

"If Only I Were That Warrior"

George De Stefano (March 05, 2014)



Valerio Ciriaci, a young filmmaker from Rome now living in New York, is making a documentary which focuses on Italy's occupation of Ethiopia

"The past is never dead. It's not even past," wrote William Faulkner in *Requiem for a Nun*. The author's famous observation fits one of the most ignominious events in recent Italian history – the decision to honor a Fascist war criminal with a mausoleum and park, built with taxpayers' money.

In 2012, the right-wing administration of Affile, a village east of Rome, dedicated the memorial to Rodolfo Graziani, a general who was known as the "Butcher of Ethiopia" for the war crimes he committed while leading the military campaigns of the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.

In 1935, Mussolini sent Graziani to invade Ethiopia. The Italian troops, with their superior weaponry and use of mustard gas, defeated Ethiopia's army in less than a year. Italy's dictator made Graziani



the Viceroy of Italian East Africa, which comprised conquered territories in Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia. After Ethiopian resistance fighters tried to assassinate Graziani in 1937, the general ordered a swift and ferocious reprisal against civilian populations. Thousands of Ethiopians subsequently were massacred or imprisoned.

But Graziani's Ethiopian atrocities weren't the first he committed on the continent. In the 1920s, while leading Italian forces in Libya, he brutally suppressed an anti-colonial uprising, imprisoning and killing thousands of Libyans, earning him the nickname "the Butcher of Fezzan."

After Mussolini's dictatorship fell in 1943, Graziani, still loyal to il Duce, became the minister of war of the Italian Social Republic, the rump Fascist government set up by the Germans in Salò, and, along with Nazi troops, fought the Allied forces in Italy. After the war an Italian court sentenced Graziani to 19 years in prison for collaborating with the Nazis, but he received a suspended sentence that was later commuted because his attorneys convinced a court that Graziani had "acted under orders." His crimes in Africa went entirely unpunished.

Unpunished, but not forgotten. Valerio Ciriaci, a young filmmaker from Rome now living in New York, is making a documentary, *If Only I Were That Warrior*, which focuses on Italy's occupation of Ethiopia. Ciriaci, and producer Isaak Liptzin of the independent production company Awen Films, have launched a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds to complete the film. Donations will help cover expenses such as airfare, equipment rental, and interpretation. The campaign, which began in February, ends March 21.

I recently interviewed Ciriaci about *If Only I Were That Warrior*. The following is an edited version of our conversation.

Why did you decide to make this film? I know that the monument to Graziani in Italy inspired it. But why was it important for you to address this issue, in a documentary?

I felt it was important to make a film that could take an unprecedented look at the brutality of the Fascist invasion in Ethiopia. Though Italy's uncomfortable relationship with its colonial past has been challenged by some historians and intellectuals, the events that took place during Mussolini's campaigns in Africa never became part of a widespread public consciousness. The lack of coverage in the media, in conjunction with the nostalgic sentiments of those who took part in the invasion, led to imprecise and mythologized representations of the occupation of Ethiopia. And the monument to Graziani proved that the issue is very urgent.

The film is set in Ethiopia, Italy, New York and Dallas. Can you talk a bit about what each place represents in the film, and what can viewers expect to see in those geographic segments?

The four places correspond to the four main characters we follow in this journey. They represent four different communities: Italians in Ethiopia, Ethiopians in Italy, and Italians and Ethiopians in the United States. Each of these communities helped us tell a part of this history: the propaganda that led Italians to support the invasion, the war crimes committed during the occupation in Ethiopia, the subsequent attempts of revisionism in Italy, and the events surrounding the construction of the monument to Graziani. Our viewers will see different landscapes and hear different languages, but they will also recognize a common narrative: these communities abroad formed as people left their native countries in search of better lives. We find stories of integration and stories of isolation, the result of different cultures brought together by the currents of history.

What kinds of reactions have you gotten to this project, from both Ethiopians and Italians? I would imagine Ethiopians are more aware of this history than Italians.

Yes. Especially the Ethiopian community in the U.S., which has been incredibly supportive of our work since the beginning. In fact they were the most active in opposing the monument to Graziani,



and organized protests all around the world. In Italy the issue of the Ethiopian occupation is not discussed much, but we have received support from members of anti-Fascist organizations such as ANPI (National Association of the Italian Partisans). In Affile itself there were mixed reactions — some people were suspicious of yet another film crew coming to the town attracted by the monument, but others welcomed our presence and appreciated our desire to learn more about their side of the story.

What is the contemporary relevance of this story? Why is it important for people to know about what Italy did in Ethiopia?

The Italian-Ethiopian conflict still has repercussions today. It became evident when the monument to Graziani provoked such strong reactions all around the world. And, unexpectedly perhaps for those who chose to build it, the monument has brought the subject of Italian colonialism back into the press and into a wider public conversation. Our film aims to become a part of this conversation, seizing this unique opportunity to clarify the facts of the past and dispel the myths accumulated over decades of revisionism. We believe that this film can help keep alive the memory of Fascist war crimes, and in so doing be an important reminder that we have to work to defend our democratic values from the existential threat posed by xenophobic and militaristic ideals.

Visit Awen Films' [Kickstarter page](#) [2] to learn about the fundraising campaign and to make donations. For more information: [If Only I Were That Warrior](#) [3]

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