

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later

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Abstract

There is the wreckage of a broken Dam in Val di Scalve, a remote valley in the Italian Alps. At 7:15 am on December 1, 1923, the Gleno Dam collapsed and the flood wave swept over the villages below, all the way to Lake Iseo and the plain, killing about 356 people (out of a population of about ten thousand people). Our research takes stock of the social vulnerability of the affected communities, one hundred years later, and aims to interpret this disaster in the broader framework of the irruption of industrial modernity in the Alps and its consequences. What did modernity mean in the most peripheral areas of the Alpine mountains? What conditions of vulnerability did it generate? And, under what conditions can the social memory of the past heal the wounds of communities affected by disasters? And under what conditions can it further aggravate the sense of trauma suffered? The research was conducted using hermeneutic methods and qualitative techniques to investigate the processes of collective memory construction, with specific reference to social vulnerability and cultural trauma, among the communities affected by the Gleno disaster. What emerges is a picture of an Alpine community in which the representation of the pain of one's past still constitutes a major activator of social phenomena and ferments one hundred years later.

Keywords: sociology of collective memory, disasters, cultural trauma.

1. Introduction

At 7:15 am on December 1, 1923, the Gleno Dam in the province of Bergamo in the northern Italian Alps suddenly collapses (Figures 1, 2, 3). A mass of water and debris of about six million cubic meters leaked from the

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reservoir and plummeted over the valley sot-tost, overwhelming the villages of Bueggio, Dezzo di Scalve, Angolo, and Darfo Boario Terme. The disaster caused the death of more than three hundred and fifty ascertained victims (but estimates put the figure at around five hundred) in an area that had, at the time of the events, about 10,000 people and damages of about 7 million liras (equivalent to about 15 million euros today), which include only material damage (Pedersoli, 1989), while compensation for the dead and injured was quantified at several hundred million of lire.

Figure 1 – The location of the Dam of Gleno in the Italian alpine Region.



The trial, brought against Virgilio Viganò, owner of the plant, Giovan Battista Santangelo, design engineer, and Luigi Vita, owner of the construction company, began in 1924 and ended in 1928 with the acquittal of all defendants. Viganò due to intervening death, Santangelo due to insufficient evidence, and Vita due to not having committed the act. Probably also because of this outcome, several hypotheses have been advanced over time on the causes of the collapse. The most credited, even according to the legal truth, concerns the inexperience with which the construction work was carried out and the superficiality of the controls operated by the institutional bodies. However, in recent times, a hypothesis has also been put forward, which has never been verified, that the collapse was caused by the explosion of a bomb placed by unspecified “anarchists” for political reasons (Bonomo, 2016). It should not be forgotten that Italy in December 1923 had been ruled by then for a year (October, 1922) by the Fascist regime led by Benito Mussolini and, for that reason, the political climate in the country was relatively tense.

The Gleno disaster is the first technological disaster, that is, one that happened by human hands, in the history of the Alps. Others would follow,

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of
an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later
Lorenzo Migliorati

and the list of Alpine “natural” catastrophes is long: the *Molare*, also in Italy between Liguria and Piedmont, in 1935; the *Fréjus* in France in 1959; the *Vajont*, in Italy, in 1963, to name only the most emblematic cases.

Figure 2 – *The Dam of Gleno (October 1923).*



The Gleno disaster happened in a small, remote alpine valley that, even today a century later (2023 marks the 100th anniversary) still represents that event as the quintessential disaster. Older people still measure the time *before* the Gleno and *after* the Gleno, and it is not uncommon to hear idiomatic expressions from local people such as “you look as scared as those on the Gleno”.

The elements outlined above make the Gleno disaster an emblematic case study, particularly a century later, for observing the dynamics of the collective memory building processes of the social groups involved. This article considers two aspects in particular. The first concerns the state of public memory of the events at the time among the affected communities. With regard to this issue, the system of representations of the dam ruins, still present and the destination of significant tourist flows, as a means of production and representation of the memory of the events will also be considered. The second concerns the sociological interpretation of the Gleno disaster as a cultural trauma and thus follows the processes of construction and the outcomes to which it led.

Figure 3 – The village of Bueggio after the collapse. The broken Dam is visible in high, left.



The hypothesis guiding the research is that the Gleno disaster constitutes a case of a routinized cultural trauma process assumed in the collective memory of the affected communities. This trauma, however, did not spread to wider publics (e.g., the national community, as was the case with the 1963 Vajont disaster) due to the historical contingencies in which it happened, the low performative capacity of the carrier groups, and the peculiar hierarchies of stratification in the collective representational systems of the time.

2. Collective memory and cultural trauma: the painful past between reconstruction and representation

The idea that the past and the stories we tell about it constitute powerful functions of social identity for the present and future design of actors and groups has its roots in the classical sociology of the late 19th century. It was Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1944), one of Emile Durkheim's most brilliant students, who gave accomplished form to the theoretical project of establishing the possibility that remembering was a social act, first and foremost than an individual one. He did so in a trilogy of works (Halbwachs, 1925, 1941, 1950) that stands out against the backdrop of the French *entre-deux-guerres* and this author's scientific maturity, tragically broken by his death in Buchenwald in

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of
an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later
Lorenzo Migliorati

1944. What we remember, even the most narrowly personal and subjective of memories, is made possible by a socially matrixed symbolic ordering system that Halbwachs calls social frameworks of memory (Halbwachs, 1925). What we call memory is not the mere reemergence to present consciousness of images of something that happened in the past, but rather the product of a reconstruction and selection of my and our past.

Memory is a reconstruction of the past operated in the present and from currently dominant interests, not a mere re-emergence to consciousness of images, more or less faithful, of what happened. Especially when we are dealing with the past of social groups, with our own histories, what we call collective memory is not the mere summation of each member's individual memories, but a socially mediated combination of them; a reconstruction, in fact.

On the other hand, it would not be possible to remember if it were not possible to forget. Making memory is possible only if the possibility of its opposite, forgetting, is given. Memory, that is, is a selection of the past that we choose to remember, based on what we consider important today, in the present, as we do so. If I had to express myself in a single sentence, even at the risk of oversimplifying, I would say that all collective memory is a choice: we, together, today, choose to remember some past because we feel it is important for us to do so; because the past speaks to our present and our future.

Far from being individual, the reconstruction and selection of the past to be remembered are social operations, activities that we carry out, necessarily, in agreement with other members of our social group and in the present time in which together we choose to do so. They are collective memory operations, precisely: "every memory is an effort" (Bloch, 1925: p. 77).

The particular theoretical construct we call cultural trauma goes back to the proposal developed by J. C. Alexander and cultural sociologists at Yale University in the so-called "strong program of cultural sociology." The idea is well known, but it is worth revisiting briefly.

Jeffery Alexander writes that "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2012: p. 35). The main hypothesis of the perspective represented by Alexander and the circle of authors gathering around the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University adopts a distinctly constructivist perspective. It is naive to think that events are themselves traumatic because events are nothing more than facts that happen. Events are not naturally traumatic; what is traumatic is the representation we give them, how we describe them and how we talk about them. If it were the events themselves that contained a collectively traumatizing potential, it would not explain why of some we say that they

redefined our social identity (e.g., as citizens) from scratch, even though we were not direct victims of them, while of others, no. The issue, J. Alexander would say, is that trauma is a socially attributed status to events, a characteristic we say about the events that have happened. But it is not enough to say so: for an event to attain the status of cultural trauma, a long, socially mediated process of signification and symbolic attribution is required that transforms a fact of the past into an event that has forever altered the sense of social identity of both those directly affected and all others. In other words, the representation of the past in culturally traumatic terms depends on the convincing and persuasive capacity with which some actors, usually first and foremost the victims, try to convince, through particular social performances, wider and wider audiences that they have been similarly affected by the devastating consequences of those events.

The starting point of this spiral of signification is the cry of vindication of someone who believes that he or she, along with others, has been affected by some event that has radically and irreparably altered his or her own and others' sense of identity. If this performative act, through which an actor aggregates the trauma-bearing group around him or her, has been successful, the spiral of signification will have been triggered and others may come progressively convinced that they have been victims of the same event represented as traumatic, even though they have not been directly affected by it. The carrier group and its members will echo that cry by progressively widening the spiral to wider and wider audiences, until it includes, in the most successful cases, all of humanity. When the spiral of signification has thus expanded and a new "big narrative" has been created, the social identity of those it has embraced will be completely redefined in the terms of social trauma. Trauma can be said to be culturally constructed and sedimented in social practices of routinized memory.

It seems to me that the Gleno disaster holds all the cards so that, with the sufficient rarefied perspective of a century in between since its occurrence, it can be observed according to the categories I have tried to summarize above. What operations of memorial reconstruction has it undergone? And which, among the various possible narratives, have been selected to hand down its collective memory? What memories exist and endure of that tragic event? And, again: can the Gleno disaster be represented as a cultural trauma?

3. Materials and Methods

The research originating this paper was conducted between January and July 2023 and involved a mixed methods approach. First, a structured questionnaire was administered to a representative sample of the adult

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of
an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later
Lorenzo Migliorati

population of the municipalities implicated in the Gleno disaster (Azzone, Colere, Vilminore di Scalve, Schilpario in Scalve Valley, Bergamo province; Angolo Terme and Darfo Boario Terme in Camonica Valley, Brescia province). A total of 290 questionnaires were administered, by CATI technique (n=206) and self-administered CAWI (n=84). Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of questionnaires for each municipality. 69% of the questionnaires were administered in the municipalities of the Scalve Valley; 31% in the two municipalities of the Camonica Valley. The questionnaire consists of 36 items and is structured into four sections: the memory of the disaster, the social consequences of the disaster at the affected communities, the plexuses of symbolic meanings attributed to the Dam ruins, and the sociodemographic information of the respondents. In terms of gender, 35% of the sample were males and 65% were females. As for age, 17.6% of the respondents fall into the age group of 18 to 34 years old, 38.6% between 35 and 54 years old, 33.4% between 55 and 74 years old, and finally, 10.3% are over 75 years old.

Table 1 – Geographical distribution of respondents for the questionnaires.

Municipality	Numerousness	% on total	N. Inhabitans
Angolo Terme	40	13,8	2.298
Azzone	15	5,2	359
Colere	59	20,3	1.106
Darfo Boario Terme	50	17,2	15.596
Schilpario	55	19,0	1.131
Vilminore di Scalve	71	24,5	1.428
<i>Totale</i>	<i>290</i>	<i>100,0</i>	<i>21.918</i>

Nearly half (45.2%) of the respondents (45.2%) of the respondents have a high school degree, while 31% have a high school diploma. Finally, respectively 5.9% and 18% possess either an elementary school license or a bachelor's degree or higher. Employed people (including homemakers) account for 66.7% of the total, retirees make up 27% of the sample, and the remaining about 6% are unemployed or students. Those who work are mostly private employees (55.5%), civil servants (12.1%) or entrepreneurs (12.1%). The remaining respondents are self-employed, artisans or freelancers.

A final piece of data used to stratify respondents concerns having had disaster victims in the family. Only a rather small minority, about 8 percent, claim to be from a family that had direct victims (grandparents, great-grandparents, collateral relatives); 92% of respondents did not, however, have direct victims.

The qualitative part of the research involved the collection of twenty in-depth interviews with privileged witnesses, moral entrepreneurs of memory and descendants of disaster victims, as well as the analysis of secondary data such

as direct testimonies of survivors collected in the decades following the disaster and now preserved at local historical archives or already published as part of memoir materials (Bendotti, 1984; Pedersoli, 1989).

4. Results

4.1 The memory of the disaster of Gleno's Dam

We asked whether or not respondents have taken part in commemorative practices celebrated in the past. More than half, 51.7% of the total, say they have never participated in commemorative events; 10.3% of them say they do not even know that any have been organized. Among those who have taken part in past commemorations, 29.3% say they have done so rarely, while frequent participants in past commemorative events account for 18.6% (Tab. 2).

Table 2 – Attendance rate at past commemorative events.

Have you ever participated over the years in events commemorating the Gleno disaster?	%
No, I have never participated	41,4
Yes, but rarely	29,3
Yes, at most of those that have been organized	18,6
No, I did not even know that commemorations were organized	10,3
No answer	0,4
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>

The absolute figure is not very understandable, except in its broad outlines. We observe, for example, that people are divided into two large, basically homogeneous groups: those who have participated (more or less actively) and those, on the other hand, who have never done so. The picture becomes more understandable if we try to distinguish some specific groups. In particular, participation becomes more assiduous among those who have had victims in their families than among others. Notably, 65.2% of those who had family bereavements brought about by the disaster say they participated in most (or some) of the organized commemorations, compared to 46.6% of those who had no victims.

The age groups that most assiduously attended the commemorations are the middle ones (35-54; 55-64). It is interesting to note that the young (18-44) participate more actively than the elderly (over 75): to have never attended memorial events is more than 70 percent of the oldest age group, compared to 51% of the youngest.

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of
an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later
Lorenzo Migliorati

Respondents residing in the municipalities of the Scalve Valley seem to show greater participation in commemorative events than those residing in the municipalities of the Camonica Valley. To have participated over time, in fact, is 53% of the former, compared to 36.7% of the latter. This is a figure that, however, should be taken with a grain of salt because, as we have seen the disparity in population numbers between territories is significant, and our survey took into consideration the entire municipality of Darfo Boario Terme, since it was not possible to select, for matters of economy of the survey, only those portions of the territory that were most marked by the disaster, for example, Corna di Darfo. Still, the trend seems interesting to me.

We then asked our respondents to state what was the first word they associated with the Gleno disaster. We found recurrences that allowed us to identify some categories and that refer to some major themes: death, pain, nature, material damage and, finally, attribution of responsibility.

It seems interesting to note that those who have had bereavements in their families mostly associate images related to death and grief (56.5%), compared to 40.9% of those who do not have victims. On the other hand, this second category of respondents associates disaster prevalently with damage and the natural (water) component of the disaster (39.4%) more than the first category (26.1%). The prevailing theme of responsibility is reported by a fairly similar share of respondents in both categories (13% of those who had casualties and 15.5% of those who did not), indicating a cross-cutting theme in the overall disaster narrative we are studying.

If the youngest respondents, then, associate disaster more with the image of material damage and the naturalness of the event, the more one advances with age, the more images related to death and destruction and the attribution of responsibility emerge (Tab. 3).

Table 3 – Representations of the disaster for age groups.

Representation	18-34	35-54	55-74	Over 75
Material damages	49	23,2	22,7	20
Pain	15,7	19,6	25,8	30
Death	9,8	27,7	21,6	6,7
Nature	17,6	12,5	9,3	3,3
Accounting	5,9	11,6	20,6	26,7
No answer	2	5,4	--	13,3
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

It seems useful to me to embark on the summary of this first section on the dominant systems of representations of the Gleno disaster, trying to shine a beam of light on the meanings it holds for the interviewees.

What did the Gleno disaster represent? What interpretation do people give of it? Let's take three symbolic objects: the disaster itself, the memory of it that endures, and the consequences over time of the tragedy. These elements combine to form the overall memorial landscape, the broader horizon of meaning within which respondents can interpret what happened and unfold the more specific systems of representations that we observed above.

We asked our interviewees to think about the Gleno disaster and tell us what was the most recurring thought accompanying them (Tab. 4).

Table 4 – The meanings of the disaster.

What do you think, in general, about the disaster?	%
I think the Dam was built to bring some wealth to the valley, but then it went bad	42,8
I think the Dam is a symbol of the hunger for wealth of the few	23,8
I think the disaster forever changed the identity of us valley people	12,1
I don't know	16,6
I don't think anything	4,8
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>

As can be seen, a relative majority of people (42.8%) think that the Gleno Dam was built with good intentions, mostly related to the economic development of the Valley, but subsequent events caused the project to collapse. About a quarter of the respondents (23.8%) make explicit the intent and responsibility for the disaster. Finally, about 12% of respondents attribute the power of having irreversibly altered the Valley's identity to the disaster. It seems to me that some themes of some interest emerge. The first concerns the idea that the Dam and the disaster do not seem to represent, today, only the idea of catastrophe, but that the respondents also attribute to it an instrumental meaning: that is, the disaster is mainly represented as the interruption of a process that, at least in the initial intentions, was supposed to bring development and well-being to the area.

Next, the significant of material and moral responsibilities for what happened emerges, and as we shall see, this is a strong theme that has always accompanied the history of the Gleno disaster. The third theme concerns the transformations of the Valley's identity following the disaster. In this case, one hundred years later, the disaster is not collected with radical changes, as if the facts, so distant in time, were no longer so searing and now represented a memory transfigured by time. This aspect, too, will be the subject of later analysis in the context of reflections on the trauma brought about by the disaster. Clearly, we detect differences in the responses between the different profiles of respondents, although, in the specific case of this do- question, they appear less pronounced than at other junctures. The most significant among

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of
an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later
Lorenzo Migliorati

these relates to whether or not they have had family bereavements as a result of the disaster. Among those who believe that the tragedy has forever altered the identity of valley dwellers, those who discount deaths in the family are almost double (21.7 percent), compared to those who have had none (11.4 percent). I report this figure because it allows us to glimpse one of the most significant memorial views of the Gleno disaster: the memory of the tragedy is, for the most part, linked to the family memories of those who have bereavements to remember.

4.2 The disaster of Gleno as a cultural trauma

Do Valle di Scalve and Valle Camonica communities represent that of the Gleno as a cultural trauma? It is around this question that we focused part of our research. We were interested in knowing the degree of penetration and the state of the process of trauma construction of this one which, as I mentioned above, presents all the elements for this to have happened.

The starting point of this part of the analysis moves from the perception of the state of extension of the memory of the disaster. We asked respondents whether they believe that the memory of the Disaster is still alive among people (Tab. 5).

As can be seen, in the perception of the respondents, the memory of the Disaster is certainly alive, even if its reach extends mainly to the affected territories, particularly to the “extended” valley, where by this term is meant the Scalve Valley and the portion of the Camonica Valley marked by the effects of the Disaster. Half of the respondents, 50.3 percent, believe this. About a quarter of the sample, 24.1%, extends this range outside the valley as well, potentially to “everyone” (hypothetically, within a national framework). 18.3% believe that the memory of the Gleno disaster is mainly the business of those who were directly affected by it because of material damage and family bereavements, while a rather small minority perceives the memory of the events that occurred as scarcely active (7.3 percent). It is worth noting that it is precisely those who have had family bereavements who perceive the memorial reach limited to victims the most. These, in fact, state much more significantly than all others how remembrance of the events is a matter limited to those who have been affected (30.4% vs. 4.2%). The others, those who had no victims, believe that the memory of the disaster is mostly the affair of the extended valley (51.5 percent). This finding confirms, once again, a rather clear distinction in the representations of the Gleno disaster between the two main groups: family members of the victims and everyone else. In general, the older population extends the memorial reach of the disaster more widely than the younger ones.

For the relative majority of those over 75, in fact, the memory of the disaster concerns the supra-local dimension (36.7%), while the younger ones contain this radius to the valley. This is the case for 18-34 year old for half of whom disaster memory is a local issue. And this is their most chosen mode. Superimposed here is a second distinction between carrier groups: those from the older generations according to whom the memory of the disaster is, in some ways, more vivid and lowered in direct experience as opposed to the younger generational groups for whom the disaster is a fact felt, but less intensely and, in some ways, more aseptic and less active. If the former seem to respond to systems of memorial representations related to those we might expect to find among the more direct victims, for the latter memory is a different, less embodied and, perhaps, more disenchanting fact.

Table 5 – The meanings of the disaster.

In your opinion, is the memory of the disaster still alive?	%
Yes, the memory is vivid in the minds of Valley residents	50,3
Yes, it is a story that everyone remembers, even outside the Valley	24,1
Yes, but only in the memory of the people who were affected by it	18,3
Not much. It is only talked about on anniversaries	6,6
Not at all	0,7
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>

Let us come to the representation of the event (Tab. 6): what happened that was so terrible as to deeply shock people’s consciousness?

Table 6 – The nature of the pain.

In your opinion, what really happened?	%
If someone had not wanted to make money at all costs, this would not have happened	57,0
An event happened that helped create a civic consciousness on these issues	26,9
A catastrophe happened that forever changed the identity of us valley people	11,5
A catastrophe happened that could not have been predicted	4,7
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>

The modes of response we have proposed refer to a kind of continuum in the collective representation of what the Gleno disaster was that oscillates between complete unpredictability and naturalness (a tragic fatality) and the collapse as the fatal outcome of almost conscious, albeit unintended, choices (the disaster as a consequence of precise choices). As can be seen, the majority of respondents believe that the Gleno disaster was a fully “human” disaster, caused, that is, by precise choices related to economic issues and profit. Only a

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of
an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later
Lorenzo Migliorati

small but still interesting minority describe the Gleno disaster as a pure and tragic fatality. We do not find any particular differences among the various groups: all, indiscriminately, represent that of the Gleno as the disaster brought about by human greed and wickedness. We do trace a difference, but the smallness of the numbers does not allow us to go beyond the mere ripple of data, between the group of those who had direct victims in their families and those who, on the other hand, did not. For the former, the Gleno forever changed the identity of valley dwellers more than for the latter (15.8% vs. 11.3%). Beyond this data, which may well be, to some extent, expected, what I would like to note is how the collective representation of the Gleno disaster is consolidated. The answer to the question of what really happened to a particular group and the broader community of which it is a part leaves little doubt: the Gleno disaster was the collapse of a dam brought about by reckless and voracious human action for profit.

Who are the victims of this tragic event? And what is their relationship to the wider public? These are the other questions that pertain to the process of constructing cultural trauma (tab. 7).

The modes of response, in this case, seek to embrace the possible range of extension of a hypothetical spiral of signification, insofar as it allows us to detect information in relation to those who felt affected by the disaster, regardless of having been direct victims. We started from the inner circle of direct victims (the families of the dead) to the entire national community, passing through the generic group of disaster victims and the Valley and the territories swept away by the wave. The idea is that of a kind of concentric circle system. Who is represented as the victim, equal to the dead, of what happened? As we can see, the majority of the answers that our respondents gave concern either the inner circle of the victims' families (22.4 percent) or the Valley and the territories affected by the wave, what we could define as the "extended valley" (50.7 percent). Only a minority, admittedly not very small (19.7%) extends victim representation to the entire national community. This strikes me as an interesting fact: the Gleno disaster was the first national "technological" disaster. Others followed: the Molare, the Vajont, the Frejus and so on. However, the range of extension of its effects is limited and does not go beyond the affected territories. We cannot go into more details of the reasons for this condition whose causes are multiple and are also discussed in this volume (e.g., the propaganda of the nascent fascism in Italy or the political and strategic need to continue development processes at the dawn of industrial modernity in the Alps), however, it is interesting to note that the Gleno one remains, in the perception of the affected communities and a hundred years later, the trauma of a community circumscribed in time and space. The Gleno disaster is, after all, the disaster of a few: the trauma of a valley.

Table 7 – The nature of the victims.

Who are the Gleno victims, besides the dead of course?	%
The whole Valley the towns that were swept away by the wave	50,7
The families of the dead: the tragedy lies with those left behind	22,4
All. It was a national disaster	19,7
All those who suffered material damage	6,6
Doesn't know/doesn't answer	0,6
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>

It is worth noting that we find differences among the various groups of respondents, the most significant of which relates to having had direct victims in the family or not. In this case, those who have had family bereavements brought about by the disaster tend to extend victim status more than those in the other group. While for the relative majority of the former, in fact, the Gleno was a national disaster (39.1 percent), the same representation holds true for less than half of the latter (18.2 percent). Those who had deaths in their families caused by the Gleno disaster tend, in essence, to portray the victim status as more extensive than those who did not have the same family history. The Gleno is ultimately represented, even today, as significantly more traumatic among the descendants of direct victims. For others it is an event, significant certainly, but less searing and painful.

4.3 The wreckage of the Dam like a multivocal memorial monument

A last topic of interest regarding the history of the Gleno disaster has to do with the ruins of the Dam. For a hundred years, in fact, the wreckage of the Dam has remained intact and constitutes a profound mark on the landscape of the Scalve Valley. It is a sign that is now ingrained in the very identity of the people of the Valley, and for this reason it takes on different meanings depending on the audiences that enjoy it. The *Piana del Gleno* (Gleno Plain), the site of the Dam, is situated at a relatively low elevation (1.537 m. asl) and can be reached by several easy hiking routes. In addition, the naturalistic setting is of the highest environmental and naturalistic value. For all these reasons, the Gleno is now a destination for an increasing number of tourists and hikers (fig. 5 and 6).

What significance does the Gleno Dam have for local people today? Is it a place of memory or is it something else? These questions are important for understanding some of the memorial dynamics that arose around the Gleno disaster. They refer back to the theme of *monumentalization* of memory sites. The sociological literature in order to these aspects is flourishing (Kidder, 2009;

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of
an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later
Lorenzo Migliorati

Saito, 2006; Schwartz and MiKyoung, 2002; Spillman, 1998), also with regard to Italian cases related to natural and man-made disasters and catastrophes (Affuso, 2019; Foot, 2009; Mangone, 2011; Musolino, 2017; Rampazi, 2015; Tota, 2001). We cannot go into the merits of the different research perspectives elaborated here. Therefore, I will only mention what seem to me the extreme paradigms related to the monumentalization of trauma sites: removing and forgetting, on the one hand; monumental sacralization, on the other.

Figure 4 – The Grande Cretto of Gibellina Vecchia (Sicily, Italy).



An example of the first semantic paradigm can be found in the research experience conducted by Olimpia Affuso on the *Cité de la Muette* in France, the scene of mass deportations during the collaborationist years of the Vichy government during World War II. That place retains no memory of that painful past and has been the subject of practices of “of hiding the past, which, in answering questions about how, by whom and for whom public choices are made about spaces, tell how from time to time something is erased, and then recovered, in the dialectic that every society sets up with its own identity when

it has to redefine itself¹“ (Affuso, 2019: p. 267). The opposite paradigm finds a significant example in the experience of *Gibellina Vecchia*, the scene of the disastrous Belice earthquake in Sicily in 1980. This abandoned place underwent a very strong artistic and environmental semantization due to the intervention of artist Alberto Burri and the creation of the *Grande Cretto* between 1989 and 2015 (fig. 4). As M. Musolino notes, as part of an articulated analysis, such an operation can be defined as a kind of “spectacularization of a site of memory” (Musolino, 2017: p. 174).

Figure 5 – The Dam of Gleno today.



We asked local people how often they go to the Dam (Tab. 8). As can be seen, the ruins of the Dam are not a significant destination for more than half of the respondents (57.3%) who, let us recall, are residents of the Valley towns. About a quarter of respondents say they have visited the Dam once during the year (26.7%). Only a small minority did so at least once a month (11.2%) or a week (4.8%). With respect to the independent variables we selected for our analysis, we record no significant differences. For example, having or not having had ancestors who died in the disaster does not affect the choice to go to the Dam for a visit. First and foremost among the motivations that lead respondents to visit the Dam are those related to leisure and the desire to go on

¹ The English translation is mine.

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later
Lorenzo Migliorati

an excursion (70.5 percent), competitive sports motivations (18.2 percent), and work-related needs (2.3 percent). Only three respondents out of the total 290 say they visited the Dam ruins to commemorate the tragedy.

Figure 6 – The Piana del Gleno during the summer 2023.



On the other hand, however, the Dam is felt to be a strong identity element of the Scalve Valley. In fact, 68.9% of respondents say that the Dam is a distinctive element of the area.

Table 8 – The Dam as a destination.

How often have you visited the Gleno Dam over the past year?	%
Never	57,3
Once only	26,7
About once a month	11,2
At least once a week	4,8
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>

These data suggest to us the idea that the ruins of the Dam are not, at present, represented as a place of memory. For that matter, it is curious to note that there are no informational materials near the Dam to guide the visitor on

a path of memory of the events. On the other hand, the Dam is perceived as a strongly present element in the symbolic identity of the Scalve Valley. It seems to us that, from a memorial point of view, these phenomena can be interpreted in the light of the most classic of the multivocal canons of memory (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991 [it. trans. in Tota, 2001]) and that, albeit in a completely unconscious and unintentional way, the ruins of the Dam constitute a strongly polysemous monument that, on the one hand, speaks for itself and, on the other, contains all interpretations of the Gleno disaster. For proponents of the exploitation and industrial development of the territory, in fact, the ruins of the Dam represent the symbol of a bygone golden age; for detractors of that prospect in the name of capital's voracity against poor people, they are the most explicit sign of evil. For family members of the victims, the Dam represents the emblem of the rightful place occupied by their ancestors in the Valley's cultural heritage. For scholars, the Dam ruins are a wealth of technical information to be acquired. Finally, for tourists and casual visitors, the Dam is simply a place to go. Consequently, the symbolic actions that take place near the Dam can only be themselves multivocal and open to every possible interpretation.

In the absence of a time-established commemorative canon and cyclical ritual repetition of ritual actions, the ruins of the Dam themselves rise to a material practice of remembrance.

5. Conclusions

The history of the Gleno disaster is an integral part of the social identity of the villages where it happened. However, the story of the disaster has not become a paradigm of collective memory and has mostly remained enclosed within the confines of the places where it happened and the heritage of the social groups that directly experienced it.

What we have found by studying the profiles of memory and the symbolic systems of construction of the cultural trauma of disaster can be summarized in a few central points.

The first one. The Gleno disaster is configured, one hundred years later as a routinized and memorized trauma in the collective consciousness of the population. What happened is clear, the historical event is closed, the responsibilities identified. From the profile of the answers we have obtained from our interlocutors, the Gleno disaster is amply inscribed in the social history of this valley. The ruins of the Dam speak for themselves, stories are told, testimonies are evident. This contributes greatly to define the framework of the symbolic representation of the events that occurred, even a century later. In a word, it could be said that the most diffused feeling about the Gleno

The Gleno Dam Disaster (1923). Cultural Trauma and Collective Memories of
an In-Depth Mountain Community in Italy a Century Later
Lorenzo Migliorati

disaster is that it is an event that happened about which everything has now been said. It is part of people's identity, but its representation does not dominate them to the point of being totalizing.

The second one. Around the Gleno disaster we detect a certain symbolic struggle to clearly define the most meaningful memorial canon. What to commemorate? The dead? The destruction? The pain? And where do these memorials rest? On the witnesses? On the ruins of the Dam? On new, hypothetical memorial spaces? On the practices of public memory? On religious rituals? At the end of the day, these questions are not for real answered, and this is probably an extremely interesting research fact. On the other hand, the Gleno disaster also presents the traits of a somewhat interrupted process of cultural trauma construction. Potentially, the fact that it was the first major disaster brought about by the processes of industrial development on the national level and, therefore, itself the first of the great disasters whose human matrix has been publicly acknowledged, could have triggered a process of general identification and could have made it possible to make the Gleno the collective reference for a lesson of history. Beyond ideological and historical motivations that are beyond the intent of these notes, this did not happen and the history of the Gleno remained confined to the history of a small community, a valley, a limited territory. In some ways, too big a story in the course of the small history of a community. A story too unwieldy, and not only for the obvious reasons related to the death, destruction and pain suffered, but also for an all-too-human need to move on.

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