



# ITALO BALBO MONUMENT AND BALBO DRIVE Chicago, USA

Balbo Monument: 41.861688, -87.613552

Balbo Drive: 41.873328, -87.622308



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## Executive Summary

Italo Balbo was an Italian fascist General who served as Mussolini's Marshal of the Air Force and then as Governor of Libya. While being celebrated for his aerial feats, he remains a controversial figure as the Governor of Libya. In 1933, the Illinois monument was erected after his transatlantic flight to Chicago to attend the Century of Progress World Fair. Ever since it has been a source of controversy. However, all petitions to remove the monument have been rejected. The Italian-American community in Chicago have consistently defended the monument. This case study examines one possible trajectory when lawmakers contend with physical vestiges from past celebrations of fascist and white supremacist leaders while seeking to balance constituent interests, latent and reignited cultural identification and honour, and the interests of the decision-makers themselves.

## Introduction

The Balbo Monument (Cover Image) was erected in 1933 to commemorate Italian Air Marshal (and prominent fascist) Italo Balbo's transatlantic flight to Chicago for the city's Century of Progress World Fair. Shortly afterwards, a downtown street was also named in his honour: Balbo Drive. The naming of Balbo Drive was gifted by the city of Chicago to Balbo, while the monument was a gift to the city of Chicago directly from Mussolini. It was political in nature, enshrining homage to ancient Rome and its found fascist heir, a conflation of historical and contemporary glories of war.<sup>1</sup> Despite repeated protestations from 1934 onwards against retaining tributes to a Fascist leader, several local Italian American groups have successfully defended both, maintaining that removal of the statue would constitute a symbolic erasure of significant Italian contribution to American and global technological and cultural developments and that the criticisms of Balbo's legacy are weak given that Balbo was opposed to Italy's alliance with Germany and the imposition of anti-Semitic Race Laws in 1938. In the wake of the violent Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville (August 2017), two Chicago Aldermans announced another push to remove the Monument and rename the street. While the measure was considered by the City Council, pressure from the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans (JCCIA) resulted in a compromise whereby the street would remain unchanged, but a contextualising plaque would be erected beside the Monument.

## Background

### *Italo Balbo (1896-1940)*

Italo Balbo was a prominent member of the Italian Fascist Party, a virulently nationalist political movement championing the superiority of Italian cultural values and the restoration of Italy's Roman-Imperial dominance over the Mediterranean and Africa.<sup>2</sup> Balbo joined the party in 1921 and quickly rose to command the *squadristi* paramilitaries in Ferrara Province, who performed strikebreaking actions and attacked left-wing activists in Portomaggiore, Ravenna, Modena, and Bologna.<sup>3</sup> In 1922 he became the youngest of the *Quadrumvirs*, the four planners of the March on Rome, which established Fascist Rule in Italy, and the following year became a founding member of the Grand Council of Fascism.<sup>4</sup> In the same year, however, he was implicated in the murder of Father Giovanni Minzoni, a prominent anti-fascist activist in Ferrara who was beaten to death by two of Balbo's *squadristi*.<sup>5</sup> Though he was later acquitted, the scandal forced Balbo to take refuge in Rome,

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, Nick, "The Meaning of Monuments," 223.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle A. Kallis, *Fascist Ideology: Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945* (Psychology Press, 2000), pp. 40-2

<sup>3</sup> Claudio G. Segre, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (University of California Press, 1990), 48-73.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99-113

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (Random House, 2012), 85-86.

where he held various state offices before being appointed the Secretary of State for Air in 1926. Now an enthusiastic aviator, Balbo focused on developing the Royal Italian Air Force, which earned an international reputation for its aeronautical feats.<sup>6</sup>

### *The 1933 World's Fair*

Balbo achieved international fame on July 15, 1933, when he led 24 seaplanes – dubbed the Italian Air Armada – which arrived in Chicago for the city's Century of Progress World Fair, where they were greeted by a crowd of 60,000.<sup>7</sup> Four days prior to Balbo's arrival, the Chicago City Council had voted to name 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue – a short but prominent downtown thoroughfare – Balbo Drive in honour of this 'D'Artagnan of the air', as he was described in the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>8</sup> Italian Fascism was popular among Italian Americans, functioning as an 'ideology of compensation' for an immigrant community which had been subjected to violent prejudice and whose mother country now appeared as a world power.<sup>9</sup> Relations between Italy and the US were also strong: Balbo appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in June 1933 and was invited to lunch by President Roosevelt, who presented him with the Distinguished Flying Cross.<sup>10</sup> To commemorate the crossing, Benito Mussolini gifted the columnal monument to the city of Chicago and it was then erected in front of the Fair's Italian Pavilion in July 1934 to a crowd of 3,000.<sup>11</sup>

### *Balbo in Libya*

Balbo would go on to become Governor of Italian Libya in November 1933 and supervise a massive campaign to settle Italians in the country.<sup>12</sup> Before Balbo's arrival, the indigenous population had been waging a 9-year insurrection against colonial rule to which the Italians had resorted to summary executions, rape, torture, aerial bombardment of civilian areas, and the deployment of chemical weapons. By the end of the conflict, 225,000 or one-quarter of the indigenous population of Libya had been killed. 100,000 Bedouins had also been expelled from Cyrenaica, and Balbo donated their settlements to Italian settlers as part of his resettlement scheme, which systematically discriminated against the remaining Muslim population.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Segre, *Italo Balbo*, p. 131 and pp. 145-7

<sup>7</sup> Segre, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Carter, Nick, "The Meaning of Monuments: Remembering Italo Balbo in Italy and the United States," *Modern Italy* 24, no. 2 (February 14, 2019), p. 221

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224

<sup>10</sup> "TIME Magazine Cover: General Italo Balbo - June 26, 1933 - World War I - Aviation - Italy - Generals," accessed September 15, 2020; Segre, *Italo Balbo*, 245-63.

<sup>11</sup> Carter, Nick, "The Meaning of Monuments," 221.

<sup>12</sup> Claudio G. Segré, "Italo Balbo and the Colonization of Libya," *Journal of Contemporary History* 7, no. 3 (April 1, 1972): 141.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses, *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (OUP Oxford, 2010), 358; Anthony L. Cardoza and Peter Stearns, *Benito Mussolini: The First Fascist* (Pearson Longman, 2006), 109.

Balbo became increasingly critical of Mussolini's policies, such as massive military intervention in Spain and, most glaringly, of Italy's alignment with Nazi Germany.<sup>14</sup> Through his background in Ferrara, Balbo had strong connections to Italy's Jewish community and, according to the eminent 20th-century Italian historian Renzo De Felice, '[he] was not an anti-Semite.'<sup>15</sup> At a rally in Tripoli in October 1937, when shouts of 'Death to the Jews!' rose from the crowd, he responded:

I shall testify to [the Jews'] labour, discipline and loyalty to the regime ... The hostile declarations of this assembly have offended me a great deal because I make no distinction between Catholic and Jewish Italians. We are all Italians and I would like to add that from my youth until today I have only had three real friends ... They are Jews, all three of them.<sup>16</sup>

In 1938 he personally wrote to Mussolini to delay the imposition of the Italian Race Laws in Libya, citing the risk of massive economic dislocation, and criticised the regime's turn towards racism in a meeting of the Grand Council of Fascists in October 1938.<sup>17</sup>

After Italy's entry into the Second World War, Balbo was killed in a friendly-fire incident on June 28<sup>th</sup> 1940, when his aircraft was misidentified by an anti-air battery. These circumstances provoked rumours that Mussolini had ordered his death, a theory which has since been discredited.<sup>18</sup> In September 1940, 1,000 members of Italian American societies attended a memorial service to Balbo in Chicago's Holy Name Cathedral.<sup>19</sup>

### *Description of the Monument*

The monument is situated in Burnham Park, Chicago, and consists of a Roman column – 13 ft tall and 3 ft in diameter – made of Breccia (compressed gravel and boulder fragments). The column dates from 117 to 38 BC and was taken from the ruins of the *Prospetto a Mare* building in the ruined port of Ostia.<sup>20</sup> Italian American architect Alexander Capraro and his partner Morris Komar constructed a square limestone base for the column, flanked by four Fasces (historic symbols of Roman authority utilised extensively by Italian fascists).<sup>21</sup> It also bears an inscription in Italian reading:

This column  
twenty centuries old  
erected on the beach of Ostia

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<sup>14</sup> Segre, *Italo Balbo*, 343.

<sup>15</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land: Libya, 1835–1970* (University of Texas Press, 2014), 169.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 170

<sup>17</sup> Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 170–72.

<sup>18</sup> Segre, *Italo Balbo*, 398–403.

<sup>19</sup> Carter, Nick, "The Meaning of Monuments," 224.

<sup>20</sup> "Balbo Monument | Chicago Park District," accessed September 15, 202.; "THE EXCAVATIONS AND RESTORATIONS OF OSTIA," accessed September 15, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> "Balbo Monument | Chicago Park District."

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<sup>22</sup>

In subsequent years, the inscription faded considerably, and photographs indicate that at some point the axes embedded in the four Fasces have been hacked off.

## History of the Contestation

### *Early condemnations (1933 – 1993)*

The decision for Chicago to honour Italo Balbo was challenged almost immediately by anti-fascists within the Italian American community. In 1933, the Italian Socialist Federation and the Italian League for the Rights of Man issued a pamphlet entitled 'Who is Balbo?' which claimed that he was instrumental in the killings of Giacomo Matteoti (an Italian socialist deputy), Father Minzoni, and a host of other murders in Ferrara Province:

It is a disgrace that this murderer and terrorist should be received by Democratic America as the official representative of the Italian people. This man no more represents the Italian people than Kaiser Wilhelm represented the German people. There should be no place in this free country for such tyrants ... We ask American workers of all races to join us in protesting against the reception given to this murderer.<sup>23</sup>

Italy's declaration of war on the US in December 1941 dramatically altered public impressions of the monument and Balbo Drive. In September 1946, local businesses, with the backing of veterans' families, veterans' groups, parent-teacher associations, Democratic aldermen, and leading members of the Italian American community, campaigned to rename Balbo Drive after Lieutenant-Commander Waldron, an American Navy pilot killed at the Battle of Midway. The Republican mayoral candidate, Russell Root, added: 'Chicago boys of Italian descent who fought in Italy do not wish to honour the Fascist who betrayed his own people as well as conducted a war against our country.' Despite this, the campaign was shelved on technical grounds, likely on the orders of Mayor Kelly, who – according to the *Chicago Tribune* – 'believes that the change would

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<sup>22</sup> "THE EXCAVATIONS AND RESTORATIONS OF OSTIA."

<sup>23</sup> "'Who Is Balbo?', 1933," accessed September 8, 2020.

offend so-called Italian American organisations, thereby costing the Democratic machine votes in the election.<sup>24</sup> Given the absence of monolithic support for the monument among Italian Americans, Kelly's stated motivations are deserving of scrutiny, notably with the consideration that alongside state governor Henry Horner, Edward Kelly personally welcomed Balbo to Chicago and oversaw a three-day celebration after which Balbo travelled to New York to accept another hero's reception.<sup>25</sup> When the Italian Ambassador to the US, Alberto Tarchiani, requested that the tributes be removed, Kelly responded: 'Why? Didn't Balbo cross the Atlantic?'<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, Kelly argued that Balbo had never been an enemy of the United States, having died 18 months before Pearl Harbour, and endorsed the discredited theory that he was killed on the orders of Mussolini.<sup>27</sup> Both of these claims became integral to the defence of the monument and Balbo Drive in later years.

By the early 1950s, the monument was the last physical manifestation of the Century of Progress Fair but had now become so weathered that the inscription was almost illegible. The monument remained a minor focal point, with veterans of the transatlantic flight visiting the monument with local Italian-American club leaders in 1983. According to historian Nick Carter, however, few members of the Italian-American community had any investment in Balbo, the monument or the street.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, complaints about Balbo's commemoration began to resurface. In 1981, a prominent African-American journalist, Vernon Jarret lamented the absence of any monument to Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a black Haitian who was the first non-indigenous settler in the region. By contrast, Jarret noted, 'A major downtown street is named for an internationally known leader of a Fascist government,' along with 'A prominent monument honouring him and Mussolini's regime.'<sup>29</sup> In 1983, responding to the 50-year commemoration of Balbo's flight, Jarret wrote that 'Within two years after Balbo's royal treatment in Chicago, the air machine that he built was dropping bombs and turning its machine guns on unarmed Africans during Mussolini's unprovoked invasion of Ethiopia.'<sup>30</sup> In 1993, the Puerto Rican community mounted a campaign for a monument to the nationalist leader Albizu Campos, with Alderman Bill Ocasio complaining to the board of the Chicago Park District that 'For 60 years, you've funded the Balbo monument with taxpayers' money, and no one questions that. 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?'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Nick Carter, "The Meaning of Monuments," 223.

<sup>25</sup> Nick Carter, "The Meaning of Monuments," 221.

<sup>26</sup> Segre, *Italo Balbo*, 264.

<sup>27</sup> Julia Lacher, "Fascists at the Fair: A Deep Dive into Chicago's Balbo Monuments," *The Lakefront Historian* (blog), August 23, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Carter, Nick, "The Meaning of Monuments," 224.

<sup>29</sup> Nick Carter, 224.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Zorn, "Change of Subject: Streetworthy? The Case for and against Italo Balbo," July 3, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

There were also voices in the *Chicago Tribune* who argued that a ‘totalitarian thug’ was less deserving than the exiled Italian Physicist Enrico Fermi and efforts were made in 2006 and 2011 to have the monument removed and the drive renamed in Fermi’s honour.<sup>32</sup> These efforts ran into a resurgent opposition from Italian-American groups, particularly the Italic Institute – a self-styled heritage organisation whose petition of 500 names thwarted the 2011 drive. According to its magazine, the *Italic Way*:

Like clockwork, each year someone wishes to obliterate Balbo from American history. But also like clockwork the Italian-American community comes to his defense ... For once, Italian Americans, who discovered, named and claimed North America for English-speakers, and for which they gave their blood and sweat to build it, should not have to beg for respect.<sup>33</sup>

### *The 2017 Effort*

The 2017 Unite the Right Rally served as a catalyst for a new drive against the public Balbo commemorations. On August 17, Alderman Ed Burke and Alderman Gilbert Vallegas announced their desire to remove the Balbo Monument and rename Balbo Drive, with Burke stating to the *Chicago-Sun Times*:

I’m amazed the citizens of Chicago have not demanded that these symbols of fascism—a street and a statue bearing Balbo’s name—donated by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, a sidekick of Adolf Hitler, be removed decades ago from the city’s landscape<sup>34</sup>

Two more aldermen – Sophia King and Brendan Reilly – threw their support in with King declaring to the *Tribune* that: ‘It’s high time we removed these symbols of oppression and antidemocracy from our city.’<sup>35</sup> On August 24, anti-fascist groups protested before the Balbo Monument led by John Beacham, who explicitly linked the Monument with the white supremacist resurgence visible in Charlottesville:

These monuments remaining is part of the reason why, in 2017, we’re seeing another resurgence in racism and white supremacy ... If people don’t come together to call for zero tolerance against white supremacy, the threat will continue to grow.<sup>36</sup>

Beacham’s organisation – ‘an anti-racist and anti-war social justice coalition’ named *Answer Chicago* – also created a petition to remove the Monument and rename Balbo Drive after the African American journalist and civil rights leader Ida B. Wells who resided in Chicago from 1895 until her

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<sup>32</sup> Nick Carter, “The Meaning of Monuments,” 225; Zorn, Eric, “Change of Subject: Streetworthy? The Case for and against Italo Balbo.”

<sup>33</sup> “Tid Bits: In Defense of Heritage,” *Italic Way*, 2011, 1–2.

<sup>34</sup> A. J. LaTrace, “What Should Be Done with Chicago’s Balbo Monument?,” *Curbed Chicago*, August 17, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> John Greenfield, “Street Honoring Fascist Balbo to Remain after Aldermen Cave,” *Chicago Reader*, June 26, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Briscoe, “Anti-Fascist Protesters Want Balbo Monument in Chicago Removed,” *chicagotribune.com*, August 24, 2017.



death in 1931.<sup>37</sup> This petition attracted 1,750 signatures by the spring of 2018 and more than 50 Civic Organisations – including the Chicago League of Women’s Voters – backed the proposal. By May 2018, Reilly and King announced that they would be asking the city council to approve the renaming.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, this initiative had received considerable criticism from Italian American groups. On August 21, just four days after the move had been announced, Dominic DiFrisco, the president emeritus of the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans and Lou Rago, the president of the Italian American Human Relations Foundation, wrote to the *Tribune*, describing Balbo’s flight as ‘one of the most important and best executed aeronautical achievements of that time,’ describing criticism of his actions as ‘misinformation’:

We want to be perfectly clear. Italo Balbo was an outspoken opponent of the Mussolini tilt towards Hitler and was not the enemy many in the Chicago City Council are portraying he was ... He was one of the only Fascists in Mussolini's regime to openly oppose Italy's anti-Jewish racial laws and Italy's alliance with Germany...He was an inspiration to Italian-Americans and to those in aviation. Balbo did the right thing: Opposed Mussolini in his darkest time. Why should the City Council bring Chicagoland Italian-Americans into a dark corner when our community shines so brightly with all ethnic groups?<sup>39</sup>

Although King initially backed the removal of the monument, in April 2018, she announced that she had changed her view – ‘there is much to learn from displays like this, and removing it entirely would hinder a valuable historical lesson’ – proposing a contextualising plaque be erected near the monument to highlight its connection with fascism. This was also confirmed in a phone call between Alderman Burke (one of the originators of the campaign) and JCCIA president Enza Ranieri; the former assured Ranieri that the Monument would not be removed but that a contextualising plaque would be attached and that the JCCIA could provide input on the wording. Ranieri also described Balbo as ‘A heroic man who fought for the rights of people. Balbo was pro-Jew and anti-Nazi.’ Loyola Professor Emeritus Anthony Cardoza rejected such a hyperbolic interpretation – ‘Calling Balbo anti-Nazi is a bit much ... Balbo was opposed to Mussolini's alliance with the Nazis because he rightly feared that Italy would be the junior partner.’ Cardoza also noted that the credit for the survival of 80% of Italy’s Jews should not go to Balbo nor any member of the fascist leadership but rather to the decisions of middle-ranking officers, local officials, and ordinary Italians.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Sign the Petition: Take Down the Fascist Balbo Monument Now!,” Change.org, 2017; “(1) ANSWER Chicago (@ANSWERChicago) / Twitter,” Twitter, accessed September 16, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Nick Carter, “The Meaning of Monuments,” 225.

<sup>39</sup> “Balbo Did the Right Thing,” *chicagotribune.com*, August 21, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> John Greenfield, “Monument to Fascist Balbo Likely to Remain, but Aldermen Could Still Rename Street,” *Chicago Reader*, April 23, 2018.



The campaign to rename Balbo Drive continued, however. Again, DiFrisco spearheaded resistance to the renaming campaign, claiming that there were other streets which could receive Ida Wells' name and that he and his supporters would actively obstruct any changes to Balbo Drive: 'We will ask to be arrested,' he declared to NBC Chicago. 'I give you my word of honour.'<sup>41</sup> On July 25, 2018, the city council approved the renaming of Congress Parkway to Ida B. Wells Drive, with Alderman King praising the decision.<sup>42</sup> The offices of King and Reilly both claimed that their decision not to alter Balbo Drive was rooted in the difficulties this would cause business owners and residents, although journalist John Greenfield pointed out that only three properties would be affected by the change.<sup>43</sup>

Another professor of Italian History, Edward Muir, called the decision 'a grave shame' and said that Balbo was 'a fascist thug and a mass murderer as governor of Libya.' Ethiopian Community Leader Erku Yimer further condemned the action, noting Balbo's complicity in the genocidal tactics used in the invasion of Ethiopia and noting that 'even in Italy people have completely renounced him.'<sup>44</sup> Local labour activist, Matt Muchowski attempted to use the momentum surrounding the George Floyd protests earlier this year to restart the campaign, calling for a protest at the Monument in June, which was cancelled (likely due to lack of public interest). Muchowski also penned an article calling for King and Reilly to act, citing Balbo's role in the Minzoni murder, his anti-union violence and claiming that Balbo was, in fact, an anti-Semite as evidenced by his flogging of Jews who refused to work on the Sabbath and his desire (expressed in a letter to Mussolini) to replace Jewish businesses with 'A group of Catholic merchant and industrialists.'<sup>45</sup> While the first three charges can be substantiated, the historians Renzo De Felice, Claudio Segre, and Robert Satloff have all attested that Balbo only voiced such rationale as a means of safeguarding Libya's Jews by assuaging Mussolini, who, in any case, rebuffed Balbo on his view that the Jews were essentially harmless.<sup>46</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

The central stated factor influencing decision-making regarding Balbo Monument and Balbo Drive is the importance of Italo Balbo in the collective memory of Chicago's Italian American community, particularly when contrasted with the prejudice faced by that same community in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Balbo's flight, with its connotations of modernity and discovery, provided Italians in Chicago with a renewed sense of ethnic pride while the Air Marshal's death prior to World War II

<sup>41</sup> "Tempest Brews Over Re-Naming of Balbo Drive," *NBC Chicago* (blog), May 23, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Gregory Pratt Byrne John, "Ida B. Wells Gets Her Street — City Council Approves Renaming Congress in Her Honor," *chicagotribune.com*, July 25, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Greenfield, "Street Honoring Fascist Balbo to Remain after Aldermen Cave."

<sup>44</sup> Greenfield, "Street Honoring Fascist Balbo to Remain after Aldermen Cave." "Street Honoring Fascist Balbo to Remain after Aldermen Cave."

<sup>45</sup> "Chicago: Remove Balbo and Fascist Monuments," *The Quarantine Times*, June 23, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 169–72; Segre, *Italo Balbo*, 346; Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous* (Hachette UK, 2006), 42–43.

allowed Italian Americans to separate him from the crimes of Italian fascism.<sup>47</sup> This stated factor can be met with scrutiny, however, because just as the time period around the monument's erection and as recently as 2018 and 2019, Italian American Chicago residents have opposed the reconstruction of monuments celebrating other Italian historical figures like Christopher Columbus on the grounds that the atrocities they committed against human beings discredit ancestral valorisation.<sup>48</sup> An additional premise for consideration is the fact that the acknowledgements of Balbo's participation in a fascist regime appear to double as adequate consideration for both his fascist ideologies and the human rights abuses he carried out in Ethiopia and as governor of Libya. Meanwhile, the latter is rarely, if ever, mentioned by supporters of the monument. These critiques were and remain most commonly responded to with rationalisations based on Balbo's aeronautical achievements. Remaining cognizant of these blank spaces in the JCCIA and IAPC argumentations, ultimately, this popularity – partially rooted in the mythmaking surrounding Balbo's cause of death – was evidently sufficient to prompt Mayor Kelly's protection of the monument during the late 1940s to maintain electoral support among Italian Americans.<sup>49</sup> While the actual remembrance of Balbo faded considerably in the later 20th century, the community's political influence only expanded, beginning with the founding of the JCCIA in 1952 and reaching a peak with the Italian-American Political Coalition (IAPC) in 1994.<sup>50</sup> The activism of the JCCIA and Italic Way was instrumental in quashing efforts to reassess Balbo's commemorations in Chicago, casting him as 'a giant of Italian aviation' and an anti-Nazi.<sup>51</sup> The magazine *Fra Noi* openly attributed their success in the Balbo affair to "a behind-the-scenes appeal to key decision makers' while also citing the breadth of the JCCIA's civic and political coalition. In the words of JCCIA spokesperson Lissa Druss:

With the number of constituents represented by our coalition, it gives our elected officials the ability to support our mission not only because they believe in it, but because they have the backing of the people who elected them.<sup>52</sup>

The opposition of public relations executive Dominic DiFrisco (1934-2019) to any change was also crucial, given his local connections and influence. He also worked hard to counter criticism of Chicago's Columbus statue.<sup>53</sup>

At the municipal level, the key actors are Chicago's aldermen – specifically Sophia King and Brendan Reilly, whose words contain the Monument and Balbo Drive. Their shift in position in 2018 effectively conceded victory to the pro-Balbo narrative. Carter notes that the sheer expense of

<sup>47</sup> Nick Carter, "The Meaning of Monuments," 232.

<sup>48</sup> Rick Romano, "Italian-American groups battle over Columbus statues"

<sup>49</sup> Scott Ackman and Christopher Schwarz, "The (Failed) 1946 Fight to Remove a Fascist's Name from a Chicago Street," *Chicago* magazine, October 7, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> "A Personal Essay on Italian Americans in Chicago and Illinois Politics in the Twentieth Century," accessed September 15, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> "Tid Bits: In Defense of Heritage," 1.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Basile, "Rewriting the Anti Defamation Script – *Fra Noi*," August 16, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> "Chicago's Italian American Legend Dominic DiFrisco Dies at Age 85," *NBC Chicago* (blog), April 28, 2019.

relocating or removing the Balbo Monument made the column ‘easy to save’ (although the renaming of the Drive might still have been achieved).<sup>54</sup>

The form of the monument has also conditioned reactions. As Christopher Borrelli of the Chicago Tribune wrote in August 2017: ‘The Balbo column is an innocuous abstraction — an ancient pillar in search of a temple.’ Borrelli noted that only those who made a concerted effort observed the link between Mussolini and Fascism, a feature assisted by the weathering of its inscription.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, the Monument has escaped much public scrutiny, possessing only indirect and subtle fascist symbolism, which has perhaps made it relatively unobjectionable to the municipal government.

To date, there is no fixed date or publicised wording for the contextualising plaque. Mayor Lori Lightfoot allegedly provided the Monument with police protection during the George Floyd protests earlier this year.<sup>56</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

The Balbo Monument and Balbo Drive, although periodically arousing criticism for their clear links to Italian fascism and the mixed record of Italo Balbo, have been successfully defended by Italian American community groups. Their narrative has sought to publicly redeem Balbo’s actions by citing his contributions to aviation and opposition to anti-Semitism as points of pride for Italians. Although anti-fascist activism following Charlottesville posed a serious challenge to these commemorations, the considerable political influence of Italian Americans in Chicago appears to have dissuaded the relevant aldermen from making substantial alterations to either the Monument or the Drive (besides voicing plans for a contextual plaque on the former). As of December 2021, there have been no further developments in this case.

Research contributed by Henry Brown, Stuart McLoughlin and Sydni Rei Scott

Last updated June 2024

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<sup>54</sup> Carter, Nick, “The Meaning of Monuments,” 226.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Borrelli, “Future of Balbo Monument, a Gift from Mussolini, Uncertain,” [chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com), accessed September 8, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> “Agitator in Chief on Twitter,” Twitter, June 18, 2020.

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## About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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To cite this publication:

*Contested Histories*, "Italo Balbo Monument and Balbo Drive in Chicago, USA", *Contested Histories Case Study #196* (June 2024), Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) at the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio), retrieved from [link], [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

*Contested Histories* is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.