

# Revealed: Italy's savage war crimes

EPOCA/MICHAEL PALUMBO

The Allied powers will pursue these wicked men to the uttermost ends of the earth and will deliver them to their accusers so that justice may be done—Winston Churchill on war crimes, 12 October 1943.

**WAR CRIMES?** What are war crimes? Ours? Don't be ridiculous! Such was the reaction of most Italians last week when told of newly opened United Nations archives containing the names of 1,200 of their countrymen who stand accused of multiple atrocities in Yugoslavia, Greece, Albania, Libya and Abyssinia.

Capital offences committed by these high-ranking military men, and listed in lurid detail, are of a magnitude for which German and Japanese war leaders had to answer to Allied justice with their lives or long terms of imprisonment—life in the case of Rudolph Hess, Hitler's deputy. Yet, for reasons of high policy, the Italian war criminals escaped. The charges were secretly suppressed, notably on the insistence of Winston Churchill.

Now, after four decades, they have risen like Banquo's ghost to haunt a peace-loving Italy which believed it had long since lived down its Fascist past.

The prime culprit, Benito Mussolini, was executed, shot out of hand by Communist partisans on 28 April 1945 before the Allies could reach him. But his 1,199 brutal accomplices were never brought to trial. Not one Italian spent a single day in prison for war crimes.

The UN archives, now opened for scholarly inspection, were held under seal L/UNWCC, standing for UN War Crimes Commission, whose inquiries resulted in 10 hangings of Nazi leaders after four others cheated the gallows by suicide. They highlighted not only the near incredible savagery of the Italian Supreme Command in conquered territories but—even more shock-

**WILLIAM SCOBIE** in Rome finds a mood of defiance as newly opened UN archives unveil the barbarism of the Fascists.

ing to contemporary feelings—the callous inhumanity of 'the good soldier Gino', from Calabria, Tuscany or Milan. Conscripts or regular soldiers, they carried Mussolini's trail of conquest and genocide from one invaded country to another. Villages were burnt, farm stock slaughtered, civilians massacred wholesale, often with horribly painful poison gases. Little of this barbarism had any military pretence. None of it was punished.

The reason why it is spelt out in the UN archives, Mussolini was overthrown by his own grand Fascist Council when the Allies landed in Sicily in July 1943. King Victor Emmanuel appointed as his successor Marshal Badoglio, then Chief of the General Staff. To secure Italy's surrender and make her change sides amnesty was granted for the king, who had

backed Fascism for 21 years—and for his military chiefs. But some things should not be committed to paper—are even better unsaid. Badoglio was sent to Malta, where the Allies gave him a ceremonial reception. General Eisenhower put the terms of the agreement to him, with his 'word as a soldier' that the marshal and his comrades-in-arms would have no regrets about the 'big switch'. 'Have faith, and sign,' said Ike.

A new terminology was quickly forged: the Allies became 'liberators', the Germans 'invaders', the surrender an 'honourable capitulation'. The king's pains of Fascist war criminals—Badoglio was to become number one on the UN list—were recognised as 'co-belligerents'. A new 'Royal Government of Italy' was off to a flying start.

The past dropped down the memory hole as if it never happened, says Professor Angelo del Boca, the leading authority on Italy's imperialist record. The Allies put it out of mind, so why should not the Italians, who were nearly all for Mussolini until his luck changed.

Del Boca, a history tutor at Turin, wrote a seven-volume work on the subject which led to an attempt by the army to prosecute him for 'vilifying the Italian soldier'. 'Nobody wanted to know,' says del Boca. 'Thus last week's news



Mussolini and Roatto, called the 'Black Beast'.



Haunted by the noose: Abyssinians executed indiscriminately by Italians in 1936.

from London that the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, is to act on UN evidence about war criminals who found refuge in Britain has no echo here. 'Who knows where this sort of witch-hunt may lead,' demanded a radical MP. 'In wartime, our men obeyed orders—didn't you?'

The young, reared on films glorifying the Italian resistance, are mostly incredulous, a few ashamed. Old hands are defiant. A retired lawyer, who served as a lieutenant in Libya, said: 'We were all Fascists. Italy was winning her place in the sun, and we came home as heroes. After all, the British Empire wasn't won with rosewater and kid gloves.'

Some of the worst atrocities were committed after Musso-

lini, in concert with Hitler, invaded his helpless neighbour, Yugoslavia, in 1941, in the hope of adding the magnificent Adriatic coast to her booty.

An Italian army of 700,000 was unable to get the better of Tito's guerrillas so General Roatto, known to his men as the 'Black Beast', ordered wholesale reprisals against the 'subhuman bandits' and the civilians behind them.

For every Italian killed, first 26 hostages were shot, then 50, finally 100, as soldiers' letters in the UN files record. An example: 'Yesterday I led an execution squad. We shot 30 prisoners. Including the Communist band leader, in Croatia. The bandits attacked, so we destroyed a whole village in reprisal. We killed entire families. Last week we

executed another 180 prisoners without trial. I have been congratulated by my officer.'

In one small village, say the UN archives, 878 people were slaughtered; then, another 2,858 people were caught in a three-day sweep. About 200 concentration camps were created in Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania.

And hostages were drawn from them as needed. Altogether, in a territory annexed by Italy, 67,230 people died out of a population of 360,000. Post-war demands for retribution were brushed aside by the Allies.

It is known that Mussolini's pre-war conquest of Abyssinia was achieved by ruthless means, but only now is the full extent of the horrors inflicted on a backward, if Christianised, black empire unveiled.

Half-a-million troops, backed by heavy artillery and flights of bombers, were launched against tribesmen, often armed with bows and arrows. When the advance was checked, Marshal Badoglio and General Graziani used mustard gas.

Although Addis Ababa surrendered without a fight, captured chiefs were decapitated, hanged in rows or drowned with stones tied to their necks. Italian officers would pose for pictures with the bodies of their victims. From the monastery of Debra Libano, 500 monks and their young pupils were taken into a church and massacred. Coptic Archbishop Petros was publicly executed. The nobles were deported to Italy.

An attempt on Graziani's life brought orders to put the capital to the torch and the sword. For three days the 'Good Soldier Gino' butchered thousands of innocents. Bodies were carted off by army lorries each night. It was estimated that, altogether, about 300,000 Abyssinians died to give Italy her place in the sun.

Later on, del Boca pointed out, all these 'empire builders' fell into British hands. Military politesse prevailed. Victor Emmanuel, Mussolini's partner-in-crime, remained on the throne. If the Allies went to extremes to support the men in power despite their past, it was because they believed, at this time, that tried-and-true Fascists were more reliable anti-Communist than anti-Fascist politicians who had spent long years in exile.

Sir Noel Charles, British High Commissioner, wrote in a despatch to the Foreign Office: 'Many war criminals have rendered exemplary service to the Allies. To arrest such men now would shock the administration and provoke bitter protests. Admiral Ellery Stone, his US colleague, backed him up. He warned Washington of 'the grave effects war crimes trials would have on American public opinion' while the US was preparing to send hundreds of millions of dollars to aid Italy.

Churchill's words, 'has already replaced the Soviet foe. Given the enormous Muscovite advance into the centre of Europe, Italy could turn red overnight. There is nothing between the king, with the petraists who have rallied around him, and rampant Bolshevism. It is vital to build up their position.' The first free elections in Italy for 23 years lay ahead and 'all forces should be rallied around the lawful Government'.

It was at this time that Mussolini was captured by partisans while trying to escape to Switzerland. After his death (shot on the spot, then strung dead down, with his mistress Clara Petacci, at a Milan petrol station while mobs 'spat' at them), Churchill's comment was: 'At least the world has been spared an Italian Nuremberg.'

Subsequent efforts to extradite the guilty men ran into increasing obstruction. Nations claiming retribution were reproved by the Foreign Office: 'There are limits in respect to the treatment of persons who came over to our side and who today occupy responsible positions.'

What of the remaining guilty leaders? Mussolini's victor in conquered Abyssinia, the Duke of Aosta, surrendered quietly to the British army. He was received with military honours, dined with his captors and was escorted to dignified retirement in Kenya.

The Duke, Generalissimo, was a cousin of the King. General Roatto was arrested by overzealous compatriots. He was spirited away with the aid of his guards, to the general relief. Marshal Graziani (number two on the UN list), who stayed with Mussolini to the last, was flown by the British to Algeria.

In 1948, well down in Yugoslavia's long list of war criminals, there was discovered the name, Oberleutnant Kurt Waldheim, a liaison officer between the Italians and the Germans. When apprised of the last years of his circumstances, Waldheim protested: 'It is the very first time I hear such things happen.' There are many more, inglorious Waldheims in Italy today.