

Italy's Fallen Soldiers

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Global Research, September 24, 2009

[After Downing Street](#) 24 September 2009

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On Monday, walking through the center of Rome, you couldn't help noticing the Italian flags on display at shops, bars and restaurants. Merchants associations had printed up color copies of the flag to be placed in shop windows with the words "In honor of the fallen soldiers," referring to the six Italian paratroopers killed by a car bomb last Thursday in Kabul, Afghanistan.

For days, news of the soldiers' deaths - and corresponding political debate on the Italian mission in Afghanistan - filled the pages of newspapers and was the lead story on the TV news. There was live coverage as the bodies of the soldiers arrived in Rome on Sunday morning. The President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, together with Defense Minister La Russa, and leaders of the center-right government were present for the solemn ceremony held at the airport.

The live coverage continued the following day, which was declared a day of national mourning. The flag draped coffins, aboard six open flatbed military trucks, slowly made their way from the Celio military hospital near the Colosseum to the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, Rome's second largest church after Saint Peter's, where state funeral services were held.

Attending were Prime Minister Berlusconi, leaders of both houses of Parliament, top-level cabinet members, deputy secretaries, a former president and exponents of majority and opposition parties.

The Pope sent a telegram which was read during the service, and afterwards the Frecce Tricolori, the Italian Air Force's acrobatic flying team, flew over the church leaving their signature green, white and red smoke trails representing Italy's flag.

While there was definitely an outpouring of solidarity for the families of the soldiers, it was also a remarkably well orchestrated show of "patriotism" - few words were reserved for the 15 Afghan civilians who were also killed that day - aimed at keeping the focus on the fallen soldiers and off the question of the Italian military presence in Afghanistan. Italy currently has 3,300 troops in Afghanistan, officially taking part in a "peace mission."

But there was no getting away from the debate. Umberto Bossi, Minister of Reforms and leader of the right-wing Northern League party, immediately expressed his hope to bring all Italian forces home by Christmas. "The mission in Afghanistan is over." Speaking with the press at the funeral services, Bossi commented, "We sent them to Kabul and they came back dead. This isn't what we voted for." Defense Minister La Russa and exponents of Berlusconi's party initially distanced themselves from Bossi's statements saying that, at the moment, talk of full withdrawal was not on the table.

Berlusconi himself first reacted by calling the mission in Afghanistan “essential” but did talk of the necessity to “bring our boys home as soon as possible.” He later began to talk of plans to bring some troops home, though limiting it to the 500 who were recently deployed on a temporary mission in advance of the Afghan elections and without specifying a date. He also spoke of the need for a “transition strategy,” words echoes by Foreign Affairs Minister Frattini.

The center-left “opposition” party, Partito Democratico, issued a statement against withdrawal from Afghanistan but calling for an international peace conference resulting in “diplomatic measures to put in place alongside the military presence.”

In a recent poll, only 26% of those surveyed were in favor of maintaining troops in Afghanistan; just 40% among center right voters. And that was a few days before the car bombing brought the war home to the Italian public.

Outside the church on Monday there were some calls for withdrawal from Afghanistan. And during the service, a man managed to commandeer the microphone at the altar to yell “Peace Now!” Cartoonist Vauro issued a stinging comment on this incident the following day on the leftist newspaper Il Manifesto. Above the caption “Man who shouted from the altar immediately removed by security” was a drawing of secret service agents carrying the crucifix out of the church.

Minister of Education, Mariastella Gelmini had issued a memo calling on all schools to observe a minute of silence. Parents called regional school boards as well as the Ministry to register their objections, which were not meant as disrespect for the fallen but in protest of the decision to single out the soldiers in what was seen as an overt political use of their deaths. A number of schools publicly declined to participate. One teacher asked why there were never calls for a minute of silence for any of Italy’s 1300 on-the- job deaths each year.

It’s interesting to compare how the deaths of soldiers are covered by the media and dealt with by the government in the U.S. and Italy. Who can forget the stir Nightline’s Ted Koppel caused in 2004 by simply reading the names of the 700 soldiers killed in Iraq at the time, with Sinclair Broadcasting refusing to air the program on stations it owned.

And it was only this past April that the 18-year government imposed ban on media coverage of fallen soldiers returning to Dover Air Force was finally lifted, leaving the decision up to the family members. To his credit, it was President Obama who asked Secretary Gates to review the policy, though this came only after years of lobbying on the part of veterans’ and peace groups. Contrary to what supporters of the ban had said, in the first few weeks following the lift, 14 out of 19 families gave permission for media coverage.

In early September, Associated Press was at the center of a controversy for having distributed the photo of a dying marine in Afghanistan, Lance Cpl. Joshua M. Bernard. Admittedly, the debate centered more on the fact that the soldier’s father had requested that the photo not be distributed. AP justified the decision, which was called “appalling” by Secretary Gates, saying, “We feel it is our journalistic duty to show the reality of the war there, however unpleasant and brutal that sometimes is.”

Reuters’ columnist Bernd Debusmann recently reported on the undercounting of deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan by concealing contractor casualties, which now amount to 1,360 according to a report by the bipartisan Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and

Afghanistan.

Obviously, in the different approaches by Italy and the U.S., historical and cultural differences come into play, as do the number of troops deployed and the number of military deaths suffered by each country. Italian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan total 54, while the U.S. count is at just over 6,500 – including contractors.

There are also some similarities reminiscent of the Bush years that come along with being involved in an unpopular war. Defense Minister La Russa was quick to assert the illogical but oft-repeated mantra, “We have to carry on with the mission to honor the fallen.” Any attempts to call into discussion the mission in Afghanistan were equated with disrespecting the soldiers and their families. And there is little or no mention of the civilian deaths.

I couldn’t help think of something a veteran once told me. “The best way to honor the fallen is to stop making more of them.”

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