate the first non-indigenous permanent settler of the area, the black Haitian-born Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, heralded the debate's revival. Jarrett wrote:

Just consider that a major downtown street is named for an internationally known leader of a Fascist government [Balbo] ... there is [also] a prominent monument honouring him and Mussolini's regime 'In the Eleventh Year of the Fascist Era' ...

The question is: If we can display, on one of Chicago's finest drives, a monument which memorializes 'the Fascist Era', why can't we honor in grandiose fashion our first [black] permanent settler [?] (CT 1 April 1981)

In 1993, Puerto Rican community groups campaigning for a statue to nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos employed a similar argument. 'For 60 years, you've funded the Balbo monument with taxpayers' money, and no one questions that,' alderman Bill Ocasio told the Chicago Park District board as it sat to consider the matter. 'The statue is from Benito Mussolini, whose war efforts cost the lives of thousands of Americans ... Why is it when it comes down to a gift from the Puerto Rican community you say no?' (CT 11 August 1993).

For Jarrett and Ocasio, the Balbo monuments constituted a problem in their own right, but their primary purpose in highlighting the presence of 'Fascist' monuments in the city was to draw attention to the *absence* of African Americans and Puerto Ricans from Chicago's commemorative landscape, indicative of the marginalisation and discrimination experienced by these groups. In calling for monumental *recognition* of du Sable and Campos, Jarrett and Ocasio were advancing minority claims 'for public space, political legitimacy and what landscape scholars refer to as the "politics of belonging"' – 'a political strategy for addressing exclusion and misrepresentation within traditional, white-dominated constructions of local and national heritage' (Alderman and Inwood 2013, 213, 216).

Jarrett's criticisms of the Balbo monuments – he returned to the subject in a 1983 article criticising plans to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the crossing (CT 8 June 1983) – appear to have revived (or at least coincided with the revival of) an earlier strand of anti-Balbo sentiment in the city: in the early 1980s we begin to see calls from white Chicagoans (usually journalists or academics, some of Italian heritage) to remove the Balbo column and/or rename Balbo Drive because they honoured a 'totalitarian thug' (CT 25 May 1983). The aim, though, was not to redress the exclusion of racial or ethnic minorities from the city's commemorative landscape but (in the case of Balbo Drive) to replace Balbo with a more deserving local Italian, the nuclear physicist Enrico Fermi the most frequently suggested alternative (CT 25 May 1983, 2 March 2006, 15 July 2008, 27 June 2011). An exile from Fascist Italy, Fermi had lived and worked in Chicago from 1941 until his death in 1954. (Fermi was typical of the suggested alternatives in that he was male.)

The two strands combined powerfully in the anti-Balbo protests and campaigns following the Charlottesville riots (11-12 August 2017). Within days of the riots, several Chicago aldermen announced they would be seeking the removal of both monuments. 'Balbo is a symbol of racial and ethnic supremacy, and in this day and age we need positive symbols', the African-American alderman Sophia King declared. 'It's high time we removed these symbols of oppression and anti-democracy from our city.'⁶ Protestors demonstrating in front of the Balbo monument expressed similar sentiments. 'These monuments remaining is part of the reason why in 2017 we're seeing another resurgence in racism and white supremacy', an organiser told the *Tribune*. 'If people don't come together to call for zero tolerance against white supremacy, the threat will continue to grow' (CT 24 August 2017). Initially, King, with fellow alderman Brendan Reilly, proposed that Balbo Drive be renamed after a 'worthy' Italian American, recognising, Reilly said, the city's large Italian-American population (CR 26 August 2017). By the following spring, however, momentum was growing for Balbo Drive to be renamed after local African-American civil rights activist Ida B. Wells. By April, an online petition had attracted 1725 signatures – dwarfing the 410 names on a second petition in favour of renaming the road after the local Italian-American saint, Francis Cabrini (CR 23 April 2018). More than 50 civic organisations led by the Chicago League of Women Voters had also thrown their support behind the proposal.⁷ In a press conference in May, King and Reilly announced they would be asking council to replace Balbo with Wells.

In July 2018, city council approved renaming a road after Wells in downtown Chicago, the first time an African American or woman had been so honoured in Chicago's central 'Loop'. This was of considerable symbolic and historical significance. But Wells did not topple Balbo. Instead, Ida B. Wells Drive replaced a downtown section of Congress Parkway: King and Reilly had switched streets in the face of stiff opposition from the JCCIA and other local Italian-American organisations (CT 19 and 25 July 2018). By this time, the future of the Balbo monument had also been assured. Rather than remove the column, the Chicago Park District (responsible for the management of Chicago's parks) would work with alderman King (within whose ward the monument was located) and the JCCIA to create an information panel explaining the monument's history. This would be erected next to the column (*Gli occhi della guerra* 24 March 2018; CR 23 April 2018).

The JCCIA's post-Charlottesville defence of Balbo Drive and the Balbo monument demonstrates their continuing importance to local Italian-American identity (at least as understood by those groups claiming to represent that community). Whereas it was relatively easy to save the Balbo monument – the cost of removing and relocating it meant a compromise was always likely – the outcome of the battle for Balbo Drive was less certain. By spring 2018, the campaign to rename a city centre road after Wells had gained considerable traction. Balbo Drive was the obvious choice in terms of location, cost (only a handful of businesses would be affected by the change of address) and symbolic significance (the replacement of a Fascist by a civil rights activist, of a white man with a woman of colour). For years, the JCCIA and other Italian-American groups had vigorously opposed calls to rename Balbo Drive after a local Italian American, counter-arguing that the name commemorated a remarkable aeronautical achievement (rather than an individual) and 'the single most memorable and important day in the history of Chicago's Italian-American community' (CT 21 August 2017).⁸ Before Balbo, Italians in America had been the victims of prejudice and exclusion. Balbo's achievement had brought them respect. Moreover, by re-naming 7th Avenue after Balbo, the city council had not only symbolically validated Fascism but also Chicago's Italian immigrant population. Now, in 2018, that community stood to lose ownership of the street entirely. This might explain the extraordinary response of JCCIA leaders to King and Reilly's proposal in May: 'We will ask to be arrested ... I give you my word of honour', declared president emeritus of the JCCIA, Don DiFrisco, claiming that he and his colleagues would chain themselves to the street signs if necessary (*NBC5 Chicago* 23 May 2018; *ABC7 Chicago* 23 May 2018). In these circumstances, one can understand King and Reilly's decision to look elsewhere.

Italy

The two transatlantic crossings made Balbo a hero in Italy. Planned by the regime as mass spectacles 'in which millions of persons would participate directly and vicariously' (Wohl 2005, 74), the flights fired the imagination of a nation already well-schooled in the achievements of Italian aviation under Fascism. Italians were kept informed of Balbo's progress via press and radio, while his arrival and reception were filmed and reported on by a cinematographer and select group of journalists 'dispatched' in advance for the purpose (Wohl 2005, 75, 91–92). Italians also participated as consumers, purchasing commemorative medals and stamps (the latter to help finance the crossings) and other memorabilia (Wohl 2005, 74; *CdS* 8 March 1999). On both occasions, huge crowds greeted the returning *atlantici* (Segrè 1987, 228, 255–259; Guerri 2013, 372). The crossings were also subject to post facto mythologising by the regime. The 1934 Exhibition of Italian Aeronautics in Milan, dedicated to the achievements of Italian aviation and modelled on the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, culminated with a room devoted to the second cruise (Esposito 2012, 146). Here visitors

were encouraged to view Balbo's seaplane (on display) as evidence of Italian national genius reborn under Fascism – a 'piece of the Fatherland that has been cast about the world to demonstrate what stuff the Fatherland is made of', according to the exhibition catalogue (Esposito 2012, 146). Balbo contributed to the myth-making process, penning best-selling accounts of both crossings that portrayed aviation in recognisably Fascist terms ('We have to treat it [the seaplane] brutally,' Balbo wrote in his account of the Brazil crossing, 'we have to make it feel our uncompromising and dominating will, stronger than its own' [Wohl 2005, 78]). A specially edited collection of his writings was even added to the middle school curriculum in 1934 (Wohl 2005, 76).

Renaming streets after Balbo became commonplace in Italy following his death. In some cases, the street was chosen for its symbolic weight. In Crotone, for example, Via Italo Balbo replaced Via Risorgimento. 'The name of the present road,' said the council resolution (July 1940), 'while it refers to a glorious historical period, has a generic significance and that period is overwhelmed by new heroic feats of the generations raised in Fascism' (Grilletta 2003, 45–46). Balbo's connection to the Italian air force was also emphasised. In Rome, Viale Pretorio, which ran in front of the imposing Palazzo Aeronautica, was renamed Via Italo Balbo; in Milan, the square in front of the headquarters of the 1st Regional Air Command (Palazzo Italo Balbo) became Piazza Italo Balbo (*L'ala d'Italia*, 1–15 November 1940, 46; *Corriere dell'Informazione*, 30 August 1945). Further commemorative renaming occurred during the Italian Social Republic. In San Remo, Via Italo Balbo replaced Corso Regina Margherita in late 1943, part of a wider purge of royal street names (*La Stampa* [hereafter *LS*] 15 September 1999).

Despite numerous studies on 'the large-scale commemorative renaming of streets that accompanies revolutionary transformations of the political order' (Azaryahu 2012, 388), postwar Italy has been overlooked. Yet, the speed and extent of the renaming process indicate it was a municipal priority. Renaming practices fell within two broad categories: restorative (the revival of former street names or the commemoration of people and events from the pre-Fascist era) or retributive (the replacement of Fascist names with those of antifascists). Whereas the former suggested continuity with the pre-Fascist period, the latter often signified not only a symbolic settling of scores but also a radical break with the past, Fascist or otherwise, and a re-setting of Italian history. A variety of circumstances – the timing of liberation, experience of occupation, strength of the local resistance, colour of postwar local politics – determined which practice predominated. We see this in the country-wide renaming of roads and squares dedicated to Balbo. For example, in Palermo, liberated by the Allies in July 1943, Piazza Italo Balbo immediately reverted to its former name, Piazza Bologna (*CT* 3 September 1943). By contrast, in German-occupied San Remo, Via Italo Balbo was renamed at the end of the war in honour of local communist partisan leader Luigi Nuvoloni, killed in 1944 (*LS* 15 September 1999).

'Official' Italy's postwar commitment to antifascism notwithstanding, positive memories of Balbo persisted after 1945, and not only in neofascist circles. Mass-circulation magazines regularly ran features on Italian achievements during the *ventennio*, including Balbo's cruises. In 1952, for example, *Oggi* celebrated the anniversary of the 1933 crossing with a four-page photo feature on the 'event that moved the world: the cruise of Balbo' (Baldassini 2008, 60–61, 313–316). In 1967, Balbo's name was still enough of a draw for *Epoca* to promote 'The legendary life of Italo Balbo' as its cover story (12 March). Such accounts were essentially exercises in nostalgia, remembering a time when Italy counted for something on the world stage (Baldassini 2008, 62–63).

Even within the new antifascist Italian state, and contrary to Segrè's claim that the air force after 1945 'made grotesque efforts to deny its paternity' (Segrè 1987, 406), the Aeronautica Militare continued to hold a light for its former *capo*. Segrè argues that the Aeronautica's silence

was for ‘political reasons’, namely, its desire to ‘live down its reputation as the most fascist of the armed services’ (Segrè 1987, 46, 406). In fact, it was impossible for the service to forget Balbo, partly because of his role in its early development and particularly because of the memory of the transatlantic crossings, kept alive by senior military figures who had known Balbo personally and even taken part in the cruises. (When Alitalia began flights between Rome and Chicago in 1962 it celebrated by bringing 14 pilots from the 1933 cruise on the inaugural crossing; 12 were now former or serving generals in the Aeronautica) (*CT* 4 April 1962). So it was that ‘numerous officials of the Aeronautica’ (*CdS* 28–29 June 1951) attended a mass for Balbo in Rome in 1951, while in November 1960 the head of the air force General Silvio Napoli – an *atlantico* and former head of the service office of the Aeronautica in Libya, 1936–1940 – presided over the first major official commemoration of Balbo and the cruises since 1945: the inauguration of a park (the Parco delle Crociere) and sacrarium on the site of the former seaplane base at Orbetello (*CdS* 13 November 1960). The open air *sacrario* featured large stone maps of the transatlantic crossings (and two earlier Mediterranean mini cruises) as well as tablets inscribed with details of the flights and crews. A separate plaque repeated the commendation that had accompanied the posthumous awarding of the *medaglia d’oro al valor militare* to Balbo in 1940. One of the two memorial stones at the entrance to the *sacrario* also carried a dedication to Balbo.⁹ The ceremony, attended by defence minister Giulio Andreotti, delighted Napoli. In a letter to Alberto Briganti (*aiutante di volo* to Balbo, 1927–1928, commander of the Stormo Sperimentale B.M. at Orbetello, 1933–1936, and commander of the Aeronautica in Libya, 1938–1940), Napoli wrote:

It was a great day! In addition to the effective memory of the historic feat, above all because with it we wanted to break that ‘wall of silence’ ... [around] those deeds that are and will always be ascribed in the world to the glory and prestige of our always beloved Aeronautica and country.¹⁰

Shortly after the ceremony, *Oggi* published a photo feature on the Italy-Brazil cruise with text by the former air force chief and *atlantico*, General Giuseppe Valle. ‘It is difficult to understand today the importance that the cruise of Balbo had 30 years ago,’ Valle wrote.

To cross the Atlantic with a powerful aerial formation was, then, like going to the moon. The whole world was thrown into turmoil ... Everywhere there were delirious crowds, banquets, speeches, expressions of admiration for Balbo, who to his talents for organisation and leadership were combined those of irresistible charmer ... At a stroke, the Italian Aeronautica became the first in the world. Thinking back to those distant memories, I feel a sense of sadness faced with the many calumnies that have been spread about our aviation. The truth is that in 1930 and over the next ten years it was at the forefront, envied and respected by all (Baldassini 2008, 61).

Similar sentiments were expressed in a contemporaneous newspaper article by journalist and former air force pilot Maner Lualdi. Known for his own aerial ‘raids’ in the late 1930s and postwar, Lualdi criticised the ‘organised silence’ around the Atlantic cruises (‘the masterpieces of our aviation’). Italy’s politicians, he argued,

must learn to judge the beautiful things done at home with the same educated honesty as foreigners, our ex-enemies and victors, judge them ... in the specific case, not confusing Balbo *quadrumvir* and restless dauphin of fascism, with Balbo aviator, organiser and commander. (*CdS* 13 November 1960)

As these interventions demonstrate, former pilots remained closely involved with the Aeronautica and active in the preservation and promotion of Balbo’s memory and the cruises with which his name was inextricably linked. So it was that in August 1968, 35 crew from the transatlantic crossings together with family representatives of four deceased participants – including Balbo’s youngest son Paolo – established the Associazione Trasvolatori Atlantici (ATA). The organisation, led by Valle and retired generals Ranieri Cupini and Umberto Nannini, sought to perpetuate

the memory of the flights in Italy and abroad, at a time when (in the words of the current ATA website), ‘the importance and memory of the enterprise were often pushed to the margin of contemporary history by a particularistic view of the recent past.’¹¹ One of the first and most important commemorative rituals performed by the ATA was its annual spring reunion, held at the Sacratio degli Atlantici in the Parco delle Crociere and at Orbetello cemetery, where, since the First World War, an area had been reserved for Aeronautica personnel who had died at the seaplane base. The ceremony was given added significance after Balbo’s remains were reburied in the cemetery in December 1972 following their repatriation from Libya (*CdS* 5 June 1972). (At the behest of Colonel Gaddafi, the remains of several thousand Italians buried in Libya were returned to Italy during the summer of 1972.) Nor was Balbo buried alone: alongside him were placed the remains of the three-man crew – all *atlantici* – and four passengers who had been on board Balbo’s last flight. This was a victory for the ATA, which used the return of Balbo’s remains to press the military and civil authorities to dedicate the reserved area of the cemetery to the *atlantici* (henceforth the space became ‘Il Quadrato degli Atlantici’). ‘A guard of honour from the Aeronautica, surviving *trasvolatori*, ex-servicemen’s association representatives, officials of various forces, and a crowd of citizens’ attended the reburial (*CdS* 18 December 1972). By the mid-1980s, the remains of 25 *atlantici* – including Valle (d. 1975) – had been interred alongside Balbo in a newly-constructed ossuary within the ‘Quadrato’. That figure is now 49.¹² The spring reunion continues, with crews represented by surviving family members. Local dignitaries, including the mayor of Orbetello, and Aeronautica personnel also attend.¹³

The Aeronautica’s commemorative activities since the early 1990s – the naming of a square and the inauguration of a bronze bust to Balbo at the Air Ministry’s headquarters in Rome (Palazzo Aeronautica, 1996); an exhibition entitled ‘Balbo Aviatore’ at the headquarters of the 1st Regional Air Command in Milan (1996); the naming of a piazzale after Balbo at Ciampino military airbase near Rome (2000–2001); the repatriation from Libya of the tombstones of the crew and passengers on Balbo’s final flight and their placement around the Balbo bust at the Palazzo Aeronautica (c. 2010); and a travelling exhibition entitled ‘Mari e cieli di Balbo’ commemorating the 1933 transatlantic crossing (2014) – must be understood as part of a tradition of remembrance of Balbo within the air force stretching back decades. What is also true, though, is that over the past 25 years the Aeronautica has been able to commemorate and champion Balbo in ways that would previously have been politically difficult if not impossible. For example, the Balbo bust (Figure 2) was inaugurated in June 1996, on the hundredth anniversary of Balbo’s birth – that is, not on an anniversary linked to the construction of the Palazzo Aeronautica, built under Balbo’s guidance (1929–1931), or the transatlantic crossings. Instead, the bust commemorated a *life* rather than a specific event. Placed in the square (named in Balbo’s honour) in front of the main entrance to the Palazzo Aeronautica, the bust also symbolically connected Balbo to ‘his’ Palazzo and ‘his’ air force. This was very different to the memorialisation of Balbo in Orbetello, which was tightly bound to the commemoration of the Atlantic cruises. Equally significant has been the transformation of the bust with the addition of the tombstones of those who died with Balbo in 1940. A plaque at the foot of the plinth on which the bust rests reads: ‘saved from oblivion and certain destruction [after the revolution that overthrew Gaddafi] the tombstones ... are reinstated here in memory of the fatal flight of this military aviator’. Underneath is a quotation from the Roman philosopher Seneca: ‘It is not important how long life is but how it is performed.’ The Balbo bust now not only commemorates Balbo’s life but also his death, and emphasises his daring, heroism and leadership.

The Aeronautica’s capacity to commemorate Balbo in this fashion has been helped by the collapse of the ‘first’ Italian Republic in the early 1990s and the subsequent political dominance of



Figure 2. Balbo bust, Palazzo dell'Aeronautica, Rome. Author's photograph.

Berlusconi and his right-wing coalition allies, 1994–2011. While the first broke the antifascist consensus that had characterised Italian politics since 1945, the Berlusconi era saw the emergence of a new narrative around Fascism as a relatively benevolent dictatorship. If Fascism was not so bad then it was comparatively easy for the Aeronautica to justify its Balbo commemoratives. The Aeronautica, though, has not only benefited from the 'new' right's reappraisal of Fascism. Since the early 1990s, the Italian centre-left has sought to historicise Fascism, 'to reflect upon yesterday's defeated', in the words of the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Luciano Violante, in May 1996, 'not because they were right, but because we must make the effort to understand' (Lichtner 2013, 20). Understanding could even stretch to forgiveness of particular Fascists, while not forgetting or condoning their involvement in Fascism. For example, in September 1995 the centre-left mayor of Rome, Francesco Rutelli, proposed naming a square in Parco Villa Borghese after the Fascist gerarch Giuseppe Bottai. Considered a 'cultivated Fascist', Bottai had played a key role in Mussolini's dismissal in 1943, and subsequently fought in the French Foreign Legion against the Nazis. According to Rutelli, the new name would be an important conciliatory gesture, recognising Bottai's contribution to the city (as governor of Rome, 1935–1936) 'without absolving him for what he did' (*La Repubblica* [hereafter *LR*] 13 September 1995). Rutelli was forced to retreat in the face of widespread criticism, although the controversy was less about Bottai's

'Fascistness' as his enforcement of the 1938 anti-semitic Racial Laws while education minister, 1936–1943 (Dickie 1997; Clifford 2013, 155–159). The inauguration of the Balbo bust at the Palazzo Aeronautica the following June afforded the recently-elected national centre-left 'Olive Tree' coalition government the opportunity to attempt something similar. At the ceremony, under-secretary of defence Massimo Brutti recalled the 'grave responsibility' of Balbo for Fascism but considered it 'legitimate for the Aeronautica to remember calmly, without any intention of historical revisionism' Balbo's 'courage as a pilot, his pioneering activities that highlighted the capacity and technical level reached by Italian aviation in the 1930s', and 'the clarity of his theories on the function of the modern military air force' (*CdS* 6 June 1996; *LR* 6 June 1996). In contrast to the earlier Bottai controversy, criticism of the Balbo inauguration was restricted to the far left, the Communist Refoundation party describing the commemoration as an 'apology for Fascism' and 'an insult to democracy' (*CdS* 6 June 1996). While the more muted reaction might in part be explained by the bust's location, away from the public gaze in the confines of the Aeronautica's headquarters,¹⁴ Balbo was undoubtedly an easier 'sell' than Bottai. Balbo's squadrist past counted against him, but he had been one of the few senior voices within the regime to criticise the German alliance and Racial Laws. In the mid-1990s, when the treatment of Italian Jews under Fascism and Nazi occupation was receiving 'an unprecedented level of public attention' in Italy (Clifford 2013, 170) thanks to the arrest, extradition and trial of former SS officer Erich Priebke for his role in the 1944 Fosse Ardeatine massacre in Rome, these were important distinctions. Brutti, perhaps with the recent Bottai controversy in mind, made this point in his speech: Balbo 'was better than others, in that he vigorously opposed the barbarism of the racial laws.'¹⁵ It is an argument that continues to be used in officially sanctioned Balbo commemoratives. For example, the press release accompanying the 2014 'Mari e cieli di Balbo' exhibition, which finished at the Palazzo Aeronautica in December after opening in Orbetello in July and touring to Montreal and Chicago, acknowledged Balbo as a 'squadrist of the first hour' but went on to remember him as a 'hero of the skies and seas, and later the bold opponent of the racial laws and of Italy's entry into war alongside Germany' (Rainews.it 22 July 2014; *LR* 2 August 2014).

We cannot talk, though, of a consensus in Italy when it comes to remembering Balbo. Take Balbo's home city of Ferrara. There are no monuments to Balbo here because – as a prominent local historian told me – 'he terrorised the city and the countryside especially in the early 1920s, bringing destruction and enormous economic damage beyond the injuries and innumerable deaths.'¹⁶ The dominant Ferrarese memory is still of Balbo *squadrista*, much to the frustration of right-wing groups in the area. In June 2016, CasaPound went as far as to 'rename' Viale Cavour in the city by posting photocopied 'Viale Italo Balbo' street signs along the road. 'We need to recover examples of people like Italo Balbo in an Italy where the examples of present politics are nearly all negative', explained the local head (*Estense.com* 8 June 2016). The failure of the right in Ferrara to commemorate Balbo publicly with a street name (or other permanent monument) is not an isolated case. Since the 1990s, road-renaming initiatives launched in Ostia and Rome in 2002 by Alleanza Nazionale (AN) and in Orbetello by Fiamma Tricolore and Fratelli d'Italia (2017) have foundered, blocked by a combination of local left-wing and partisans organisations (*LR* 26 September 2002; *CdS* 14 January 2017). An AN proposal for a monument to Balbo in Ostia (2001–2002) suffered the same fate (*LR* 21 December 2001; *CdS* 23 January 2002). In fact, only once in recent years has the right succeeded in renaming a road after Balbo, in the small town of Civitanova Marche (2010). In 2013, a new centre-left administration promised to change it. It was still there in February 2015 – at which point the sign was spray painted. In April, on the eve of Liberation Day, it was again covered, this time by a sticker claiming the road for Guido Picelli, who had led the

antifascist defence of Parma against Balbo's squads in 1922 (*Il Messaggero* 25 February, 25 April 2015).

Despite the general success of traditional antifascist groups in blocking attempts by the right to rename roads or build new memorials to Balbo, the right has found other ways to commemorate him. In 2003, for example, the XIII municipality in Rome presented the AN President of Lazio, Francesco Storace, with the first of 100 specially-minted gold medals commemorating the 70th anniversary of the North Atlantic cruise. The brainchild of the Ostia-based AN councillor (and former member of the Movimento Sociale Italiano) Pier Paolo Zaccai, the medal depicted Balbo with Columbus. In 2017, the annual *Atreju* youth festival organised by Fratelli d'Italia featured a conference room named after Balbo, one of six 'patriots' (and the sole Fascist) to be so honoured. Moreover, while the right has struggled to create permanent monuments to Balbo, it has overseen the renaming of roads in Italy in honour of other, lesser-known, Fascists, sometimes replacing heroes of the left. For example, in Guidonia (Lazio) in 2002, Via Gramsci was renamed after the 'fervent Fascist' (*LS* 3 February 1939) Aldo Chiorboli, who had died trying to rescue a pilot from a burning plane (*CdS* 28 September 2002).

Conclusion

Since the early 1990s, Balbo commemorations have proven to be acceptable to both sections of the Italian left (under certain circumstances) and the Italian right. For the left, it has been possible to look beyond (but not ignore) his 'Fascistness' and focus instead on the memory of Balbo as a pioneering aviator, the commander of the great cruises that attracted worldwide admiration. For the right, leaving aside obvious ideological affinities, the memory of Balbo *aviatore* makes him the perfect candidate for commemoration because it supports the right's narrative of Fascism as a generally 'good' dictatorship that only went wrong in the late 1930s with the introduction of the Racial Laws and the Nazi alliance. Balbo is doubly attractive from this perspective because of his well-known opposition to both policies. However, the right has struggled in its efforts to commemorate Balbo because the left has inevitably viewed such proposals as politically-motivated, at which point the left has revived the memory of Balbo *fascista/squadrista* in order to block them. For the most part, for commemorative initiatives to succeed, the involvement of the apolitical Aeronautica has been required. In these cases, the memory of *Balbo aviatore*, which has always been the primary memory within the Aeronautica, takes precedence.

Chicago's Balbo monuments have become increasingly controversial in recent decades as the meanings and memories attached to them have multiplied. Since the early 1980s, the monuments have come to mean different things to different groups. For minority racial and ethnic groups, the monuments have served as symbols of longstanding social injustices in the city. For white liberal-left critics, they are offensive because they commemorate a Fascist. Radical anti-Fascist groups on the American left, meanwhile, have vandalised the Balbo column because of its 'Fascistness' (in July 2012, a group identifying itself as 'Kalamazoo antifa' spray-painted and wheat-pasted the monument as an 'act of solidarity' with antifascists in Greece).¹⁷ Post-Charlottesville, both monuments have been targeted as 'enduring symbols of white supremacy and racism'.¹⁸ Yet they remain, testimony to the resilience and influence of those Italian-American groups in the city committed to their defence. For these, 15 July 1933 marks the birth of the modern Italian-American community in Chicago, the day Italian migrants in the city finally 'became' something in the eyes of their fellow citizens. As criticisms of Balbo Drive and the Balbo monument have grown (and as attacks on another longstanding source of Italian-American pride and identity, Christopher Columbus, have increased) so the response of Italian-American organisations has

become more fervent. ‘For once, Italian Americans, who discovered, named and claimed North America for English-speakers ... should not have to beg for respect’, thundered the *Italic Way*, the magazine of the Italic Institute of America, responding to a 2011 petition for Balbo Drive to be renamed.¹⁹ As the stakes have risen, Balbo has even been cast by his supporters as a ‘friend of freedom’ and ‘a heroic man who fought for the rights of people’ (ABC7 Chicago 23 May 2018; *CR* 23 April 2018) – absurd claims. We should not be too surprised. In battles over monuments, the issue is often not history but *meaning*, what monuments *represent*. Due regard for the historical record is a secondary concern.

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Notes

1. The Columbus statue in Grant Park also commemorates Balbo. Inaugurated on ‘Italian Day’ at the World’s Fair (3 August 1933), an inscription on its base reads: ‘This monument has seen the glory of the wings of Italy led by Italo Balbo, 15 July 1933.’ *Fasci* mark both ends of the exedra that frames the monument. The Fascist aspects of the statue have passed largely unremarked, perhaps because of the ubiquity of fasces (as an ancient symbol of unity and authority) in American political iconography.
2. Italy’s declaration of war had triggered immediate, but isolated, calls for Balbo Drive to be renamed (*CDT* 15 December 1941, 6 and 11 January 1942).
3. According to Guerri (2013, 356), Italy’s first postwar ambassador to the United States, Alberto Tarchiani, also requested that the road be renamed and the column removed. Guerri claims – although the story may be apocryphal – that Kelly replied: ‘Why? Didn’t Balbo cross the Atlantic?’
4. *Chicago Reader* (*CR*), 17 September 1993, reproduced in Zorn 2006.
5. *CR*, 30 October 1998, reproduced in Zorn 2006.
6. *Streetsblog Chicago*, 26 August 2017, <https://chi.streetsblog.org/2017/08/26/blackshirts-and-green-signs-is-it-time-to-rename-balbo-drive-a-tribute-to-a-fascist/>.
7. <https://my.lww.org/illinois/chicago/article/running-campaign-ida-b-wells-drive> (accessed 12 December 2018).
8. See Zorn 2006; the 2011 ‘Petition to retain the name of Balbo Drive’ (<https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/balbodrive>); and *Italic Way* XXXVII, 2011, 1–2. The 2011 petition to retain Balbo Drive was in response to a petition by a group of Chicago academics calling for the street to be renamed after Fermi. For the 2011 controversy see Pugliese 2011.
9. For details of the ceremony and images of the sacrario see <http://www.trasvolatoriatlantici.it/index.php/il-sacrario>.
10. Silvio Napoli to Alberto Briganti, 19 January 1961, <http://www.trasvolatoriatlantici.it/index.php/il-sacrario>.
11. <http://www.trasvolatoriatlantici.it/index.php/2012-10-03-23-49-33>.
12. <http://www.trasvolatoriatlantici.it/index.php/la-storia-dellata/il-cimitero>.
13. See for example <http://www.trasvolatoriatlantici.it/index.php/archivio-notizie/59-notiziario-ata-2015>.

14. This also helps to explain the silence surrounding the Aeronautica's decision (2000–2001) to name the *piazzale* at the entrance to Ciampino military airport after Balbo. Only after *Avvenire* reported the story in mid-2002 did left-wing parliamentarians demand the name be changed, a move rejected by Berlusconi's new centre-right government. *LS*, 12, 13, 31 July 2002; 10, 11 September 2002.
15. Carlo Giovanardi (Minister of Parliamentary Relations), oral reply to Mauro Fabris, Italian Senate, 10 October 2002, <http://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/frame.jsp?tipodoc=Resaula&leg=14&id=31195>.
16. Personal communication, 30 August 2016.
17. <http://southsideantifa.blogspot.com.au/2012/08/> (accessed 7 July 2018).
18. <https://www.change.org/p/mayor-emanuel-take-down-fascist-and-racist-balbo-monument-now>.
19. *Italic Way* XXXVII, 2011, 1–2. <http://www.italic.org/ItalicWay/editions/ItalicWay2011XXXVII.pdf>

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Italian summary

L'articolo esamina il significato dei monumenti dedicati, in Italia e negli Stati Uniti (Chicago), al gerarca fascista Italo Balbo. Personalità di enorme popolarità nell'Italia fascista, nei primi anni '30 Balbo consolidò la propria fama di comandante di crociere aeree transatlantiche verso il Brasile (1930-1) e gli Stati Uniti (1933). I monumenti di Chicago – una strada (Balbo Drive) e una colonna (il 'Balbo monument') – restano a testimonianza del trionfale arrivo di Balbo in città, nel 1933. I monumenti in Italia si datano invece in età postbellica e contemporanea. L'articolo analizza i motivi per cui la Balbo Drive e il Balbo monument di Chicago siano diventati nel tempo assai controversi, soprattutto negli ultimi decenni, e perché, nonostante le richieste di rimozione, entrambi rimangono. Mette anche a contrasto il suddetto caso con la situazione in Italia, dove, sin dagli anni '90, Balbo è stato commemorato in varie forme.