

# Italian right wing honours fascist war criminal

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On August 11, an ominous ceremony was held with great pomp in the small town of Affile, east of Rome. The ceremony commemorated the erection of a mausoleum for fascist war criminal Field Marshal Rodolfo Graziani (1882-1955) in the town's Radimonte Park.

About 100 participants took part, led by the priest Don Ennio Innocenti Sakrarium, who consecrated the mausoleum. Alongside giant Italian tricolours hung flags from *Giovine Italia*, the youth organisation of the People of Freedom (PDL) of former Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi.

The mayor of Affile, Ercole Viri (PDL), declared that the monument, engraved with the words "fatherland" and "honour", was "of national importance". The regional transport minister, Francesco Lollobrigida (also PDL), praised Graziani: "We have always loved him."

The construction of the mausoleum and the expansion of the park cost no less than 180 million euros—the monument alone cost €127 million—monies paid by the taxpayers of a region marked by unemployment and poverty.

## Who is Rodolfo Graziani?

Graziani is a legally convicted war criminal. On behalf of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, he commanded Italy's wars of conquest in North and East Africa, in which nearly half a million people were killed.

Fascist Italy sought to brutally subjugate the African colonies of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania (now Libya), as well as Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) and Somaliland. Libya had already been conquered by Italy in the Italian-Turkish War of 1911.

Mussolini gave the generals a free hand for crimes of genocidal proportions. The Italian air force bombed the civilian population, dropped poison gas over oases and vital water supplies, and shot columns of refugees from the air. Italian ground forces launched raids, massacres and executions to force the surrender of Libyan resistance fighters and their leader, Omar al-Mukhtar. Graziani was the commander of the Italian troops and governor of Cyrenaica.

In the summer of 1930, Graziani resettled hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of Cyrenaica to the desert where they were exposed to the scorching sun, thirst, starvation, exhaustion and disease. Half of these people died within three years. In Fezzan, a desert region in southern

Libya, he personally ordered the murder of Omar al-Mukhtar by hanging, earning the nickname "the Butcher of Fezzan".

His crimes were compounded in Abyssinia, now Ethiopia. Italian troops invaded the country on October 3, 1935. Graziani led the invasion along with Marshal Pietro Badoglio, and in May 1936 was appointed viceroy of Italian East Africa. For the first time in modern history, Italian troops systematically employed weapons of mass destruction, including bombs and chemical weapons, against civilians.

Following persistent resistance and an assassination attempt against him, Graziani personally gave the order on February 19, 1937, for a wave of bloody repression that went down in history as "Yekatit 12," based on the date in the Ethiopian calendar. During the pogroms, Italian troops massacred up to 30,000 civilian residents of Addis Ababa. Graziani laid waste to entire villages and dispatched large numbers of victims to concentration camps. His notorious dictum from this period was "The Duce will get Ethiopia, with or without the Ethiopians."

During World War II, the Italian army under Graziani was defeated in North Africa by British troops, and Graziani was relieved of his duties. As the end of the war neared, he took over command of forces of the fascist "Social Republic of Salò", Mussolini's last territory in northern Italy. Together with the German general Kesselring, Graziani led the fascist "final battle" until forced to capitulate in 1945.

In 1948, he was convicted of war crimes and sentenced to 19 years in prison. He was released after just 2 years. Although fascism was officially banned in post-war Italy, the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) named him its honorary chairman. He died in Rome in 1955.

This latest, macabre ceremony by prominent leaders of the PDL in Affile left many political observers dumbstruck. David Willey, Italian correspondent of the BBC, expressed his surprise to find "that the cult surrounding Fascist heroes has been kept alive in some parts of Italy, even though the fascist party was banned by the country's post war constitution."

In fact, the ceremony in honour of Graziani is by no means unique. Just a few months ago, the same local community erected a bronze bust of Giorgio Almirante, founder and leader of the neo-fascist post-war MSI. Almirante was editor in fascist Italy of the racist, anti-Semitic paper *Difesa della Razza* (Defense of the Breed).

In his 2010 book “*Viva Mussolini!—the rise of fascism in Berlusconi’s Italy*”, author Aram Mattioli cites numerous examples of the “trivialisation of fascism by centre-right circles”.

In 1994, media mogul Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister, following a wave of corruption scandals (“Tangentopoli”) involving all the republic’s major post-war parties. One of his first acts was to appoint former MSI leader Gianfranco Fini as minister. For the first time since the end of World War II, a neo-fascist minister sat in the cabinet of a European government.

Since then, the Italian right has systematically worked to rehabilitate “good fascists”, arguing that their activities in the war were on a par with those of members of the Resistance.

At the same time, research into Italy’s fascist past is systematically boycotted. The film *Omar Mukhtar—Lion of the Desert* (1979), starring Anthony Quinn in the title role and Rod Steiger as Mussolini, was denied a distribution licence until the visit to Italy of former Libyan leader Gaddafi in 2009. The BBC documentary “Fascist Legacy” (1989) by Ken Kirby has still not been shown on television in Italy, although an Italian version has existed since 1992.

In his book, Mattioli concludes: “In less than twenty years, Silvio Berlusconi changed Italy so drastically that the founding fathers of the post-war republic would have hardly recognised the country.” He warns of the “political and ideological abuse of history” which “is a threat to civilised coexistence.”

How is it possible for fascist thugs in Italy to be honoured with impunity in such a way? Two factors should be mentioned in this context.

First, fascism in Italy has never been really overcome, not even at the end of World War II. A thorough coming to grips with fascist crimes, both legally and ideologically, was stymied by Stalinism, embodied in the former Italian Communist Party (CPI).

The PCI played a leading role in the guerrilla war against fascism and had a mass following among workers. Workers assumed that the collapse of fascism would be accompanied by the overthrow of capitalism and socialist revolution. At the end of the war, the PCI rapidly betrayed these expectations.

According to the Stalinist maxim of “peaceful coexistence with capitalism,” the PCI in late 1944 entered the “national unity government” led by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who had led the Italian campaign in Ethiopia alongside Graziani. He had changed sides after the victory of the Allies in southern Italy in 1943.

PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti was made minister of justice in the civil war government and in this function headed off the revolutionary struggles of Fiat workers in Turin and saved the capitalist state. In June 1946, he personally organised a general amnesty for fascist crimes, thereby preventing any political settlement before it had begun.

After it had somewhat stabilised its rule, the Italian bourgeoisie

lined up with the Western powers and tossed the PCI out of government in May 1947. Today, the successor parties to the PCI—the Democratic Party (PD) and the successor organisations of Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) led by Nichi Vendola and Paolo Ferrero—are fully integrated into the Italian state.

The second reason is the global economic crisis and the massive programmes of cuts introduced by the Italian government aimed at destroying all the post-war social gains of working people.

Such a social counter-revolution cannot be imposed with democratic methods. Mario Monti, the unelected prime minister and former Goldman Sachs consultant, recently declared in a *Spiegel* interview that European governments had “a duty to educate parliament”. He was admitting that maintaining the euro and the European Union is incompatible with democracy.

Against this background, the public acknowledgment of Graziani, a man implicated in the worst war crimes of the Mussolini dictatorship, is a clear warning to the working class.

Some of Berlusconi’s political rivals have expressed their criticism over the incident. Esterino Montini, head of the Democratic Party in Lazio, asked: “Is it possible that in 2012 one simply allows, tolerates or accepts that we commemorate the fascist General and Minister Rodolfo Graziani with a park and a museum”.

And Luigi Nieri, SEL leader in Latium, wrote: “It is inconceivable for a democratic country to celebrate such persons. Even worse is the fact that this is done with the money of citizens.” The SEL (*Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà*) is a successor party of the PRC, led by the governor of Puglia, Nichi Vendola.

Such remarks are both hypocritical and misleading. The same parties recently supported Italian participation in the war against Libya, which once again has reduced the country to the status of a colony of the Western powers.



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