

# The Trouble with Italy's Post-colonial Memory: Affile celebrates Rodolfo Graziani, the 'Butcher of Ethiopia'

*Antonio M. Morone*  
University of Pavia

Rodolfo Graziani was born on 11 August, 1882 at Filettino in Italy and died on 11 January, 1955 in Rome. On August 11, 2012, the anniversary of Graziani's birth, the mayor of Affile, Mr. Ercole Viri, inaugurated "the memorial building to the Soldier;" that is, Marshall Graziani.<sup>1</sup> While the local administration of that small Italian town, in the Lazio region, not far from Rome, celebrated the memory of one of the

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greater Italian colonial criminals, the international intervention in Libya under the diplomatic shield of the United Nations (UN) and the military command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), was just coming to an end. The Italian participation in that intervention, known as the "Operation Unified Protector" was in accordance with the provisions of UN Resolution 1973/2011, which allowed the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya and authorized the use of "all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Jamahiriya, including Benghazi."<sup>2</sup> This Italian engagement in the Libyan intervention was taking place without anyone paying any attention to the interconnected history of those two countries in the twentieth century: to colonize Libya Italy was engaged from 1911 to 1931 in the longest war of its

history since the national unity in 1861. In 2011, Italy was operating once again in Libya but on this occasion against the regime of Colonel Gheddafi, who in recent times had entertained excellent relations with the former colonial power; at the same time as this operation was taking place, Affile administration was paying homage to the Marshall of Italy, Rodolfo Graziani, who was responsible for the most brutal

massacres in Libya that culminated in the capture and hanging of the leader of the Senussi resistance Omar Mukhtar.

Affile was the birth town of Graziani's father and here Rodolfo Graziani spent some years during his childhood and later on, after retirement from the military. This homage by the Affile administration was largely overlooked by the Italian media until the news was spread by the international press: many articles emphasized astonishment mixed with condemnation for the decision of Affile's right-wing town council to celebrate one of the most famous Fascist generals who was responsible for many crimes during his service in Africa and Italy.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards some representatives of the leftish Democratic Party questioned a 127,000 euro grant from the Lazio regional administration to the



Rodolfo Graziani with captured leader of Libyan resistance Omar Mukhtar (1931).

Affile local administration to build the memorial commemorating Graziani. In response, Major Viri answered in the rightist newspaper *Secolod' Italia* that Rodolfo Graziani "was not convicted for war crimes" and in fact the memorial building "is entitled to the Soldier with the capital S [because] for us he was the soldier *par excellence* to be celebrated [... but] we are honouring also the memory of all Affile citizens fallen during the war."<sup>4</sup> Viri's response is feeble in the light of Graziani's biography.<sup>5</sup>

After General Graziani's arrival in Libya on October 1, 1921, he fought strongly against the Libyan *mujahdeen* and accomplished the Fascist "pacification" of the colony by 1931 through the tactics of massacre, torture, execution and the use of banned chemical weapons as well as the

deportation of 100,000 civilians from Cyrenaica to the concentration camps in Sirte, where many of them died. To win an unconventional guerrilla war, "livestock was confiscated to reduce the population to starvation and members of the Libyan notable families were deported to Ustica or continental Italy."<sup>6</sup> At that time some described the events in terms of extermination, while afterwards some began to use the term "genocide."<sup>7</sup> In 1935, Graziani was appointed governor of Somalia from where he led the Southern military front during the second Italian-Ethiopian war that culminated in the proclamation of the Italian Fascist Empire and the establishment of Italian East Africa in 1936. During the military campaign, Graziani's strategy for overcoming the numerous, but poorly-armed Ethiopian patriots was "the free use of special-liquid bombs and shells in order to inflict maximum losses on the enemy, and above all to effect his complete collapse of morale."<sup>8</sup>

On February 19, 1937 there was a failed attempt to assassinate Graziani, who at that time was the marshal and second viceroy of Italian East Africa. This attempt was the premise for a three-day period of violence in Addis Ababa when Italian soldiers and civilians together with fascist militias and Libyan *ascari*<sup>9</sup> collectively targeted the Black Lions' patriots, the Ethiopian educated elite and the Coptic clergy. In fact, after the 1941 liberation the Ethiopian government included Graziani's name on the list of



Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi with Colonel Muammar Gheddafi.

Italian war criminals given to the U.N. War Crimes Commission, but it was never able to obtain his extradition or prosecution. After having left Addis Ababa in November 1939, the so-called "Butcher of Ethiopia"<sup>10</sup> unsuccessfully led the Italian Army in Libya during the Second World War and then ended his "career" as Defence Minister of the Italian Social Republic, during which time he sentenced to death several anti-Fascist partisans. After the war, in 1950, he was condemned by the Special Military Court of Rome and given a 19-year sentence for "military collaboration with the Germans."<sup>11</sup> After only a few months, the sentence was remitted and Mr. Graziani became the honorary president of the neo-Fascist party *Movimento Sociale Italiano*. The newly founded Italian Republic prosecuted Rodolfo Graziani for his crimes in Italy, but no investigation was conducted into his crimes in Africa.

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The memorial building in Affile represents a political attempt to rewrite history and to rehabilitate the memory of one of the most bloodthirsty figures of the Fascist regime and Italian colonialism. According to Graziani's outline published by Giovanni Sozi on the official website of the Affile town council, "the Soldier was the interpreter of complex events as well as of painful choices, he was able to address his everyday acts to the benefit of the fatherland by means of the inflexible uprightness and the scrupulous fidelity to his military duty."<sup>12</sup> The quotation apparently shows that historical research on Fascism and Italian colonialism has not buried the myth of 'Italians good guys' (*Italiani brava gente*) and good faith in Italian colonialism. The African page of Italy's national history refers to "diversified"<sup>13</sup> memories of ordinary peoples who in many cases are still crystallized, removed, often hidden histories: Italians typically know little about their country's former African colonies. On the contrary, citizens of the former Italian colonies generally recall Italian rule as a period of suffering, violence, lack of freedom, racial subordination and economic dependency; nevertheless many of those citizens still consider Italy as being part of their history and are aware that a special bond exists between them and the former mother country. The process of the

rehabilitation of colonialism around the figure of Graziani confirms those different perspective and the lack of a post-colonial dimension in Italian society: if post-coloniality is defined as not only the time following the end of colonial rule, but also the capacity to shed light onto a country's colonial past, then Italy still has to enter its post-colonial phase.

The removal of the colonial past from Italian public memory is a topic widely debated among Italian and international scholars and it is possible to consider at least three causes. The first of these was the loss of the Italian colonies during the Second World War (1941-3) and the consequent "decolonization from above"<sup>14</sup> settled at the General Assembly of the United Nations (1949-50). The manner in which the colonies were lost, tended to shelter Italian society and its institutions from hard shocks or painful separations that would have probably occurred during a "normal" process of decolonization as experienced by most French and British colonies. At the same time, these factors also worked in favour of "the continuity of Italian foreign policy beyond every political change" and against a clear awareness of the colonial past.<sup>15</sup> The second cause was the "stickiness"<sup>16</sup> of the Italian administration and the survival of the Ministry of Italian Africa until 1953, which worked hard to recover the colonies and founded many semi-secret operations in Africa. On the Italian foreign policy agenda, the colonial dossier came immediately after the commitment to bring back under Italian sovereignty the city of Trieste, and together with the broader goal "to recover, to the extent possible, those positions Italy had enjoyed prior to 1922."<sup>17</sup> Thus, the return of Italy to Africa was stated within the "electoral programs of all political parties,"<sup>18</sup> including the leftist parties that had not yet started to elaborate an anti-colonial position. The colonial lobby, across parties and institutions, clubs or associations that arose in parallel to the past Italian expansion overseas, worked to steer towards an inattentive Italian public opinion,<sup>19</sup> for whom concern for the colonies was not great. This position is supported by the results of one of the first opinion polls held in October 1946 which indicated that the loss of all the colonies was seen

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as comparable to that of Tenda pass, Briga and Mont Cenisio, which were and represented a small part of national territory.<sup>20</sup>

A third cluster of reasons to explain the removal of the crude realities of the African past from the Italian national consciousness is closely connected to the persistence of colonial knowledge and studies in Italian academia. In fact, "Professors of colonial history who were trained under Fascism or their pupils" were still to teach in Italian universities long after the end of colonialism, so that "the loss of the colonies did not immediately correspond to the end of colonial discourse."<sup>21</sup> For all these reasons, the colonies represented the intrinsic value of 'Italian-ness' and the love of the fatherland, and so their loss was perceived as an impairment of Italian national identity as well as the revision of national borders. Silvana Patriarca has argued how according to some misinterpretation of the true reality of history, it was only Fascism to lose the war, so that Mussolini's regime was consequently reduced to a dark interlude within the post-war national narrative. Therefore Italians are described as "persons who possessed a great civilization and basically consisted of good people;"<sup>22</sup> colonialism followed a similar fate within the same post-war national discourse. From the late 1970s, academic research on Italian colonialism acquired a new critical dimension that helped to rewrite the history of Italian colonialism.<sup>23</sup> It is widely felt that the current lack of research and discussion around Italian colonialism "is no longer justified,"<sup>24</sup> and that the outcomes of historical research have not been internalized by Italian society.

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## Notes

- 1 Official dedication as stated in *Delibera di Giunta n. 66, Comune di Affile*, 21 July 2012.
- 2 Article 4, Security Council Resolution 1973, 17 March 2011.
- 3 Among others see: "Italy memorial to Fascist hero Graziani sparks row." *BBC News*, 15 August 2012; "Village's tribute re-ignites a debate about Italy's fascist past," *The New York Times*, 28 August 2012.
- 4 Ercole Viri, "Uno Mattina mi ha teso una trappola," *Secolo d'Italia*, 22 September 2012.
- 5 Del Boca 2002.
- 6 Walston 1997: 173.
- 7 Rochat 1981: 158.
- 8 U.S. Library of Congress, Africa Collection, *Memoria Segreta Operativa per l'azione su Harar*, reported in "Focus on the Horn," (<http://focus.on.the.horn.wordpress.com/2012/08/29/a-monument-for-graziani-italys-unresolved-relations-to-its-violent-colonial-past>)
- 9 *Ascario* or *ascari* is an Italian loanword from the Arabic 'askari

- (soldier). The term was used during the colonial times to refer to the African soldiers recruited to serve in the Italian colonial army.
- 10 Milkias 2006: 336.
  - 11 Del Boca 2002: 835.
  - 12 Sozi, G. *Personaggi illustri di Affile, Rodolfo Graziani* (<http://www.affile.org/?s=storia-cultura&p=personaggi-illustri-rodolfo-graziani>)
  - 13 Labanca 2002: 458.
  - 14 Calchi Novati 1995: 205.
  - 15 Rossi 1980: p. 581.
  - 16 Pavone 1995: 163.
  - 17 Seton-Watson 1991: 331.
  - 18 Pastorelli 1987: 124.
  - 19 Tarchiani 1955: 192.
  - 20 Labanca 2002: 384.
  - 21 Labanca 2011: 22.
  - 22 Patriarca 2011: 217.
  - 23 The six-volume history of Italian colonial rule in the Horn of Africa and Libya written by the well-known scholar Angelo Del Boca is still the most important work aimed at rewriting the colonial page of Italian national history. See Del Boca 1976-84 and Del Boca 1986-8.
  - 24 Pergher 2007: 53.