

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## ‘Fascism on trial’: Rodolfo Graziani and the manipulation of historical consciousness in postwar Italy

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### Abstract

This article uses the postwar trial of Fascist Italy’s most prominent general, Rodolfo Graziani, to examine issues of transitional justice and the formation of popular memory of Italian Fascism and colonialism after 1945. During the Fascist *ventennio*, the regime constructed Graziani as the nation’s colonial ‘hero’ despite his leading role in genocidal measures during Fascist Italy’s colonial wars in North and East Africa. His position as minister of defence in Mussolini’s Nazi-backed Salò Republic in 1943–5, however, threatened his heroic reputation as he worked with Nazi commanders and became responsible for atrocities against Italian civilians. After the Second World War, Graziani was tried for Nazi collaborationism at the Supreme Court in 1948, but his colonial conduct was left unquestioned. Unlike in the Nuremberg Trials in post-Nazi Germany, few Italians were tried for war crimes after 1945. This historical inquiry analyses the legal proceedings, transnational representation and outcome of Rodolfo Graziani’s 1948 trial as an emblematic case study to explore de-fascistisation and decolonisation initiatives and their limitations in post-Fascist postcolonial Italy.

**Keywords:** Fascism; colonialism; de-fascistisation; decolonisation; public memory

### Introduction

On 11 October 1948, Rome’s Palace of Justice was teeming with public crowds squeezing into the courtroom to witness the beginning of what was deemed ‘the most important trial of our time’ (Processo Graziani 1950a, vii).<sup>1</sup> The trial defendant was Rodolfo Graziani, who had been one of Italy’s most prominent military figures during the Fascist *ventennio*. The transcript’s editor stated: ‘The Graziani trial has sparked and unleashed the emotions of the Italian population’ (vii). This striking introduction immediately raises questions surrounding the figure, the nature of the trial and its monumental emblematic significance, as perceived by its contemporaries. Who was Rodolfo Graziani? What was he tried for and why? Why was the trial deemed so important and why did it incite so many public emotions?

Graziani rose to public prominence through his active participation in the long-attempted colonisation of Libya during the Second Italo-Senussi War (1923–32), following the Fascist takeover and intensification of the conflict (Del Boca 1988; Rochat 1973). The

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regime's aggressive foreign policy granted Graziani freedom of action which led to his enactment of genocidal measures consisting of mass hangings and deportations to concentration camps, directly resulting in the deaths of an estimated 70,000 people from torture, starvation and disease (Ahmida 2021, 27; Labanca 2005; Rochat 1973, 31).<sup>2</sup> Graziani's capture and hanging of the anticolonial resistance leader Omar al-Mukhtar in September 1931 precipitated the Fascist declaration of colonial victory in Libya. These atrocities were heavily censored by the Italian press as the Fascist government celebrated the general as a national hero for the conquest and placed him at the forefront of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia a few years later (1935–41). In Ethiopia, Graziani committed further atrocities during his leading role in the military invasion and occupation through the censored use of illegal poison gases, deportations and massacres of thousands of Ethiopian civilians (Campbell 2017; Del Boca 1979, 487; Rochat 1973, 37).<sup>3</sup>

After Italy initially joined the Second World War alongside the Axis powers in 1940, Marshal Badoglio and King Victor Emanuel III's armistice with the Allies in September 1943 sparked a civil war between the royal army, Allied forces and Italian partisans against Mussolini and his followers in the Nazi-backed Salò Republic (RSI).<sup>4</sup> Graziani was appointed the RSI's minister of defence to incite confidence in the new republic in light of his previously admired reputation under Fascism. During the Italian civil war (1943–5), Graziani collaborated with Nazi commanders in the organisation of anti-partisan deportations and massacres of Italian civilians in North and Central Italy (Ganapini 1999, 58; Klinkhammer 2006). Graziani's participation in the RSI marked a pivotal moment in polarising Italian public opinion for the first time. The soldier-hero became vilified by antifascists for his crimes at Salò, setting the precedent for his blockbuster trial in 1948.

This article examines the historical course, representation and outcome of Rodolfo Graziani's trial as means to examine wider issues of transitional justice and its implications in postwar Italy. I use theories of transitional justice, Fascism, colonialism and postcolonialism to contribute to recent scholarly discussions on the difficult heritage of Italy's Fascist and colonial past. The article aims to trace the events surrounding the trial and highlight important themes that emerge from this notable example of de-fascistisation in practice. Analysis of international and domestic transitional justice initiatives, the trial transcript and transnational press have led me to argue that Graziani's 1948 trial was a show trial designed to appease public opinion in response to the Western denunciation of Fascism after 1945. As Graziani was one of Mussolini's most closely associated figures and head of the dictator's last armed forces, his trial proved to be a powerful political and didactic tool to reset and re-educate. However, it only served to superficially denounce Fascist violence and consolidate pervasive Western ideologies of colonial heroism and admired militarism – the long-lasting effects of which are still evident in contemporary Italian politics, culture and society.

### **The Allied treatment of Axis war crimes and 'the missing Italian Nuremberg'**<sup>5</sup>

In October 1942, during the Second World War, the British lord chancellor announced plans for 'the formation of a United Nations War Crimes Commission for the Investigation of War Crimes (UNWCC), whose task would be naming and identifying the persons responsible for Nazi atrocities, and in particular organised atrocities' (UNWCC 1948, 105). One year later, the UK, USA and Soviet Union pronounced the Moscow Declaration, which was extended to all 'major (Hitlerite) war criminals whose offences have no particular geographical location and who will be punished by a joint decision of the Governments of the Allies' (108). The Allies dedicated Annex 4 of the declaration to the Italian case when they announced that:

The Three Governments are in complete agreement that Allied policy towards Italy must be based upon the fundamental principle that Fascism and all its evil influences and emanations must be utterly destroyed and that the Italian people shall be given every opportunity to establish governmental and other institutions based on democratic principles. ('Protocol, Signed at Moscow, November 1, 1943' in Franklin and Perkins 1963, 758)

These initiatives resulted in the Nuremberg and Tokyo War Crimes Trials that took place between 1945 and 1949 and the UNWCC, which operated from 1943 to 1948. The trials encompassed the International Military Tribunal (IMT), the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) and the Nuremberg Military Tribunal (NMT). The first and most famous of these was the IMT (1945–6), where Allied judges and prosecutors tried 22 high-profile Nazi political and military leaders such as Hermann Göring, Wilhelm Frick, Hans Frank and Joachim von Ribbentrop for 'a) crimes against peace; b) war crimes; crimes against humanity'.<sup>6</sup> The IMTFE, commonly known as the Tokyo Trials (1946–7), was modelled on the IMT; 11 countries tried 28 officials from the former Japanese empire for crimes across Asia. Lastly, the NMT (1946–9) was held by US military courts to prosecute 'minor (Nazi) war criminals' in 12 trials which were composed of the Doctors', Judges', Einsatzgruppen and High Command Trials. The purpose of the highly publicised trials was not merely to 'denazify' and prosecute Axis criminals, but they equally served 'as a collective learning process ... bringing the Germans back from perpetrating unspeakable crimes to a sincere commitment to human rights' (Jarausch 2006, vii).

The lesser-known British-led UNWCC had 17 member states and worked separately from, but heavily influenced by, trial investigations in Nuremberg and Tokyo, with the wider scope of investigating war crimes before and during the Second World War and assisting in the trials of perpetrators in their respective countries (Plesch and Sattler 2014, 437–455). Following Germany, Italy was second on the UNWCC's list of the highest number of war criminals, with charges in Albania, France, Greece, Yugoslavia and Ethiopia (Plesch 2017, 90; UNWCC 1948, 149). Between 1946 and 1948, the Ethiopian legation submitted a preliminary list of the top ten Italian war criminals to be tried for their crimes during the Fascist occupation of Ethiopia in 1935–41 (UNWCC 1948, 149). Number one on the list was Graziani's former superior, Badoglio, for his role in the heavy use of poison gases during the invasion of 1935–6 (Pankhurst 1999, 123). Graziani was number two, with the same charge plus further atrocities committed when he acted as viceroy of Italian East Africa (1936–7).<sup>7</sup> The UNWCC representative for Ethiopia saw 'the Graziani case [as] ... the key to all other cases [because] ... it gave an explanation to the whole Italian policy of systematic terrorism' (Leijonhufvud quoted in Pankhurst 1999, 127).

Given Allied efforts to investigate and try 'major' and 'minor' Axis war criminals, why did Italy not undergo its own Nuremberg or Tokyo Trial? Why did the Allies not try Graziani for his crimes? Historian Michele Battini has revealed that plans for an 'Italian Nuremberg' were initially discussed by Britain and the USA between 1943 and 1944 but dropped after the war due to Allied preoccupations with postwar stability, economic reconstruction and the perceived threat of a communist takeover with the rising Cold War (Battini 2007, 75).<sup>8</sup> The growing popularity of the Italian left after the fall of Fascism led to Allied fears that a maxi trial would radicalise public opinion in favour of the 'popular bloc' of left-wing parties (74). Effie Pedaliu's study of the British handover – or lack thereof – of Italian war criminals to Yugoslavia supports Battini's findings that 'British policy towards Italy [was]: first, to deny Italy to the Soviets and the Italian Communist Party and second, to safeguard British interests and influence in Italy' and the Mediterranean (Pedaliu 2004, 507).

On a practical level, Pedaliu argues that ‘the punishment of Italian war criminals was not ... of paramount concern of British policy towards Italy’ (529) given that the number of war crimes trials had to be restricted to ‘manageable proportions’ (506). Thus, when it came to the issue of Italian war crimes in Ethiopia, there was little question of reprimand.

Ethiopia’s number one Italian war criminal, Badoglio, had played a key role in collaborating with the Allies in Italy’s unconditional surrender in 1943 and was supported by them as *de facto* prime minister between 1943 and 1944 (Pankhurst 1999, 107). Within a few weeks of Badoglio’s surrender to the Allies, Ethiopia was excluded from the UNWCC but, after years of insistence, the commission agreed in 1948 to accept war crimes charges for the top two, Badoglio and Graziani (128), at face value at least. Badoglio’s previous alliance with the Allies led to opinions in the British Foreign Office that ‘the request for Badoglio might well cause embarrassment’ (128). Furthermore, official British pro-imperial attitudes signified that they had ‘no direct interest in Graziani’ as a war criminal (128). Despite the UNWCC’s 17 state membership, the British government held the overarching power to approve and/or reject proposals in concordance with its own interests and concerns (Garrod 2016, 356). Thus, Ethiopia’s request was ignored and eventually rejected. British governmental oblivion to Badoglio’s and Graziani’s colonial atrocities suggests that racial and imperial hegemonic attitudes prevailed. The commission’s initial acceptance of the charges appeared to be hollow gestures taken to appease international public opinion in the face of Ethiopian pressure.

When the war ended in Italy in April 1945, Graziani successfully managed to negotiate his surrender to American forces to avoid meeting the same bloody end as Mussolini and other leading RSI members who were shot by the partisans. The Americans handed Graziani over to British forces who transferred him to a British prisoner of war (POW) camp in Algeria while they decided upon his fate. From his entry into British custody, the British War Office remained uninterested in Graziani’s own role in any acts of violence, domestically or abroad. Following a series of telegrams dating from 6 June 1945 to 1 February 1946, the Central Mediterranean Force concluded: ‘It was decided that ... it would be better if the British military courts did not try Graziani, in whose Army Group a certain number of atrocities were committed.’ At this point, Allied interest in Graziani served only ‘to give evidence against Field Marshal Kesselring and possible German divisional commanders serving under his command’. As the chief German commander in charge of the Nazi occupation of Italy, Kesselring was tried in a British military tribunal in Venice 1947 for the Ardeatine Caves massacre (1944) and other reprisals against Italian civilians.<sup>9</sup> Kesselring’s trial was one of very few Allied trials to take place in postwar Italy, indicating that the Allies saw Italian Fascist commanders and their crimes as a lesser evil compared to their Nazi counterparts. Such a differentiation in official thought permeated the international and Italian public spheres, resulting in popular misrepresentations and beliefs of ‘the bad German and good Italian’ (Focardi 2016).

At the POW camp, Graziani described his transfer to Algeria as a ‘sad return to Africa’ (Mayda 1992, 268). In the camp, he attested to ‘being treated with much respect’ as he likely enjoyed a certain level of consideration for his previously admired Western reputation as a skilled colonial general. Following multiple requests from the Italian government, British forces released Graziani into Italian custody on 16 February with the utmost secrecy. Careful planning of his transfer to Naples meant that ‘every effort will be made to avoid publicity’ for the high-profile military figure, ‘in view [of the] risk of disturbances’.<sup>10</sup> Despite having been on the wrong side of the war, dominant imperial ideologies and norms of militarised masculinity dictated not only Graziani’s soft treatment as a POW but his fate in the hands of the Allies.

## Italian de-fascistisation and decolonisation: scopes and flaws

British fears over the explosive effect of Graziani's return to Italy were warranted as he was immediately transferred to Palazzo d'Avalos on the small island of Procida. Local rumour had it that the lights on the island were turned off to ensure Graziani's tactful transfer to the isolated prison, which also held other RSI members (*La Repubblica*, 30 October 2016). How did Italians respond to his arrival back in the peninsula? What were they to do with such a prominent colonial and Fascist figure at such a fragile time in the nation's history? To answer such questions, we must briefly explore how Italy itself sought to de-fascistise and decolonise the war-torn country and its civilians domestically vis-à-vis the Allied approach.

As early as November 1943, the Badoglio government 'established the punishment of collaborators and political purification as a primary point of departure' (Algardi 1973, 7). By May 1944, the High Commission for the Punishment of the Crimes and Misdemeanours of Fascism was established to prosecute 'crimes against military loyalty and honour committed after the armistice' (Carucci 2010). Despite an overwhelming focus on RSI members and leading Nazi collaborators, de-fascistisation had many inherent problems, which didn't just begin with co-ordination with the Allies' agenda. The most obvious obstacle was that 'those who undertook sanctions against Fascists were immediately bewildered by the enormity of their task', which entailed unravelling 20 years of dictatorship at all levels: political, economic, cultural and social (Domenico 1991, 4). Core contentions lay in where Fascism began and ended, what it constituted, and what was now perceived as good or bad about the *ventennio*.

Between 1944 and 1945, inconsistent purges took place arbitrarily and differed depending on the state of the war and the political forces at play (Domenico 1991, 88; Malone 2017, 449). Various factors influenced the imposition of sanctions in each locality: Allied presence, communist/anticommunist sentiment and conservative Catholic influence, to name only a few (Domenico 1991, 88; Dondi 1999). Above all, two decades of Fascism had created a class of bureaucrats who had benefited from the regime, many of whom were now in charge of de-fascistisation and wanted to limit its effects (Pavone 1995; Ponzani 2011, 122). Some important trials indeed took place and sought justice. In September 1944, Roman Chief of Police Pietro Caruso was tried and executed for his role in the Ardeatine Caves massacre. Other trials, like that of General Mario Roatta, proved a complete failure as he escaped during his 1945 trial and no concrete efforts were made to find him.

The superficial purge of the most symbolic and 'strategic figures tied in the public's mind to the regime' (Domenico 1991, 90) signified that Graziani, as head of the RSI's army, was the most obvious target after Mussolini. On 4 July 1945, *Corriere d'Informazione* declared that the commission had announced that 'the death penalty [was] foreseen for Graziani'. As we shall see, the outcome of Graziani's trial turned out radically differently from this prediction for multiple reasons. By 1946, the anger and desperation of war had quelled as Italians had grown tired of violence. The Duce was dead, the condemned monarchy ceased to exist, and so 'the great wave of anti-Salò sentiment had subsided' (Domenico 1991, 176). Furthermore, the Togliatti amnesty of 22 June 1946 crucially pardoned many mid- and high-ranking offenders, a measure that many historians argue was a result of, and in turn institutionalised, a collective amnesia regarding Fascism (Caroli 2022, 119; Cento Bull 2008, 405; Franzinelli 2016, 260; Ventresca 2006, 196). Italians' hastiness to forget Fascism was bound to 'the fascist mentality after Fascism' that continued to pervade all sects of society (Dondi 1999).

As ineffective as de-fascistisation ended up being, decolonisation fared even worse. The Italian colonial project was as old as the Risorgimento itself and remained inextricably intertwined with nation building and national identity (Finaldi 2017, 65). The inculcation of colonial thought dated back to the nineteenth century and to the first Catholic missions and

the Italian acquisition of the port of Assab in 1869 (Finaldi 2017, 19). Thus, colonialism long predated Fascism and proved far more resilient. When the Allies formally stripped Italy of its colonies in the postwar Italian Peace Treaty of 1947, there was a complete lack of internal decolonisation, which blocked the emergence of a critical appraisal of Italy's colonial past (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005, 2; Pes 2014, 417).<sup>11</sup> The absence of independence wars or popular anticolonial sentiment, which were prevalent during British and French decolonisation, hindered the Italian public in reckoning with decades of colonial propaganda (Andall and Duncan 2005, 9; Labanca 2015). As difficult as it was to face Fascism, the strength of the political left in Italy's postwar government allowed for some public criticism and reflective debate. The same cannot be said for colonialism, as both the left and the right unanimously campaigned for the return of Italy's colonies after the Second World War (Labanca 2015, 124). It was this reticence that would cause serious and long-lasting consequences for the national consciousness for generations to come.

The postwar state of the military posed the same problem as the colonial question. The Italian army was an institutionalised form of patriotism born out of unification, the myths and cults of which long preceded Mussolini. After 1945, blurred lines between Fascism and the armed forces confused the issue of war responsibility and public perception of what it was to be labelled Fascist or nationalist. It is this contradictory context in which Graziani's trial took place in October 1948, following deferral due to his ill health.<sup>12</sup> What would the colonial soldier-hero turned *repubblichino* be tried and condemned for?

### 'Fascism on trial':<sup>13</sup> Graziani faces the bar

The eve of Graziani's trial sparked protests by the RSI's heir and postwar neofascist party, the Italian Social Movement (MSI), demonstrating the unwavering support he had among the political far right (*New York Times*, 16 October 1948, p. 5). On 11 October 1948, *The Los Angeles Times* reported that 'demonstrators waving black flags and singing Fascist songs surged through Rome'. On the same day, *The New York Herald Tribune* elaborated on the displays of Fascist nostalgia and solidarity in the city centre as it described a gathering of up to a thousand members of the MSI shouting 'long live Graziani', resulting in over 100 arrests and violent clashes with left-wing supporters. The political polarisation of the trial could thus be seen, heard and felt before it had even begun.

Transnational anticipation and interest in 'the trial of the most distinguished survivor of fascism' was reflected in the explosion of sensationalist newspaper reports (*Daily Mail*, 12 October 1948, p. 1). *The Christian Science Monitor* was convinced that 'this is the biggest war-crimes trial of an Italian yet held in Italy' (12 October 1948, p. 1). The US paper sharply identified the emblematic significance of the trial; its European correspondent wrote that 'although it is Marshal Graziani who ostensibly is on trial in Rome, in reality it is dictatorship which stands at the bar ... [The trial is] one of self-examination for the Italian nation.' The journalist was of the scathing opinion that 'Marshal Graziani typifies much of what went to make up fascism ... cruelty, cynicism and warped idealism.' Once the trial had begun and the inquest clear, one that focused only on his military actions during the Salò Republic, *La Tribuna Illustrata* similarly found symbolic importance in the proceedings, as 'the Graziani trial effectively becomes the trial of Mussolini's 600 days' (31 October 1948, p. 5).

On 11 October, emotions were high as Graziani entered the courtroom dressed in civilian clothing (for the first time in public) – a white open-necked shirt and dark blue suit – with an escort of 50 carabinieri. Journalists commented that 'he appeared to be in excellent shape' despite his frail health (*New York Times*, 12 October 1948, p. 3), and that he 'smiled and bowed for a battery of photographers' (*New York Herald Tribune*, 12 October 1948, p. 5). According to *The New York Herald Tribune*, 'the stern-faced, gruff-voiced former Marshal completely dominated the crowded courtroom' from the moment he entered. This sparked

immediate concerns from the leader of the Italian Communist Party, Palmiro Togliatti, that broadcasting the Graziani trial 'placed an important means of propaganda at the service of Fascism' (*Corriere della Sera*, 13 October 1948, p. 1). As an expert veteran in self-serving propaganda, Graziani was acutely aware of the importance of every aspect of his courtroom performance: his physical appearance (clothing and stance), the content and delivery of his defence (voice and language), and, most significantly, his audience as he actively interacted with the judiciary, press and public throughout what turned out to be quite a political spectacle.

The trial opened with the charge against the defendant, who then proceeded to conduct his own defence, having confidently decided against legal representation. The president of the court, Luigi Marcantonio, who had been a prominent Fascist judge during the *ventennio*, read the charge as follows:

Rodolfo Graziani is charged with the crime of military collaborationism for having committed crimes against the loyalty and military defence of the state by collaborating with the invading Germans after 8 September 1943 until May 1945 in Rome and the territories of northern Italy. (Processo Graziani 1950a, 1)

As the main accusation against Graziani was that of military collaborationism with the Nazis, the court first focused on his decision to adhere to the RSI. Graziani responded by arguing that he initially refused the position of minister of defence when Kesselring called upon him, but a combination of Nazi insistence and the threat of internment forced him to reconsider (Processo Graziani 1950a, 203). Graziani's reconsideration led to his unwavering assertion that he accepted his position as minister of defence 'to put as many obstacles as possible to German violence' (Processo Graziani 1950a, 200). National and international papers uncritically reproduced this line of defence. *Corriere della Sera* wrote that Graziani collaborated 'to save the Italian population from the Germans' (12 October 1948, p. 1) and *The Times* of Britain reported that 'his sudden change of heart was forced upon him by the grave prospects before Italy' and the likelihood of Hitler pursuing a scorched earth policy (14 October 1948, p. 3). In contrast, the communist paper *L'Unità* was more damning in its reportage as it referred to Graziani as 'a traitor ... with the Germans till death' (14 October 1948, p. 1).

Second, it came to the specifics of the charge: 'the ordering of round-ups and decrees, with threat of terroristic punishment, arranging systematic round-ups, the armed repression of patriots against the Germans' (Processo Graziani 1950a, 1). Graziani's response to these accusations were unwaveringly consistent: 'I never ordered a deportation ... the responsibility of the anti-partisan war was that of [German Field Commander] Marshal Kesselring and [SS and police leader] General Wolff' (355–358). Graziani insisted that accountability for the death penalty for dissenters, partisan deportations and any acts of terror lay solely with the German High Command officers operating in Italy at the time. In the face of the lack of documentary evidence against Graziani due to wartime destruction and Allied and Nazi confiscation of thousands of documents during the war, 180 witnesses were called to testify. Many countered Graziani's defence as they viewed him as 'the symbol of anti-partisanism' (Processo Graziani 1950b, 477). The first postwar prime minister and partisan, Ferruccio Parri, who was present at the trial, testified:

This army had been formed only in grace by Gen. Graziani's adherence to the Republic of Salò. He was the only Italian general who enjoyed popularity, especially among the circle of officers who had fought in Africa. No other person could be at Mussolini's disposal for the establishment of this army. (Processo Graziani 1950b, 192)

Parri argued that only Graziani could be held accountable for the successful formation and legitimisation of the RSI's army due to the immense popularity he had enjoyed in his colonial heyday. According to Parri, Mussolini would not have been able to arm the republic without Graziani. Parri also attributed the intensification of the anti-partisan war in 1944 to Graziani: 'Graziani's intervention – from early 1944 – resulted in the serious and dangerous development of the civil war that would take place in northern Italy' (Processo Graziani 1950b, 192). Similarly, lawyer and partisan Dante Bianco testified that Graziani's name instilled fear as 'we partisans saw Graziani as the promoter of all anti-partisan organisation, the author of the decree that sanctioned death by shooting for members of the resistance or deserters' (477). Another partisan, Antonio Prearo, argued that Graziani was culpable for the deportations as German troops ultimately answered to him (413).<sup>14</sup> Others testified against him by describing further actions against the enemies of Salò. These ranged from the burning of villages (740), public hangings (215) and other forms of execution, in addition to the deportation of partisans and their families to concentration camps (480). While some were convinced that such brutality could be attributed directly to Graziani's encouragement of anti-partisan violence (416), others believed it to have been down to German incitement (216).

Despite such accusations, many witnesses rallied to Graziani's defence. Lieutenant Colonel Musco had worked as an undercover partisan officer during the Nazi occupation of Rome and insisted that 'Graziani's situation was that of a man at the peak of a painful, dramatic situation, and through his alliance with the Germans he tried to float this boat that was sinking on all sides' (Processo Graziani 1950b, 187). Ex pro-tempore commanding general of the carabinieri, Casimiro Delfini, also defended Graziani when he was accused of ordering the deportation of 2,500 carabinieri from Rome on 7 October 1943 to remove opposition to the deportation of 1,259 Roman Jews on 16 October. Delfini was adamant that:

In all conscience I must state that ever since that time, when my soul could have been most filled with resentment, I never thought that Marshal Graziani was aware of the deportation. Therefore, I must say that I did not believe that the deception was hatched by Graziani. This conviction of mine did not depend on subjective considerations: it derived from the fact that I had a way of seeing the great attachment that the Marshal had for the carabinieri ... the partiality he had flaunted in Africa toward the carabinieri ... I did not know Graziani but I had noted all the action he had unfolded in favour of the armed forces ... he was not aware of their fate. (Processo Graziani 1950b, 71–72)

Delfini remained in disbelief over any actions Graziani could have committed against the carabinieri due to his unwavering confidence in Graziani's prior behaviour towards them in the colonies. A Jewish official from the Airforce, Araldo Reyer, told the court that Graziani saved him and his family from deportation to a concentration camp after the Nazi occupation (Processo Graziani 1950b, 109).<sup>15</sup> The parish priest of Graziani's home town of Filettino testified that Graziani saved the village from a German sweep in May 1944 when they suspected the presence of hidden Allies and partisans (438). Another local from Filettino also testified that Graziani made sure that the village was fed during the war by providing cows and other goods to ensure survival (440).

General Angelo Cerica, a soldier who had fought with Badoglio's army and postwar Senate member of the Christian Democratic Party, fervently denied Graziani's involvement in anti-partisan atrocities. He evocatively ended his testimony with the following statement:



The events of 1943 separated us. I followed a road that has a whole world behind it. Marshal Graziani followed another road, which has another world. We are enemies. But I am an old soldier, and here I have to protest against all the infamies of people who were not on the front line and who have tried to throw mud on a great soldier who honoured the country for so many years. [*followed by impromptu applause from the public in the courtroom*] (Processo Graziani 1950b, 119)

Despite being enemies between 1943 and 1945, Cerica defended Graziani's actions through patriotic discourse and the high esteem he held for the General's prior career in the colonies. Whenever there was praise for Graziani, the public's 'impromptu applause' was a common occurrence throughout the trial, as many sympathisers were present. The officers mentioned above who defended Graziani (Musco, Delfini, Cerica) had all fought on opposing sides to him during the civil war, but they had fought under the same flag during the *ventennio*. They had all participated in Fascist Italy's colonial wars, which unanimously dictated their continued support for Graziani at the trial.

The attention given to Graziani's military popularity prior to 1943 crucially overrode political divisions between left and right. As he had spent most of his career abroad, it was easy for him to ideologically distance himself from the Fascist regime. He did this by appealing to the unifying force of patriotism that had been tirelessly bestowed upon the population since the Risorgimento in attempts to 'make Italians'.<sup>16</sup> He tried to convince the court that:

I am a soldier serving the Fatherland. Be it in a democratic government, be it in a Fascist government, be it in any other government, because a soldier serves the Fatherland: and the Fatherland is personified by any government, and a soldier doesn't involve themselves in politics. A soldier marches where he is commanded in the interest of the Fatherland. (Processo Graziani 1950a, 33)

The deflection of any responsibility is especially evident in the last line: *a soldier marches where he is commanded*. The justification of 'just following orders' was a potent weapon long used by soldiers to legitimise their actions in wartime, becoming so common to defend Holocaust crimes during the Nuremberg trials that it became known as the 'Nuremberg defence' (Telford 1970). Discourses like these served to depoliticise Graziani's persona by representing a military career in service of the homeland: a life in the service of colonial expansionism.

### **'Una vita per l'Italia':<sup>17</sup> colonial nostalgia and 'heroic charisma'**

Graziani dedicated his 30-hour defence to a self-laudatory account of his colonial career which he approached in the same manner as his previous propaganda speeches under Fascism. In highlighting what he perceived as the most important aspect of his career, he arrogantly sought to control the narrative: 'I will now come to the topic of the occupation of African territories; I strongly ask that my description not be interrupted' (Processo Graziani 1950a, 35). This announcement was followed by shouts of 'Viva Graziani' (35); journalists reported that the cheers were especially loud 'from the general public who still remember his exploits during the Abyssinian campaign' (*The Times*, 12 October 1948, p. 3). Graziani maintained that his life had been one of patriotic sacrifice as he devoted himself entirely to the Italian colonial cause, one which was devoid of the personal comforts enjoyed by a civilian life in the metropolis:

From the day I enlisted, in 1902, to 1945, I served my country continuously, on the battlefields, in the middle of deserts, in the bush, far from all comforts, all the bad habits of the metropolis, disinterested in family life, giving up on people and having children. (Processo Graziani 1950a, 38)

In this statement, Graziani combined military patriotism with the exoticisation of the African landscape as he talked the court through romanticised descriptions of his battles, where he had instead unleashed unbridled terror. The only admission Graziani made throughout the trial was that 'I am addicted to colonial expansion' (Processo Graziani 1950a, 38), yearning for Italy's colonial past with comments such as 'if only we returned to Somalia now, if only I returned to Somalia' (48). Graziani's erratic behaviour became evident while talking about 'his Abyssinian heyday ... he was limp and perspiring when he finished, so excited that even his own counsel had to calm him' (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 October 1948, p. 5).

Graziani's defence was cleverly laced with colonial nostalgia, which was reproduced in written form in his autobiography, *A Life for Italy: I Defended the Fatherland*, published a few months earlier (Graziani 1948). In interplay between self-preservation and self-promotion, Graziani drew frequent attention to the book and his other authored works.<sup>18</sup> Five minutes into his self-defence, he arrogantly professed that 'now when life is bitter, one can remedy it by recalling my autobiography ... which the jury and journalists would have read' (Processo Graziani 1950a, 19). In a cunningly orchestrated pre-emptive move, Graziani had spent the two years awaiting trial writing *A Life for Italy* and *Libya Redeemed: History of Thirty Years of Italian Passion in Africa* (1948).<sup>19</sup> The titles of the bestselling books teemed with nationalism and nostalgia for a nation of public readers, many of whom also felt the loss and trauma of the end of the Italian empire (Labanca 2015, 141; Pes 2014, 427).

The autobiography, in particular, reflected the essence of his defence as it spanned his life and career in the 1920s and 1930s. While there was little mention of Fascism, he painted himself as a proud colonialist from the outset as he described growing up:

Those were the years of African colonial endeavours, culminating in Adua, which reverberated within me to such an extent that they produced fits of anguish and spurts of joy that left me distraught, in the grip of meditations and non-superficial exaltations. I began to dream of being able to try my hand as a soldier in the lands of Africa one day; I was thrilled by the thought of being in that environment, by that exclusive love of arms that then gripped my life, like a sign of destiny. (Graziani 1948, 14)

Graziani's excessive passion for firearms and the exoticised colonial landscape highlights that he had become consumed by his old colonial propaganda and popular persona, now unable to distinguish between myth and reality. The book's core detailed his colonial career as 'the most fortunate and important period of my life' (Processo Graziani 1950a, 86). In the book and the trial, he attempted to distance himself from colonial violence and instead convince people of his role in Italy's self-proclaimed 'civilising' mission: 'Giving life to road construction, to an infinity of public works of agricultural and industrial rehabilitation, to the splendour and astonishment of Anglo-American armies in 1940–1941' (38). By portraying his actions as necessary for the 'progress' of society, Graziani sought to deflect criticism and exploit the continuation of Italian imperial thought after colonialism.

Although Graziani's colonial conduct was not the primary focus of the investigation, it was raised on a few occasions in attempts to shed light on the defendant's personality, behaviour and reputation. First, the presiding head of the court questioned Graziani's conduct in Libya by mentioning 'hearsay that Libyans, previously very pleased with the

civilising mission completed by Italy, started to hate Italy – this is because of reports of the terroristic measures enacted by Graziani in 1931–32’ (Processo Graziani 1950a, 48). The reported terroristic measures were concentration camps in the Cyrenaica region, to which Graziani simply responded that they had been a necessary measure planned by his superior Badoglio and enacted by him to ‘pacify’ the population.

A Jewish business owner from Benghazi, Giacomo Agiman, testified to ‘a regime of terror and injustice [under Graziani], with frequent hangings and concentration camps where more than 60,000 people lost their lives due to scurvy, bad nutrition, etc.’ (Processo Graziani 1950b, 514). The debate that ensued ruminated over whether responsibility should lie with the Fascist regime or Graziani himself. Ex-colonial general Castriota, however, argued that, prior to Graziani, the previous 13 governors had failed to gain control of Cyrenaica, resulting in ‘orders from Rome to use a stronger system’ (99). He assured the court that under Graziani:

The camps were well equipped, there were doctors ... some of the population wanted to remain because they lived better. They had everything they needed, we prioritised the education of children who weren’t abandoned but instead educated, we even built mosques for them. (Processo Graziani 1950b, 100)

Castriota’s testimony justified not only Graziani’s actions in Libya, but also those of the ‘civilising’ mission that had long served as a justification for European colonialism on the African continent. This myth had been used as a powerful tool of Christian rhetoric since the Middle Ages and continued to be used as such in postcolonial Italy.

The second example deemed by the court as ‘colonial excesses’ were the mass violent reprisals against up to 20,000 Ethiopians following Graziani’s attempted assassination during a public ceremony in Addis Ababa on 19 February 1937 (Processo Graziani 1950a, 48).<sup>20</sup> His response was highly defensive: only Mussolini’s Blackshirts could have been responsible for the massacres due to his state of ill health from wounds after the attack – he was in hospital with a high fever, pneumonia and shrapnel wounds. He emphasised the excuse of being too ill to have ordered the atrocities:

I was told that the Fascists intended to embark on retaliatory actions because there was fear of an uprising in the city. Even in the haze of fever, Mr President, I did not order this, I did not say: make a massacre. Instead, I told them: take care, do not commit excesses. (Processo Graziani 1950a, 65–66)

Despite blaming the Blackshirts, Graziani still justified the violence through the assertion that Italians feared a mass uprising after his attempted assassination. General Olivieri, who had been in Addis Ababa at the time, supported Graziani’s assertions and sought to diminish accusations of the burning of entire neighbourhoods by stating that ‘actions were not directed against people, but infrastructure’ (Processo Graziani 1950b, 837).

After a quick deliberation, the inquests into Graziani’s colonial conduct in Libya and Ethiopia were rapidly dropped. The instances raised at the trial only appeared to serve as isolated examples through which to shake his defence. As the examples referred to brutality that took place years after the Italian initiation of both conflicts in Libya and Ethiopia, the colonial wars themselves were not questioned. This was a missed opportunity for any serious critical reflection on colonial expansionism and de-legitimation of popular beliefs surrounding Italy’s colonial past.

Italian newspaper accounts – in both left- and right-wing papers – remained entirely pre-occupied with Graziani’s main charge of anti-partisanism rather than his colonial crimes.

The front pages of *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Messaggero* and *L'Unità* largely ignored the topic other than occasionally ridiculing Graziani's 'endless tales of his colonial ventures' (*Corriere della Sera*, 12 October 1948, p. 1). This silence was likely reflective of national anxiety regarding the official loss of the colonies a year earlier. The mainstream North American press paid some attention to Graziani's colonial crimes albeit on a superficial level. *The New York Herald Tribune* described Graziani as 'Italy's cruellest general' (17 October 1938, p. 3) and *The Washington Post* noted 'his responsibility for the deaths of thousands of natives in Ethiopia and Libya' (14 October 1938, p. 5). The pro-imperial sentiment of the British press, however, was reflected in their hesitation to comment on Graziani's colonial career. Western reports tended to reuse celebratory Fascist sobriquets long used to describe Graziani – for example, 'Mussolini's empire builder' (*Toronto Daily Star*, 8 July 1948, p. 1) and 'the Lion of Africa' (*New York Times*, 12 October 1948, p. 3) – in service of journalistic sensationalism for a white middle-class readership when colonial thought still pervaded the West.

The only US papers to provide a detailed denunciation of Graziani's colonial conduct and the indictment itself were the African American press. Journalist A.M. Wendell Mallett from the *New York Amsterdam News* wrote:

[T]he unfortunate wretch is being tried for crimes committed in Europe ... there is something strange about the trial of Graziani which should indicate to non-Europeans the real nature of the white man's twisted concept of justice and decency ... [He] is being tried in Italy for crimes committed years after the atrocities, which, under his direct orders, were visited upon thousands of helpless people in Ethiopia. (*New York Amsterdam News*, 16 October 1948, p. 11)

In a public display of anticolonial Pan-African solidarity, the author delineated what was concealed in plain view.<sup>21</sup> That which Mallett deemed reprehensible and problematic was instead left largely unquestioned by other Western observers.

### Verdict and aftermath

After months of deliberation, the Supreme Court declared itself incompetent in making military judgements in February 1949 (Processo Graziani 1950c, 1425). Graziani's case was turned over to a military tribunal where the old general was likely to be treated sympathetically among his old comrades. One year later, in February 1950, the trial reopened in a military court. This time, Graziani looked wearier, wearing his military uniform decorated with rows of ribbons, despite having been stripped of his rank. On 2 May 1950, the court declared him:

Guilty of the offence of military collaboration with the Germans after 8 September 1943 with a reduced sentence for serious injuries sustained and acts of valour and for the mitigating circumstance of having acted for reasons of moral and social value. The court sentences him to 19 years' imprisonment, of which 13 years and 8 months are remitted. (Processo Graziani 1950c, 1425)

It remained unclear what the acts of 'moral and social value' that granted Graziani a heavily reduced sentence were, but he was declared innocent of his leading role in the anti-partisan war, which was attributed to 'units that operated autonomously from him' (Processo Graziani 1950c, 1425). After four months, the conviction was overturned in a legal loophole: Graziani could not be found guilty of Nazi collaborationism because the Italian government had not formally declared war on Nazi Germany until October, after Graziani

had adhered to the RSI in September 1943 (Algardi 1973, 141).<sup>22</sup> The outcome of Graziani's trial was similar to that relating to many other important military figures, who received light, if any, judicial treatment for the countless list of atrocities committed globally before and during the Second World War.

Graziani's poor health meant that, in the four months between sentencing and acquittal, he was held in a military hospital and never saw the inside of a prison cell. On 30 August 1950, he left hospital and went home a free man (Mayda 1992, 289). Over the next few years, he embraced his continued popularity among the political far right, becoming the honorary president of the MSI in March 1953. Two years later, he died from a stomach ulcer at the age of 72.

### Conclusion: legacy

A highly paradoxical image of Graziani emerged from the trial. Despite his acquittal, his reputation as a fervent Fascist who had a hand in Nazi-led atrocities would persist among antifascists for decades. For many Italians, however, Graziani's absolution distanced him from atrocities committed during the Second World War and from association with the Fascist regime. As his popular persona as Italy's colonial hero was never seriously scrutinised at the trial, it was sustained and left unscathed. The unwillingness to critically engage with Graziani's colonial past in this crucial transitional period had grave repercussions for further assessments of the historical truth. This failure had enduring implications for the formation of the popular memory of Italian colonialism for future generations, as is evident in recent events.

In 2012, over 60 years after the trial, a monument to Graziani, regionally funded to the tune of €127,000, was constructed in his home town of Affile near Rome. While the domestic debate caused by the monument mobilised antifascists in their outrage over the commemoration of a *repubblicano*, dedication to the anticolonial cause remained secondary. In 2017, the neofascist mayor, Ercole Viri, who had been responsible for initiating the monument, went on trial under the Scelba Law of 1952, which criminalised public Fascist apologetics. The exponents of the monument were legally liable because the monument openly celebrated 'Graziani, a primary figure who supported the Republic of Salò' (Procura della Repubblica 2017, 28). In an uncanny reiteration of the 1948 trial, Graziani's legacy was being retried through his commemoration for his crimes under Salò. His colonial crimes, however, remained marginal and undeserving of legal inquiry. In 2017, Viri was found guilty of Fascist apologetics and sentenced to eight months in prison. In 2020, the sentence was annulled and he was acquitted due to lack of evidence in attributing responsibility. Between 1945 and the present, the echoes of Graziani's postwar trial have been actively reverberating in what continues to be celebrated, problematised and ignored in contemporary Italy.

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### Notes

1. All quotations are translated by the author.
2. From 1930 onwards, Graziani, operating under his superior, Pietro Badoglio, became responsible for the war against the Libyan anticolonial resistance movement, resulting in the creation of concentration camps to separate the local population from resistance groups (see Rochat 1973).
3. Throughout the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, Graziani and Badoglio were granted maximum freedom by Mussolini for the implementation of poison gases which killed countless Ethiopian civilians (see Del Boca 1979).

4. When Italy entered the Second World War, Graziani initially headed the North African campaign against the Allies in Libya in September 1940. Poor planning and lack of resources led to immense Italian losses, Graziani's quick resignation (in February 1941) and Mussolini's failed attempt to have him court-martialled for his poor performance (see Del Boca 2002). Despite this, state censorship surrounded the military failure to keep support for the war effort; this preserved Graziani's positive reputation and enabled the reutilisation of his heroic persona during the RSI.
5. 'The Missing Italian Nuremberg' is taken directly from the title of historian Michele Battini's monograph (2007).
6. See [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocitycrimes/Doc.2\\_Charter%20of%20IMT%201945.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocitycrimes/Doc.2_Charter%20of%20IMT%201945.pdf). All of the defendants noted above were sentenced to death at the IMT for 'planning, initiating and waging aggressive war during World War II'; this included crimes of the Holocaust, described as 'murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation on political, racial, or religious grounds'. The term *genocide*, however, was first used to describe the Holocaust in the later NMT trials.
7. In May 1936, Graziani was appointed viceroy of Italian East Africa and the highest Italian colonial representative in Africa. After the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, struggle for Italian colonial control over Ethiopia led to Graziani's ordering of mass atrocities (torture, deportations, summary executions) to quell Ethiopian anticolonial resistance. The worsening of atrocities following Graziani's attempted assassination in February 1937 led to his replacement in December (see Campbell 2017).
8. Battini's expression 'Italian Nuremberg' and his monograph do not refer directly to Italian Fascist crimes but more generally to 'the lack of global procedure against those responsible for the system of Nazi occupation in Italy' (2007, 17).
9. The Ardeatine Caves massacre refers to the mass killing of 335 civilians on 24 March 1944 in response to a bomb planted by Italian partisans that killed 42 German policemen in Rome's city centre the day before. In a cold-blooded reprisal, occupying German forces rounded up the victims (political prisoners, Jews and civilians aged from 15 to 75 years) and shot them in the isolated Ardeatine Caves on the outskirts of Rome.
10. Telegrams of 15 February 1946 and 12 January 1946, War Office records (WO).
11. Despite Mussolini's formal declaration of the Fascist empire in 1936 following the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, local armed resistance to Italian colonialism in Libya and Ethiopia continued to hinder Italian control of the territories right up until the Second World War. By 1941, British forces on the North African front had beaten Italy militarily in North and East Africa, foreshadowing the 1947 treaty that stipulated the dissolution of the Italian empire (with the exception of Italian Somaliland, which became a UN protectorate under Italian administration until 1960).
12. By June 1946, Graziani's health had grown fragile and he was treated for a serious case of appendicitis. He was transferred to a private clinic in Naples and then to a military hospital in Rome where he was in and out of care until his trial (see Mayda 1992, 271–274).
13. 'Fascism on Trial' is a quote taken directly from the title of journalist Joseph G. Harrison's newspaper article for *The Christian Science Monitor* (12 October 1948).
14. Prearo said that 'the Marshal was in command of German troops ... [D]uring round-ups there were episodes against civilians and partisans'.
15. Others also claimed that Graziani showed mercy by saving them from deportation. General Paladino, for example, testified that he contacted Graziani when his family was to be deported to a concentration camp due to partisan activity, to which Graziani responded by incorporating him into the RSI (Processo Graziani 1950b, 759).
16. In Massimo d'Azeglio's 1867 memoirs, the Italian statesman famously wrote: '[W]e have made Italy, now we must make Italians (see Malia Hom 2013).
17. *Una vita per l'Italia: Ho difeso la Patria (A Life for Italy: I Served the Fatherland)* is the title of Graziani's unapologetic autobiography published the year of the trial (1948).
18. Graziani wrote a number of books during the Fascist *ventennio* which justified his military actions in Libya and Ethiopia. They included *Cirenaica Pacificata (Cirenaica Pacified; 1932)*, *Verso il Fezzan (Towards Fezzan; 1934)* and *Il Front Sud (The Southern Front; 1938)*.
19. Graziani wrote a third book, *Africa Settentrionale 1940–41 (Northern Africa 1940–41)*, also published in 1948. It focused on the defence of his poor military performance during the North African campaign against the Allies.
20. In the days, weeks and months after the attack, Fascist squads, Italian soldiers and civilians tortured and slaughtered up to 20,000 men, women and children across Ethiopia in unimaginable acts suppressed by national information outlets. These acts included a three-day inferno in Addis Ababa, which ranged from rape and burning to lynching and disembowelment, and the attempted elimination of the Amharan nobility through deportation and massacres in the following months (Campbell 2017, 308).
21. In 1935, African American communities rallied against the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in unprecedented displays of Pan-African solidarity for Africa's oldest independent nation. Historians such as William R. Scott (1978) and J.H. Meriwether (2002) have found that 20,000 people took to the streets of Harlem, Detroit and

Chicago to protest against Italian colonial aggression in Ethiopia and some volunteered to join Ethiopian defence forces.

22. The verdict caused so much controversy that it precipitated the early retirement of the president of Rome's military court, Emanuele Beraudo di Pralormo. General Beraudo was a military figure from a noble family who fought in Italian Africa and then fought against the RSI for the Royal Italian Army during the Second World War. Heavy pressure during Graziani's trial, and gross criticism of his verdict, led to the end of his military career in 1950 (see Beraudo di Pralormo 2007, 76–97).

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### Italian summary

Questo articolo utilizza i processi di Rodolfo Graziani per esaminare questioni legati alla giustizia di transizione e alla formazione della memoria collettiva del fascismo e del colonialismo italiano dopo il 1945. Durante il ventennio fascista, il regime aveva promosso la figura di Graziani come 'eroe' coloniale, nonostante il suo ruolo di primo piano nelle misure di genocidio durante le guerre coloniali in Libia ed Etiopia. La sua posizione di Ministro della Difesa nella Repubblica di Salò ne minacciò la reputazione eroica, poiché collaborò con i comandanti nazisti e si rese responsabile di atrocità contro i civili italiani. Dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale, Graziani fu processato per collaborazionismo nazista presso la Corte di Cassazione nel 1948, ma la sua condotta coloniale rimase indiscussa. Contrariamente ai processi di Norimberga nella Germania post-nazista, pochi italiani furono processati per crimini di guerra. Questa indagine storica analizza il procedimento legale, la rappresentazione transnazionale e l'esito dei processi a Rodolfo Graziani come caso-studio emblematico per esplorare le iniziative di defascistizzazione e decolonizzazione e i loro limiti nell'Italia postfascista e postcoloniale.



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