



MONUMENT TO RODOLFO GRAZIANI

Affile, Italy

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Executive Summary

A mausoleum inaugurated in August 2012 in the town of Affile, located in metropolitan Rome, has been subject to vandalism and protests by various anti-fascist groups. While the local right-wing mayor, Ercole Viri, claims that the publicly funded mausoleum was commissioned to honour Italian war veterans, the structure appears to be a monument to Rodolfo Graziani, a controversial figurehead within the Italian fascist regime and a notorious military leader complicit in Italy's colonial history in Libya and the conquest of Ethiopia. The controversy surrounding the mausoleum led to the eventual withdrawal of funds by the centre-left regional government and the sentencing of Viri to eight months in prison, albeit his conviction was overturned in 2020. Protests against the mausoleum are ongoing. This case study explores the continuous debate around Italy's relation with its fascist past.

Introduction

A monument to the prominent fascist, Field Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, was inaugurated in 2012 in the town of Affile, located in the south of metropolitan Rome. This installation attracted condemnation both within the international press and by various domestic factions, ultimately sparking a legal dispute which led the mayor and two other councillors to be convicted of *apologia del fascismo* (apology of fascism). Meanwhile, regional authorities argued they had been misinformed as to the nature of the monument and revoked its funding following its completion. As of June 2021, the criminal convictions of the three men have been overturned, and the monument remains standing.

Background

Rodolfo Graziani was a field marshal and *gerarca* of the Italian fascist regime. Throughout the 1930s, he served at the forefront of Italy's colonial empire in various high-ranking military and administrative capacities.¹ During this time, he became infamous for the implementation of repressive and illegal policies. Most notoriously, he used chemical weapons in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1937) and was complicit in the bombing of a Swedish Red Cross camp, in violation of the Geneva Convention.² Following the Italian armistice in 1943, Graziani became Minister of Defence within Mussolini's so-called Republic of Salò. The latter position proved highly controversial, not least because it placed Graziani in command of efforts to suppress Italian partisan forces.³ Moreover, Graziani implemented an increasingly draconian military draft, bolstered by the threat of execution for those who failed to enlist.⁴ In the aftermath of the war, the United Nations recommended Graziani be tried for war crimes, charges which were ultimately presented against him and for which he was convicted in an Italian court.⁵ While an initial sentence of nineteen years was imposed, he would only serve four months in prison. Thereafter, Graziani returned to Affile, where his remains were subsequently buried following his death in 1955.⁶



Figure 1: "Italian Fascist Marshal Rodolfo Graziani" Image by National Digital Archives via Wikimedia CC BY-SA 4.0

Graziani's legacy is closely linked to his reputation as the 'Butcher of Fezzan,' a nickname he acquired by virtue of his violent counterinsurgency methods. Such tactics involved the employment of mass executions against the Libyan people and the construction of concentration

¹ BBC News, "Italy Memorial to Fascist Hero Graziani Sparks Row," BBC News, August 15, 2012.

² Nick Pisa, "Italian Town's Memorial"; Jacob Wiebel and Toni Weis, "A Monument to Graziani: Italy's Unresolved Relations to its Violent Colonial Past," *Focus on the Horn*, August 15, 2012.

³ Pisa, "Italian Town's Memorial to Fascist Leader Sparks Row," *Telegraph*, August 15, 2012.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Mauro Favale, "Affile, parla il sindaco del sacrario a Graziani: 'Pentirmi io? Alle elezioni prenderò l'80%,'" *la Repubblica*, November 8, 2017.

⁶ Jessica Phelan, "Italian Mayor, Councillors Jailed Over Monument to Fascist General," *Local Italy*, November 8, 2017.

camps.⁷ Moreover, Graziani is considered partly responsible, alongside the fascist blackshirts, for a campaign of reprisals in Addis Ababa in February 1937 after he, the then viceroy of Ethiopia, was subject to an attempted assassination.⁸ On the authoritative estimates of historian Ian Campbell, the ensuing massacres killed upwards of 19,000 people.⁹

Despite such actions, a mausoleum and a memorial park dedicated to Graziani were unveiled in Affile on 11 August 2012.¹⁰ Symbolically, Affile is located in close proximity to the birthplace of Graziani in Filettino. More importantly, however, Affile is known as the town in which he resided and, as noted above, was to be eventually interred within its local cemetery.¹¹ The mausoleum was inaugurated by the aforementioned town mayor, Ercole Viri, in a ceremony attended by approximately one hundred guests. Some donned black shirts and the X Mas badge, the latter associated with a fascist-era military unit.¹² The *BBC* alleged that a representative from the Vatican was also present.¹³

The design of the mausoleum conforms to a 'style reminiscent of fascist architecture.'¹⁴ Indeed, in a manner somewhat resembling the iconography of its fascist predecessors, the terms 'onore' and 'patria' are inscribed into its surface, meaning respectively 'honour' and 'fatherland.'¹⁵ While Graziani's name is not explicitly engraved into the structure, its association with the fascist general is readily apparent. The mausoleum contains sentimental memorabilia, including newspaper clippings regarding the death of Graziani in 1955. Most notably, it houses a bust of the leader, donated by Mayor Viri himself.¹⁶ Moreover, upon the ceremonial opening of the mausoleum, flyers advertising the event by explicitly linking the architectonic structure to the memorialisation of Graziani were distributed.¹⁷ Further to this, the council website on Affile also featured Graziani in a positive frame. As the *BBC* reported in 2012, Graziani was therein denoted as one among the 'famous sons' of Affile.¹⁸ Moreover, the website also featured images from the inaugural ceremony of the mausoleum.¹⁹

History of the Contestation

Several prominent international media platforms, such as the *New Yorker*, *BBC*, and the *New York Times*, immediately criticised the installation.²⁰ Rapidly thereafter, the issue garnered increased attention in several Italian papers.²¹ Within Italian society more broadly, both *ANPI*, namely the Italian National Partisan Association, and the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party)

⁷ BBC News, "Italy Memorial"; Pisa, "Italian Town's Memorial"; Giorgio Ghiglione, "As Europe Reckons with Racism, Italy Still Won't Confront its Colonial Past," *Foreign Policy*, July 30, 2020.

⁸ *Economist*, "Painful Memories: Italy and the Addis Ababa Massacre," *Economist*, July 20, 2017.

⁹ Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 328.

¹⁰ *La Repubblica*, "Affile, il mausoleo al fascista Graziani scandalizza anche New York Times e Pais," *La Repubblica*, August 29, 2012.

¹¹ Favale, "Affile, parla il sindaco del sacrario a Graziani."

¹² Gaia Pianigiani, "Village's Tribute Reignites a Debate About Italy's Fascist Past," *New York Times*, August 28, 2012; Nello Trocchia, "Ad Affile va in scena la celebrazione del gerarca fascista. A spese nostre," *Fatto Quotidiano*, August 12, 2012.

¹³ BBC News, "Italy Memorial."

¹⁴ Pianigiani, "Village's Tribute Reignites a Debate."

¹⁵ Trocchia, "Ad Affile."

¹⁶ Pianigiani, "Village's Tribute Reignites a Debate."

¹⁷ Trocchia, "Ad Affile."

¹⁸ BBC News, "Italy Memorial."

¹⁹ Trocchia, "Ad Affile."

²⁰ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Why Are So Many Fascist Monuments Still Standing in Italy?," *New Yorker*, October 5, 2017; BBC News, "Italy Memorial"; Pianigiani, "Village's Tribute Reignites a Debate."

²¹ See, for example, *La Repubblica*, "Affile, il mausoleo."

condemned the project.²² In particular, the Lazio regional leader of *Partito Democratico*, Esterino Montino, questioned the acceptability of the monument by reference to the ostensible standards of modern sensibilities: 'Is it possible to allow, to permit or simply tolerate, that in 2012, a park and memorial is dedicated to the Fascist general and minister Rodolfo Graziani?'.²³

Such widespread criticism also materialised and manifested in physical acts of protest. For example, in September 2012, the monument was temporarily closed after three men from the nearby town of Subiaco covered the mausoleum with graffitied phrases, wherein they declared 'No al fascismo' ('No to fascism') and exclaimed '*Chiamate eroe un assassino*' ('You call hero a murderer').²⁴ This was followed by a protest on 23 September entitled *Non in mio nome* ('Not in my name') organised by the so-called Affiliate Anti-Fascist Committee, a collaborative effort involving ANPI, local anti-fascist groupings, and segments of the Ethiopian community.²⁵ In April 2013, spurred by such controversy, Graziani's tombstone, located in a nearby cemetery, was also vandalised by the use of red paint.²⁶ By November 2017, reports again noted that the 'memorial stands in disrepair, covered in graffiti that denounces Graziani's war crimes in Italy's African colonies.'²⁷

Italians of Ethiopian descent, alongside Ethiopian diaspora communities, have been integral in challenging the monument. Expectedly, Graziani is notorious within Ethiopia. In fact, the Ethiopian government had previously called upon Italy for his extradition in the immediate post-war period, albeit to no avail.²⁸ Since the inauguration of the monument, members and representatives of the Ethiopian community in Italy, especially the Italian Ethiopian Association, have been vocal in their condemnation and indeed have participated in local demonstrations.²⁹ Furthermore, as the *Amsterdam News* reported, the *Global Alliance for Justice: The Ethiopian Cause*, a group chaired by Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie, also dispatched an open letter to then Italian President Giorgio Napolitano requesting the removal of the mausoleum.³⁰ As outlined therein:

Ethiopians and Italians around the world join the international community in proclaiming: 'Never Again!' to genocide, and we expect immediate action by the Italian government to reverse this disgraceful attempt to celebrate hatred and racism which violates Italy's own Law No. 205/1993 prohibiting the dissemination of ideas based on superiority or racial and ethnic discrimination.³¹

In addition, segments of the Ethiopian-American community have also engaged in acts of protest. Notably, this involved collaborating with the Centro Primo Levi organisation to crowdsource for the award-winning 2015 documentary by Valerio Ciriaci, *If Only I Were That*

²² Trocchia, "Ad Affile"; Phelan, "Italian Mayor."

²³ Pisa, "Italian Town's Memorial."

²⁴ *La Repubblica*, "Affile, chiuso il sacrario di Graziani per ripulirlo E domenica la protesta in piazza degli antifascisti," *La Repubblica*, September 22, 2012.

²⁵ Ibid.; ANPI, "Affile: protesta contro il sacrario al fascista Graziani," ANPI, September 19, 2012.

²⁶ *La Repubblica*, "Affile, indagato sindaco per apologia fascismo Si indaga sui fondi per il mausoleo di Graziani," *La Repubblica*, April 24, 2013.

²⁷ Phelan, "Italian Mayor."

²⁸ Ghiglione, "As Europe Reckons with Racism."

²⁹ *Quotidiano Nazionale*, "Roma, monumento del gerarca Graziani imbrattato con vernice rossa," *Quotidiano Nazionale*, May 29, 2021; Jasper Chalcraft, "Beyond Addis Ababa and Affile: Italian Public Memory, Heritage and Colonialism," Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Research Paper No. RSCAS 2018/69, 2018: 15.

³⁰ *Amsterdam News*, "Ethiopians Outraged by Monument to Notorious Italian War Criminal," *Amsterdam News*, June 13, 2013.

³¹ Ibid.

Warrior, a film which engages with the malign legacy of Graziani.³²

Such controversy, emanating from various quarters, culminated in a legal dispute as ANPI endeavoured to remove the mausoleum. In turn, Viri and two council members, namely Giampiero Frosoni and Lorenzo Peperoni, were brought to court in 2017.³³ The three individuals were convicted of *apologia del fascismo* ('apology of fascism') for the sanctioning of the mausoleum; Viri was sentenced to eight months, and his counterparts each received terms of six months.³⁴ While the president of ANPI described the judgement as a victory for '*tutta l'Italia democratica e antifascista*' ('all democratic and antifascist Italy'),³⁵ Viri contended that the sentences were animated by political motivations.³⁶

Under clause twelve of the *disposizioni transitorie e finali* ('transitional and final provisions') of the post-war Italian constitution, attempts to reorganise the Italian Fascist Party are outlawed, while legal prohibitions against the 'public exaltation of fascism' has been further enhanced by the 1952 *Scelba Law* and the 1993 *Manchino Law*.³⁷ In addition to the sentences noted, the court ordered €8000 in compensation be paid to ANPI.³⁸ While the verdict was upheld in March 2019 by the Court of Appeal, it was eventually overturned in 2020 by the Italian Supreme Court.³⁹ In turn, the verdicts were annulled on the grounds that, to amount to the crime of *apologia del fascismo*, the act must 'produce some kind of result' in the direction of fascist political mobilisation, rather than merely commemorate events or figures.⁴⁰

Despite the legal and political controversy surrounding the monument, Viri has been re-elected as mayor twice.⁴¹ Furthermore, notwithstanding the aforementioned legal effort to remove the mausoleum, whereby the public prosecutor of Tivoli argued for the statue to be confiscated, the court rejected its proposed demolition, which presently remains intact.⁴² Accordingly, periodic acts of protest recur. For example, on 28 May 2021, symbolically coinciding with the 84th anniversary of the Debra Libanos massacre in Ethiopia ordered by the then viceroy Graziani, ANPI organised a flash mob in front of the monument.⁴³ Clothed in red-painted gloves and masks, the protesters unfurled a banner declaring their opposition to the memorialisation of fascist atrocities: '*Nessun monumento ai crimini del fascismo*' ('no monument to the crimes of fascism').⁴⁴ Following the protest, it was again found that parts of the monument had been painted red. Gianfranco Pagliarulo, president of the organisation, denied that ANPI had anything to do with the vandalism, stating that they honour the law, a pointed comment at Ercole Viri. In

³² Chalcraft, "Beyond Addis Ababa and Affile," 15.

³³ *La Repubblica*, "Sacratio di Affile, condannati per apologia del fascismo il sindaco e due assessori. Anpi: "Ora si demolisca," *La Repubblica*, November 7, 2017; *La Repubblica*, "Sacratio fascista a Affile, 'apologia del Ventennio': confermata condanna sindaco," *La Repubblica*, March 14, 2019.

³⁴ Phelan, "Italian Mayor."

³⁵ *La Repubblica*, "Sacratio fascista a Affile."

³⁶ Favale, "Affile."

³⁷ Paolo Heywood, "Fascism, Uncensored: Legalism and Neo-Fascist Pilgrimage in Predappio, Italy, Paolo." *Terrain* 72 (2019): 86-7.

³⁸ *La Repubblica*, "Sacratio fascista".

³⁹ *Ibid.*; RAI News, "Sacratio fascista, confermata condanna sindaco Affile," RAI News, March 14, 2019.

⁴⁰ Patrizia Maciocchi, "Il mausoleo a Rodolfo Graziani non basta per l'apologia del fascismo, annullata la condanna di sindaco e assessori," *Il Sole 24 Ore*, March 26, 2021.

⁴¹ For the most recent 2018 municipal results, see Dipartimento per gli affari interni e territoriali, "Comunali 10/06/2018 Area ITALIA Regione LAZIO Provincia ROMA Comune AFFILE," Eligendo: Archivio storico delle elezioni.

⁴² Ghiglione, "As Europe Reckons with Racism"; Phelan, "Italian Mayor"; *La Repubblica*, "Sacratio di Affile."

⁴³ ANPI, "Flash mob dell'ANPI ad Affile, Pagliarulo: 'Il monumento al boia Rodolfo Graziani è un' ignominia!'" ANPI, May 28, 2021.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; *Quotidiano Nazionale*, "Roma."

his own statement, the mayor referred to the *'Inciviltà e odio'* ('incivility and hate') of the protesters.⁴⁵

Decision-Making Processes

The decision to construct the mausoleum appears to have resided with the town authorities of the Comune of Affile, the council members, and above all, with the elected mayor, Ercole Viri. Press reports quote Viri as calling Graziani *'un eroe della Patria'* (a hero of the Fatherland).⁴⁶ For Viri, the monument is 'a recognition of our fellow citizen who was the youngest colonel of the Italian army.'⁴⁷ Of particular note, Viri expressed his desire for Affile to become, by virtue of the unveiled memorial, as 'famous and as popular as Predappio'; the latter town is an ill-famed site of neo-fascist pilgrimage, due to its peculiar status as both Mussolini's birthplace and host of the Mussolini family crypt.⁴⁸

The project was originally formulated in 2009. However, at this stage, during which the local council sought regional funds, it has been alleged that there was no mention that Graziani would constitute the centrepiece of the memorial.⁴⁹ On such grounds, the President of the Lazio region, Nicola Zingaretti, conveyed his objections to the monument following its inauguration.⁵⁰ According to reports, the monument cost a total of €127,000 of public funds, afforded to the local council by regional authorities.⁵¹ As Zingaretti explained in a public letter to the people of Affile, the use of the public funds to create a mausoleum for Graziani was not merely an abuse of the conditions under which such money was granted, or what he referred to as 'a clear administrative violation,' but an error in decision-making due to Graziani's war crimes, which he continued to list in part.⁵² Therefore, the €180,000 originally allotted to the project would be withheld until or unless the monument was repurposed per its original intention, namely as one dedicated to the unknown soldier.⁵³

At a practical and administrative level, the situation has scarcely changed since 2012. As noted, contrary to the aim of its detractors, the mausoleum remains intact, and Viri continues to act as the elected mayor of Affile, having had his sentence overturned. This intractable standstill is thus a product of the polarised viewpoints surrounding the monument, divided between those who defend it as a valid tribute and others advocating for its removal. Indeed, those sympathetic to the mayor defended the decision to construct the monument, ostensibly relying on obfuscation of Graziani's role in the perpetration of Italian colonial violence and the avid nature of his fascist beliefs. Francesco Lollabrigida, a local council member, remarked that '[t]here has

⁴⁵ *Quotidiano Nazionale*, "Roma."

⁴⁶ *Il tempo*, "I revisionisti ora vogliono abbattere il mausoleo Graziani ad Affile. Furia del sindaco: 'Giu le mani,'" *Il tempo*, June 11, 2020.

⁴⁷ Pianigiani, "Village's Tribute Reignites a Debate."

⁴⁸ Pisa, "Italian Town's Memorial."

⁴⁹ Roma Today, "Affile, revocato dalla Regione il finanziamento al monumento per Graziani," Roma Today, April 24, 2015.

⁵⁰ *La Repubblica*, "Affile, indagato sindaco"; *Il tempo*, "I revisionisti."

⁵¹ BBC News, "Italy Memorial."

⁵² Nicola Zingaretti, "Sosteniamo Affile, ma sul Monumento a Graziani il Comune ha violato i patti," *Nicola Zingaretti*, April 25, 2013.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

been too much controversy and chat in the last few days.⁵⁴ As he contended: 'From the locals there is nothing but affection for Rodolfo Graziani and he has always been looked on with respect. He was a decorated soldier in the Italian army.'⁵⁵ Viri himself referred to the monument as but a tribute to one of the most prominent figures to hail from the town, thereby rejecting such criticism as 'idle chatter.'⁵⁶ Moreover, despite comments to the contrary, Viri has also claimed the monument to be a dedication not to the fascist general at all but rather one memorialising the death of Italian soldiers.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, critics and protesters have repeatedly made it clear that their opposition stems from the war crimes Graziani ordered as a military and administrative leader in the African colonies occupied by Italy.⁵⁸ For protesters and organisations such as ANPI, the construction of the monument and the celebration of Graziani is not only offensive and morally questionable but legally dubious.

Provided this disjuncture between opposing factions, a satisfactory resolution to the contestation is presently elusive. Lest the statue remains in its current form, a decision will have to be made on the correct course of action, whether it involves its removal, recontextualisation, or some other approach deemed suitable.⁵⁹ The status quo is clearly untenable for protestors. At the same time, its removal would be vocally challenged by Viri and other monument supporters, who defend a particular interpretation of Graziani and his legacy. In this regard, Viri contends that to remove the statue is contrary to the will of the town's citizens, who have elected him over consecutive terms.⁶⁰ While protestors refer to the violence perpetrated under the auspices of Graziani and his place within Italy's colonial and fascist legacy, many supporters of the mausoleum view opponents as revisionists and refute any competing narrative, rendering an adequate solution a distant possibility.

Summary and Conclusions

The mausoleum was criticised from its opening, mainly on the grounds that a monument to Graziani was offensive to the memory of the victims of fascism in both Italy and its former colonies. Indeed, from a legal and administrative viewpoint, it appears the monument should not have been commissioned. As a recently established monument, it is possible that the mausoleum will be removed, its defenders unable to rely on the claim that its disbandment would represent a denial of the past. However, its foremost advocate, Mayor Ercole Viri, remains both widely popular in Affile and seemingly resilient to the pressure of journalists and protestors. Accordingly, the removal of the monument presently seems improbable.

⁵⁴ Pisa, "Italian Town's Memorial."

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Phelan, "Italian Mayor."

⁵⁷ *Il tempo*, "I revisionisti."

⁵⁸ See, for example, *Quotidiano Nazionale*, "Roma."

⁵⁹ For example, one such suggestion was suggested by the academic and executive director of the World Peace Foundation, Alex de Waal: 'Let the mausoleum at Affile serve as a memorial to the victims of his crimes and as a reminder that never again can such inhumane political ideologies and their barbarous acts be tolerated. Let this memorial be inscribed with the names of at least some of those who died at his hands, and let the judgment [sic] of their descendants and representatives be prominently displayed.' See Toni Weis, "Leading Academics React to the Graziani Memorial," *Focus on the Horn*, August 29, 2012.

⁶⁰ *Il tempo*, "I revisionisti."

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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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