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Forging an Italian hero? The late commemoration of Amedeo Guillet (1909–2010)

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, Amedeo Guillet (1909–2010) has been turned into a public and military hero. His exploits as a guerrilla leader in Italian East Africa in 1941 have been exaggerated to forge a narrative of an honourable resistance against overwhelming odds. Thereby, Guillet has been showcased as a romanticized colonial explorer who was an apolitical and timeless Italian officer. He has been compared to Lawrence of Arabia in order to raise his international visibility, while his genuine Italian brand is perpetuated domestically. By elevating him to an official role model, the Italian Army has gained a focal point for military heroism that was also acceptable in the public memory as the embodiment of a ‘glorious’ defeat narrative.

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Italy is not renowned for its military heroes. The armed forces are frequently demeaned, while their history receives little serious research. Still, myths of war and heroic figures have been cornerstones of national identities across the world. In Europe, soldiers could attain such a status, as long as victory (or defeat) was honorable and continued the legacy of the chivalric ethos.¹ In fact, victory on the battlefield was no precondition for mythological significance: the Spartans’ struggle at Thermopylae and other ‘last stands’ provided heroic tales of ‘glorious defeats’.² In Italy, Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–82) was the archetype of a modern hero. As a successful military leader, he failed as a politician, but has remained a powerful mythical figure.³ Italy’s colonial endeavors stimulated the creation of new heroes – even if they died on the battlefield: Major Pietro Toselli’s stand at Amba Alagi (1895) or Lieutenant Colonel Tommaso De Cristoforis’ at Dogali (1887) were enshrined as glorious defeats in the public and military memory.⁴ Also in Britain and Germany, romantic colonial beliefs spurred the promotion of T. E. Lawrence (1888–1935) and Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck (1870–1964) into national heroes. Even in the age of industrialized mass armies and anonymous slaughter in the twentieth century, the individual combatant has remained an important symbol in the military realm.⁵ While the First World War commemoration placed an emphasis on the Unknown Soldier, the conflict also gave birth to the myth surrounding Enrico Toti, a one-legged Bersagliere volunteer who was killed in 1916.⁶ In regards to the Second World War, today’s Italian Army has listed six individuals as official role models. Among them is Amedeo Guillet (1909–2010), who is presented as a dashing cavalry officer, guerrilla leader in Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana, or AOI) in 1941, and loyal diplomat of the First

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Republic after the war.⁷ Over recent years, more attention has been paid to him. Yet, even the most detailed works were rather uncritical popular histories.⁸ Likewise, none of these works analysed why and how Guillet became a publicly renowned hero and official role model.

Therefore, this article will first investigate Guillet's military career and his guerrilla operations in 1941 – on which his fame was built. Secondly, the way, the protagonists and the methods of his late rediscovery will be examined. The following will argue that his military activities in 1941 were negligible, but the myth of a noble struggle (even under Mussolini's regime) was intertwined with historical interpretations of Italy's colonial past and contemporary conflicts in the Horn of Africa in the 1990s. Guillet has to be placed in line with other Italian colonial heroes, but his portrayal as a gentleman warrior was supplemented by his long peacetime career, which served to classify him as more than a spirited military leader – also in comparison to T. E. Lawrence, Lettow-Vorbeck or Orde Wingate (1902–44), the British expert on irregular warfare who helped organize the Ethiopian rebels in AOI. Thereby, his service in post-war Italy turned him into an acceptable role model beyond the military sphere. At a time when the First Republic was discredited and the past renegotiated, the public memory was receptive to new heroic figures from 'bygone times'.

A role-model cavalry officer

In 1909, Baron Amedeo Guillet d'Albigny was born into a family of Savoyan high aristocracy, where military service to King and *Patria* had a long tradition. His uncle had been a corps commander during the First World War, and subsequently helped his close friend, the Fascist leader Italo Balbo (1896–1940), to professionalize the militia.⁹ Amedeo junior also chose the military profession and aided by his uncle, the aspiring rider served in the Abyssinian War (1935–6) instead of continuing his preparations for the Berlin Olympics. Guillet was wounded and decorated for bravery as commander of an indigenous cavalry unit (the so-called *spahys*). His experiences set the stage for a life-long fascination with Africa and the Arab world.¹⁰ Guillet also fought in the Spanish Civil War. He later denied any ideological fervour, but acknowledged that he had considered a communist victory neither favourable for Spain, nor for Europe.¹¹ Guillet took part in the battles for Santander and Teruel, but from his biographers we learn very little about his time in Spain.¹² Afterwards he was based in Libya and Italian East Africa, where his experiences in commanding and incorporating indigenous forces were needed to suppress an ongoing insurgency. After the Abyssinian War, Italy had established an interconnected Empire in the Horn of Africa – without fully pacifying the territory. Rome had ordered the killing of anyone found with arms, but Guillet followed a different road and offered rebels a pardon if they changed sides or lay down their arms. This meant disobeying orders, but the Duke of Aosta (1898–1942), viceroy, governor-general and a close friend, shielded him and supported the approach. In fact, the Duke ordered him to establish an indigenous light cavalry unit (*Gruppo Bande Amhara a cavallo*). Guillet communicated with his men in Arabic and soon earned the nickname 'Devil Commander'.

The outbreak of the Second World War found the Italian forces in East Africa unprepared. Surrounded and cut off from supplies, the Duke of Aosta faced an unpromising campaign.¹³ After the Italian conquest of British Somaliland (3–19 August 1940), the fortunes turned in late 1940. By overcoming the tenacious Italian resistance at Keren on the Eritrean front in March 1941, the British opened the way to Asmara and Massawa. At

the same time, the Duke of Aosta had surrendered at Amba Alagi in May 1941, while some isolated Italian strongholds continued their static defence against British troops and Abyssinian irregulars until November 1941.¹⁴

Guillet fought on the northern front (today vaguely Eritrea and some northern provinces of Ethiopia) and distinguished himself when his cavalry unit was ordered to cover the Italian retreat towards Agordat in January 1941. Despite the mission's almost suicidal character, Guillet personally led the charge against superior British forces. His close friend, Lieutenant Renato Togni, was posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valor, after commanding an attack with 30 men to secure the regrouping of Guillet's force. The British described it as 'the most gallant affair until now in this war'¹⁵ and buried Togni with military honors.¹⁶ Uncritical scholarship and a lack of primary sources have inflated the numbers, thereby creating a myth of a 1500-man cavalry attack.¹⁷ In fact, Guillet charged with 600 men of his *banda amhara* and Togni's group was even smaller.¹⁸ In sum, the charge bought time for the retreating Italian infantry, but had a rather limited impact on the British forces.¹⁹ Guillet was promoted to Captain after the battles at Keru and Keren in spring 1941, but the days of Italian rule in the Horn were numbered.

Still, some Italian and native troops continued to fight even after the fall of Asmara in April 1941. British reports show that one Italian cell was largely destroyed in November 1941 and there were only some whose remnants made their way to the last stronghold in Gondar.²⁰ Other scattered units continued sporadic acts of sabotage even after the fall of Gondar, but serious scholarship on the scale and intensity is still needed.²¹ Additionally, one must differentiate between political 'underground' movements and actual guerrilla resistance.²² The historian Nicola Labanca judged that these 'handful of men' who were 'considered heroes by the Italians, were in reality fighting a hopeless fight'.²³ Guillet had managed to evade captivity in May and gathered some of his men to form a resistance group – whose actions will be analysed below.

In late October 1941 Guillet dissolved his *banda* and crossed the Red Sea into neutral Yemen, where he befriended the Imam before returning to Italy in September 1943. He deemed the losses in Africa Orientale, Libya and even Stalingrad merely as 'local defeats' and wanted to be parachuted back into Abyssinia.²⁴ Events of 8 September 1943 cancelled these plans, but the new government in the South was interested in his abilities. He joined the intelligence service of the Southern Kingdom as Major and also conducted operations behind German lines – on which we possess very little information. After the war, he oversaw the conditions and possible repatriation of the remaining Italian citizens in Eritrea. Here, he encountered some of his former British enemies who were pleased to welcome him.²⁵ After the monarchy was abolished in a referendum in 1946, Guillet, like other aristocratic officers who still felt bound by their oath to the King, quit the military and joined the diplomatic corps (in 1947).²⁶ His main area of expertise became the Arab world. Until 1975, he served in Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Morocco and India, thereafter spending much of his retirement rather quietly in Ireland.²⁷

Setting the desert on fire?

Guillet's activities in 1941 have led to many mythical descriptions of an all-out guerrilla war. Yet, how much do we actually know about the scale and intensity of these

operations? In fact, it remains difficult to measure, if Guillet's efforts to undermine British control over Eritrea were outstanding. Assessing his (and other) guerrilla campaigns poses several problems. As he relied on indigenous forces, there were no written commands or memoirs; the British files also provide little information. The most detailed accounts, by Segre and O'Kelly, both trusted Guillet's memory on the 'eight month' operations, but left many questions unanswered. Guillet's testimony of 1949 simply spoke of an 'efficient guerrilla activity against the British supply lines, until [it was abandoned due to] strained resources, many wounded and sick'.²⁸ On the other hand, wartime accounts on guerrilla activity in AOI were rare and did not mention Guillet,²⁹ although O'Kelly claimed that 'his fame had spread widely in AOI'.³⁰ Nevertheless, these operations have acquired legendary status over the last two decades.

It appears that Guillet spontaneously started this struggle in late May 1941. Some reports suggest that he had read about the deeds of T. E. Lawrence and Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck during the First World War and was inspired by their approach.³¹ In any regard, he rallied 100 former askari to resume the fight and stripped himself of his Italian identity and uniform.³² In early June, his group attacked four convoys coming from Kassala, 'during which a number of soldiers [were] killed and three lorries' – which had mostly contained tobacco and whisky – were 'looted and and burned out'.³³ According to O'Kelly:

On another occasion, the Asmara to Agordat railway had been sabotaged. The rails had been thrown down a gorge and the train fired upon. Telegraph lines were cut; a road bridge – the Ponte Aosta, near Ghinda, had been damaged by a mine; and lorries traveling towards Massawa had been shot at. The attacks were never pressed. Every time patrols were sent out, the guerrillas disappeared into the hills.³⁴

This description constitutes one of the most detailed operational accounts, but hardly conveys an impression of a ruthless guerrilla war. Indeed, there are seldom specifics on the 'campaign', apart from occasional statements of 'activity' or one detailed account of Guillet evading detention.³⁵ Already by August – after eight weeks – 'his men did not keep camp any more, but were widely dispersed throughout sympathetic villages'.³⁶ After having nearly been killed in an ambush, Guillet decided to hide on an Italian settler's farm,³⁷ where he recovered for the following two months with Kadija, his native love affair and 'warrior bride'. During this period, he would 'go off to find his men' every couple of weeks to conduct operations, such as blowing a crater in a road (which the British readily repaired).³⁸ After a search mission on the farm, led by the British intelligence officer Sigmund Reich, Guillet decided he could not expose his friend (and his men) to further dangers.³⁹ He gathered his troops near Ghinda in 'late October' 1941 and dissolved the group, which at this point was made up of around 30 physically torn down men.⁴⁰ Guillet thanked his 'brothers in arms' and voiced his pride at having remained 'undefeated'.⁴¹ He argued that the operations were not over, but simply suspended, as the war in North Africa was seemingly tipping in the Axis' favour.

In conclusion, Guillet's operations spanned five months from early June until late October 1941 – with a marked decline since August – which leaves two months of noteworthy activity by a maximum of 100 men. The total number of sabotage acts, fire incidents and raids appears to have been around a dozen – hardly the scale of Lawrence's Arab Revolt that involved tens of thousands combatants or Orde Wingate's activities on the Ethiopian side. Therefore, it is more than doubtful that

the guerrilla actions were a 'strong burden'⁴² for the British, and that Guillet was tying down 'several divisions',⁴³ with an 'efficient guerrilla activity'.⁴⁴ In fact, the British War Secretary decided in May 1941 to shift attention and troops to the North African theatre, acting 'on the assumption that no organized resistance continues in the whole area of East Africa south of the Egyptian border', and therefore recommended the 'substitution of police for military units'.⁴⁵ The often-conveyed impression that these guerrilla actions had any significance in summer 1941 – while the British were routed in North Africa (and Greece) and Hitler attacked the Soviet Union – is illusory. Nonetheless, this illusion of a significant *private* guerrilla war still endures, but how it came about has never been investigated.

Forging a hero?

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Guillet's guerrilla operations were largely forgotten. Initially, the Duke of Aosta was used as a heroic symbol, but over the last decades Guillet has become a widely celebrated figure.⁴⁶ As mentioned above, he became an expert on the Arab world, but his prominence remained confined to a certain elite and the small circles of former settlers who cherished the colonial past.⁴⁷ He was mentioned sporadically for his warm relations with the Eritreans or in the context of the cavalry charge at Keru.⁴⁸ However, the early Italian service histories on the East African Campaign (1952, reprinted in 1971) discussed his unit's counter-attack at Keru in one sentence, without his name or much pathos.⁴⁹ Some British accounts were slightly more detailed, but often discredited him as a Fascist.⁵⁰ Guillet also made headlines when he was present during a bloody coup attempt against the Moroccan king in 1971. Afterwards, he gave a phone interview to *La Stampa*. The front-page article cited his guerrilla experience as reason for his calmness during the coup, but neither mentioned Keru, nor elaborated on his experiences. The article wrongly stated that he had been taken prisoner and returned to Kuwait after fleeing a POW camp in India.⁵¹ When he was appointed as envoy to India around the same time, the British Embassy in Rome reported that Ambassador Guillet was 'not known to any' of the staff, and the short curriculum vitae not only misspelt his name, but contained no information on his military career and deeds during the war.⁵² Thus, in contrast to other individuals who had been elevated as war heroes during and immediately after the conflict, Guillet had remained largely unknown.

In order to find out how his fame came about one has to look closer at the doyen of Italian journalism, Indro Montanelli (1909–2001). Montanelli possessed a weakness for cavalry charges and heroic gestures. As a war correspondent, he was crucial in creating the legend of the Polish cavalry charge against German tanks at Krojaty on 1 September 1939. His sensationalist (to say the least) article in the *Corriere della Sera* was picked up by German propaganda to display Polish inferiority and created a long-enduring myth. Yet, it was not only the desperate *beau geste* that Montanelli glorified.⁵³ He applauded collective ones, for example the Finnish resistance in the Winter War 1939–40, or the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, which he both observed first hand.

Montanelli had briefly encountered Guillet in 1936, when he served voluntarily as a company commander in the XX Eritrean Battalion during the conquest of Abyssinia.⁵⁴ Montanelli remained apologetic about Italian colonialism for the better part of his life

and repeatedly described it as the ‘most humane of all’.⁵⁵ He denied that war crimes had been committed during the Abyssinian War, until the crushing burden of evidence made him change his mind in 1996⁵⁶ – a fact which should not be forgotten when one analyses his promotion of Guillet as a role model hero. Indeed, Montanelli had written quite early about him⁵⁷ and aired his disappointment that the disregard of lost wars also affects true acts of heroism, like the charge at Keru. Montanelli also cited the cavalry attack at Izbushenski⁵⁸ as well as the battle of Keren in one of his popular books.⁵⁹ But Guillet was only referenced on one page and was not portrayed as a romantic, let alone successful, guerrilla leader. Still, Montanelli was fundamental for his heroization during the 1990s. He mentioned him in numerous articles in the *Corriere della Sera*, and repeated his argument from the 1950s that ‘heroes of lost wars are quickly forgotten’.⁶⁰

In addition to Montanelli’s articles, his friend Vittorio Dan Segre’s (1922–2014) biography on Guillet laid the foundation for his wider recognition. The backgrounds of Montanelli and Segre are essential: both were key figures in founding the newspaper *Il Giornale* (with the prefix *Nuovo* until 1984), in protest against a perceived shift to the left at the *Corriere della Sera*. Segre was a former enemy, but also a fellow countryman. Born into a wealthy assimilated Jewish family, his father had been decorated as volunteer in the First World War, and became an early supporter of Fascism. Segre grew up in this nationalist environment, and desired to attend the military academy to serve the Savoyan dynasty, which embodied emancipation and freedom for Italian Jews since the *Risorgimento*.⁶¹ The racial laws forced him to migrate to Palestine in September 1939, where he enlisted in the British Army in 1941. Segre is often portrayed as an operational British Intelligence officer at the time of Guillet’s guerrilla war, as if he were directly working against him.⁶² In fact, Segre was rather bored by his basic infantry training in 1941, before he was assigned as speaker to a radio propaganda unit (of the intelligence branch) that was broadcasting to Italy.⁶³ Later he served in Cairo, was involved in the preparations for the Sicily landings, and was deployed to his home soil thereafter. Yet, he met Guillet only briefly in Naples in 1943 and 1946.⁶⁴ Like him, he became a successful diplomat after the war (for Israel).

Segre’s monograph was first published in February 1993 and the last (9th) edition dates from May 2012. When he was asked in an interview why Guillet had been forgotten this long, Segre answered that it was because he

represents the antithesis of everything that the self-flagellating Italy has been the last twenty years. But if there is a moment in which she needs an example for virtues, it is today: this is why I have written this book.⁶⁵

The end of the Cold War and the demise of the First Republic led to many debates about the country’s past. The country’s ruling class had been shaken by a wide-ranging scandal and the bygone antagonism of the Cold War gave way to new political developments, which in some cases led to an uncritical appraisal of the Fascist period.⁶⁶ Thus, it is important to note the societal context in which Guillet was rediscovered as a symbol for Italian heroism and dignity in defeat. Guillet himself argued that his cooperation with Segre was motivated by thinking

of today’s youth, that has been kept in the dark after the war about all the campaigns in which our armed forces took part in. Hence, they forget that also a country that lost a war has nonetheless episodes and individuals worth honoring and acknowledging.⁶⁷

Thus, both used the same argument that Montanelli had put forth from the beginning and perpetuated the mystified narrative of a glorious defeat.

The book received much praise, which, however, was often not as critical as it should have been. One journalist even argued that the guerrilla war had lasted ‘almost two years’⁶⁸ – instead of the actual five months (June to October 1941). A review in the leading military journal (*Rivista Militare*) lauded Guillet as an ‘atypical’ Italian, mainly for embracing local customs.⁶⁹ The same author complimented Segre’s book as ‘impartial’, and admired Guillet’s sacrifice, chivalry and ‘desperate actions’ against overwhelming forces.⁷⁰ The interest aroused by Segre’s biography also prompted public speeches by Guillet, which boosted his popularity – also within the military. In 1994, Guillet praised the heroic and desperate campaign in AOI in one of his rare appearances in front of young officers at the military academy in Modena. He called on them to remember this ‘unfortunate, but glorious campaign’ – which even their former enemies still cherished, due to the valour and sense of duty the Italian soldiers had shown.⁷¹

Sebastian O’Kelly, an Irish journalist who runs a website on Guillet, was another vital protagonist. He first met him after an interview with Montanelli in 1995 – where Segre was also present.⁷² O’Kelly became a close friend of Guillet and repeatedly spent time with him in Ireland. The Italian edition of his book was presented at the officer’s club in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome on 27 June 2002. It was hosted by the Defence Minister Antonio Martino, Renato Togni’s sister was also present and General Franco Angioni, commander of the Italian peacekeeping contingent in Lebanon 1982–4, held a laudation. Thus, past and present were linked. The book was also reviewed with much sympathy, especially in the *Corriere della Sera*, where its British origins were delightfully noted.⁷³ O’Kelly’s nationality found repeated mentioning as it appeared that Guillet was more widely commemorated by his former enemies than his own countrymen.

Besides the two monographs and Montanelli’s smaller pieces, it was primarily Sergio Romano, another former diplomat and *éminence grise* of Italian journalism, who continuously cherished Guillet.⁷⁴ He demanded his inclusion in school curricula, as he considered him to be a hero who can instill Italians with pride and erase their deep-seated skepticism about their (military) history.⁷⁵ The renowned journalist Aldo Cazzullo also repeatedly honoured Guillet’s charge at Keru,⁷⁶ and cited him as an illustration that ‘it was possible to fight well in the Second World War without becoming the Nazis’ puppet’.⁷⁷ Thereby, an attempt was made to decouple Guillet’s military deeds and personality from Fascism, while upholding his soldierly performance and values. Along similar lines, Guillet himself had argued that even though the Second World War ‘was a mistake, it was my duty to fight [...] I would do it all again’.⁷⁸ Consequently, remarks about Guillet went much further than simply elevating his role in the East African campaign. His reputation was used for general remarks about the Italian Army, the Second World War, timeless military values and other individual heroes.

An Italian Lawrence?

Whenever Montanelli answered letters that vaguely touched upon military questions in his legendary sub-section in the *Corriere della Sera*, he repeatedly named Luigi Durand de la Penne (1914–92)⁷⁹ and Guillet as inspiring heroes.⁸⁰ He claimed that it is ‘false to say the Italians are good soldiers but always betrayed by their bad leaders’.⁸¹ Rather one

has to understand that in a ‘mass of unsoldierly figures there are heroes, who were fighting as much against themselves as against the enemy and managed to become protagonists in luminous episodes, characters such as De la Penne and Guillet’.⁸² In contrast to the Germans, the Italians had never been a collective warrior race, Montanelli argued, and ‘our military glory has always a first and last name – Durand de la Penne, Guillet, Muti,⁸³ etc. – because they were deeds by individual heroes’.⁸⁴ Individuals, Montanelli resumed, that make him proud to be Italian.⁸⁵ He concluded that if ‘instead of Italy, Guillet would have had the British Empire behind him, he would have become a second Lawrence’.⁸⁶ In fact, the comparison to Lawrence has been drawn recurrently,⁸⁷ but opinions on characterizing Guillet as an ‘Italian Lawrence’ have remained divided.

The journalist Stefano Malatesta also likened Guillet to cavalry figures like Friedrich Wilhelm von Seydlitz (1721–73) and Lord Raglan (1788–1855), and their ‘military dandyism’.⁸⁸ But in Guillet’s case ‘there was no photographer, like it happened to Lawrence, who could have made him famous while he was giving the signal for a charge’.⁸⁹ The assertion that Guillet had been cheated of his glory augmented the unwillingness to subordinate him to other, more famous, heroes. Dan Segre preferred a comparison with Lettow-Vorbeck, a leader who never surrendered despite the fact that he was cut off from supplies, while Lawrence had (allegedly) been able to count on the support of a whole Empire.⁹⁰ Guillet, some argued, was superior to Lawrence, and not only in terms of speaking Arabic. He was not ‘an archaeologist in an officer’s uniform’, but a real soldier who ‘never paid money for the loyalty of a single soldier and never participated in power games’.⁹¹ Guillet’s defendants often overlooked the different scale and importance of the two revolts. Yet, the comparison to Lawrence corresponds with the ‘noble explorer’ narrative, understanding and embracing the local culture, which includes his love affair with the indigenous Kadija.⁹²

The attraction of Lawrence and Lettow-Vorbeck in Britain and Germany after the First World War was without comparison in Italy. The closest resemblance was the portrayal of Rodolfo Graziani (1882–1955) as colonial victor and ‘self-made soldier’ in Libya in the 1920s.⁹³ However, his ruthless conduct and allegiance to Mussolini made him unsuitable for the function of a romanticized condottiere after 1945. Guillet, however, could be sold as a gentleman-warrior-turned-democrat-and-ambassador and his aristocratic background added to the aura of a hero ‘from a different age’, as O’Kelly put it, who had been ‘too conservative to be Fascist’.⁹⁴ Also, his former enemies in East Africa – e.g. Max Harari and Sigmund Reich – were attributed with a cosmopolitan flair of bygone times.⁹⁵ Their similarity to Guillet, as a cultured, aristocratic, romantic and cosmopolitan adventurer-soldier also applies to Montanelli and Segre. Indeed, the close friendship between Guillet and Harari after the war can be paralleled with that between Montanelli and Segre, who was also a close friend of the ‘Devil Commander’.⁹⁶ : a circle resembling a ‘World from Yesterday’. Accordingly, the narrative on Guillet placed an emphasis on overcoming old enmities and he was depicted as a respectful and respected officer.⁹⁷

Elder hero and elder statesman?

Despite the rather late rise to eminence as a public hero Guillet even gained political importance. In 2000, on occasion of the 140th anniversary of the foundation of Italy, then-President Carlo Ciampi decided to honour three esteemed veterans with the

reintroduced Knight of the Grand Cross of the Italian Military Order: Admiral Vittorio Patrelli Campagnano (1917–2013); Air Force General Paolo Moci (1911–2002); and General Amedeo Guillet.⁹⁸ This made Guillet the most decorated living Italian soldier with five Silver Medals for Military Valor, one in bronze, five War Crosses and several other awards. Ciampi later declared that active soldiers need values and role models, as Italy was about to renew its commitments in international operations after the attacks of 11 September 2001.⁹⁹ With this ‘presidential stamp’, Guillet became a vital symbol for Italy’s relation to her former colony, Eritrea. The country gained its independence from Ethiopia after a long and bloody struggle in 1993, but hostilities re-emerged between 1998 and 2000.¹⁰⁰ In face of the bloodshed during the Ethiopian-Eritrean War, Sergio Romano reinterpreted Italian history in the Horn as a stabilizing and fruitful colonization effort comparable to the American conquest of the West.¹⁰¹ Indeed, many press reports showed a clear bias towards the Eritreans. Montanelli deemed them as ‘more evolved and civilized’ than the Ethiopians and was full of praise for their contemporary and past military performance.¹⁰² Segre drew historical parallels to Guillet’s asymmetrical war. He advised the Eritreans to rely on their traditional strengths in guerrilla warfare,¹⁰³ while the historian Angelo Del Boca compared the Italian defence at Keren with the Eritreans’ in 2000.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, the material disadvantage of the ‘nephews of the old askari’ was paralleled with the Italian inferiority *vis-à-vis* the British in 1940–1.¹⁰⁵

When the Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki visited Rome in 1999, he desired to meet the ‘Devil Commander’ and subsequently invited him to Eritrea. Accompanied by his biographer Sebastian O’Kelly, he was given the reception of a Head of State from 14 to 21 March 2000. He visited Italian war cemeteries, old and new battlefields, and shook hands with former askari. Guillet praised the Eritreans as ‘Prussians of Africa, without the defects of the Prussians’ and the press re-interpreted the campaign in 1941 as the beginning of the Eritrean freedom struggle,¹⁰⁶ and highlighted the good memory and excellent contemporary bilateral relations. The Italians, Guillet in particular, were even seen as fore thinkers of Eritrean independence.¹⁰⁷ After his visit, Guillet wrote a letter to Montanelli, in which he thanked him for repeatedly mentioning the Eritrean struggle for freedom – against communist Ethiopia and its Russian war materiel – and praised the small country for embracing its colonial heritage with pride.¹⁰⁸ The colonial past and contemporary conflicts were thus mixed and interpreted freely with a gentleman’s attitude towards historical facts.

Guillet’s trip paved the way for further military visits. In 2002, the Eritrean Ministry of Defence invited Italian military delegations to visit old battlefields and cemeteries. The participants were mostly active or retired *Alpini* (Mountain Infantry) who attended ceremonies in Asmara with former liberation fighters and askari. Reports on subsequent travels also emphasized the friendship and joint remembrance, as well as the good condition of the memorial sites and cemeteries, and underlined the task for current Italian soldiers to uphold the heroic colonial heritage.¹⁰⁹ The military-to-military exchanges worked both ways. The *Alpini* association welcomed both General Sabat Efrem, then Eritrean Defence Minister, and President Isaias Afwerki at their congresses in 2003 and 2004 respectively. In a letter to *L’Alpino*, the mountain infantry’s magazine, a reader declared the Eritrean delegation’s presence as an ‘evident sign of the finest impression the Italians have left in these areas’.¹¹⁰ Historical blurriness was not

the only concern: current problems in Eritrea were also overlooked. After leading the Eritrean People's Liberation Front against Ethiopia, Afwerki became President of an independent Eritrea in 1993 and shoulders one of the worst human-rights records possible. This close relationship is also questionable due to UN suspicions that Italy circumvented the arms embargo to Eritrea.¹¹¹ It should not come as a surprise that many Eritreans flee their home country and attempt to settle in Europe. Aldo Cazzullo has argued that historical reasons necessitate solidarity with the Eritrean nation – particularly due to the long 'brotherhood in arms'.¹¹² Interestingly, the Italian colonial legacy was not seen as reason to pay special attention to Eritreans in need, but their role (and the myth) of their fidelity as askari.

Guillet's political significance benefitted his inclusion into collective memory. In 2004, he was the subject of an exhibition¹¹³ and a popular RAI programme (*La storia siamo noi*) devoted a documentary to him in 2008. Elisabetta Castana's film featuring the 'Devil Commander' risked running short on superlatives even at its start. To the movie themes of *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, Guillet was celebrated as a courageous, valorous hero in a desperate struggle and whose askari followed him loyally. The documentary highlighted his closeness to the Eritreans and their will to fight for freedom (from the Ethiopians) – which added an aura of righteousness to Guillet's guerrilla endeavour. In a 2011 documentary, co-produced by the Italian Cavalry Association, he was even described as a 'national hero for the Eritreans'. For the cavalry, Guillet stayed a 'living monument' and symbolized romantic nostalgia.¹¹⁴ In 2003, he became honorary president of the Cavalry Association and in a review of O'Kelly's book, the association's journal claimed that they had always remembered him.¹¹⁵ One can find repeated articles in the last 20 years, but only two during the 1990s and even fewer mentions in the decades before.¹¹⁶ Therefore, it seems that even the cavalry started to remember him very late.

At the end of his life, however, Guillet was a widely acclaimed public figure. When he turned 100, the narrative was set; the superlatives and praise could hardly improve, even if attempts were made.¹¹⁷ The Cavalry Association lauded his 'multiculturalism' and thanked his two biographers and President Ciampi for keeping the memory of Guillet and his embodiment of the old cavalry spirit alive.¹¹⁸ On 7 February 2009, over 400 esteemed guests, including members of the royal family, gathered at the officers' club in Rome. Guillet expressed his gratitude at witnessing a 'new spirit' among the younger generation, particularly those soldiers who had served in one of the recent peacekeeping missions.¹¹⁹ He remarked that 'a soldier's duty is to fight, however, for the defence of the *Patria*. With the adversary one must and one can retain respectful and friendly relations'.¹²⁰ Therefore, his hearts-and-minds approach *vis-à-vis* Abyssinian rebels and his 'partnering' with the Eritreans could be used as a blueprint for missions such as Afghanistan. Guillet reached the biblical age of 101 and was widely commemorated when he passed on 16 June 2010¹²¹ – even in Britain.¹²² The Italian Foreign Ministry eulogized the life of a '20th century Italian hero'¹²³ and the President lauded him as an outstanding servant in war and peace.¹²⁴ His official commemoration by the Foreign Ministry and inclusion in a list of the 150 most illustrious state officials is a further sign of his eminent standing well beyond the military sphere.

Conclusion

Amedeo Guillet was a modest gentleman with an outstanding military record who served his country in war and peace. His life demonstrates the many facets and grey-tones of Italian history in the twentieth century, and his heroization in the 1990s speaks for the Italian desire to find 'timeless' values and symbols after many ruptures and defeats.¹²⁵ Yet, many facts about the scale and intensity of his guerrilla war have been blurred by this late mystification: he never commanded more than 100 men, in less than two dozen engagements over a maximum period of six months – with a notable decline in activity after eight weeks. His activities neither threatened the British position in AOI, nor tied down a significant number of forces. Guillet never actively promoted such tales, let alone boasted with his deeds.¹²⁶ His military endeavours were first 'rediscovered' in the public (civilian) sphere, even before the military embraced him as a role model.

Montanelli, Segre, Romano, O'Kelly and the presidential approval were essential in this process. Through books and newspaper articles, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s, they elevated Guillet to public eminence. The general gist was very benevolent and critical remarks were hardly ever made. Guillet deserves a scholarly biography, which should also devote attention to more delicate questions, such as his role in the Spanish Civil War or possible involvement in atrocities in Abyssinia. His life had the benefit of not being involved historically in more problematic events and theatres, as, for example, the Italian occupation regime in the Balkans or the trauma of the 8 settembre. Guillet could therefore be portrayed as an adventurous nobleman, 'humane colonizer' and dashing commander, yet an apolitical officer who was only loyal to King and *Patria*. Indeed, it did no harm to his reputation when he publicly declared that he had always remained a monarchist (in the presence of members of the royal family) at the Palazzo Barberini in 2009.¹²⁷ The comparison with T. E. Lawrence augmented his standing at home and also abroad. Yet other authors demanded to establish him as the 'last hero of Africa' and not as a second-class version of a British archaeologist in uniform.¹²⁸ At the same time, his recognition by former enemies remained important. It played into the Italian (military's) desire for acknowledgment, and prestige, which, coming from victorious British gentlemen-warriors, increased their own merit.

Once established, Guillet's function as a role model reached beyond the memory of *Africa Orientale*: it transcended into the public with a wider idea of Italian soldiers as dashing heroes who courageously fought against all odds. Thereby he could be linked to individuals such as the Duke of Aosta, Toti, De la Penne, De Cristoforis, Toselli and others. However, Guillet retained a much greater impact beyond the military realm. His mythical reputation was used to showcase an Italian 'glorious defeat' and to brush over shortcomings in the army as an organic whole. Lucy Riall's description of the Garibaldi myth can also be applied to Guillet: the 'purpose of the cult was to embody and publicize a political sense of *italianità*, to identify an imaginary narrative of romantic heroism with a living, military leader, and to encourage Italians to 'regenerate themselves'".¹²⁹ The 1990s were a period of national regeneration after the end of the Cold War and demise of the First Republic. In the face of a delegitimized ruling class, a figure like Guillet could be used as an inspiration, a role model for the military and a public hero who shed some positive light on the country's darkest period.

Notes

1. Keen, *Chivalry*.
2. Schivelbusch, *Culture of Defeat*; Perrett, *Last Stand*, 7–10.
3. Riall, *Garibaldi*.
4. Baratieri, *Memories and Silences*; Patricelli, *L'Italia delle sconfitte*, 61ff and Calchi Novati, "Italy and Africa".
5. Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*.
6. Fabi, *Enrico Toti*.
7. The others are Pietro Badoglio, Paolo Caccia Dominioni, Alberto Bechi Luserna and Giovanni Messe, see <http://www.esercito.difesa.it/storia/pagine/amedeo-guillet.aspx> (accessed 24 October 2017). All Gold Medal recipients for deeds at El Alamein are listed collectively, as are the 392 Italian 'Righteous among the Nations'.
8. Segre, *La Guerra*; O'Kelly, *Amedeo* and Mongelli, *Amedeo Guillet*.
9. O'Kelly, *Amedeo*, 128.
10. *Ibid.*, 44.
11. *Ibid.*, 90; *Amedeo Guillet. La leggenda del comandante diavolo*. Directed by Elisabetta Castana. RAI Radiotelevisione Italiana, 2008.
12. He was clearly aware of atrocities, and O'Kelly tells of an episode where Guillet defended a Spanish girl against harassment from an evil German – evoking the image of the "good Italian;" see O'Kelly, *Amedeo*, 93–4.
13. Rovighi, *Le operazioni in Africa Orientale*; Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, 343–593; Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero* and Stewart, *The First Victory*.
14. Stewart, *The First Victory*; Rovighi, *Le operazioni in Africa Orientale*.
15. Cited in Segre, *La Guerra*, 112, 114.
16. Loffredo, *Cheren*, 50.
17. Carroll, "Italians' Last Action Hero," May 26.
18. In sum, 116 of his men were killed and 260 wounded, Segre, *La Guerra*, 119–20. Also 400 Yemeni infantry and 200 men from the camel corps accompanied the attack, O'Kelly, *Amedeo*, 150.
19. Imperial War Museum London (IWM), Department of Documents (Doc.) 20714, Private Papers of Lt. V.S. Gregg, Diary Entry January 21, 1941.
20. The National Archives Kew (TNA), War Office (WO), 276/363, "Gondar Operations, No 17," November 25, 1941; Segre, *La Guerra*, 34.
21. Several Italian officers sketched plans to launch guerrilla campaigns; see for example Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Italian State Archives, or ACS), T-821/141/IT A1192/397-398, Progetto della Medaglia d'Oro Iesi per la costituzione di bande in A.O.I., July 18, 1941.
22. On the political movements *Fronte di Resistenza* and the *Associazione Figli d'Italia* see Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, 547ff; Labanca, *La guerra d'Etiopia*, 209; Rovighi, *Le operazioni in Africa Orientale*.
23. Labanca, *Oltremare*, 210.
24. Montanelli, *Gli incontri*, 377.
25. O'Kelly, *Amedeo*, 285.
26. Serra, *Professione*, 109–17.
27. O'Kelly, *Amedeo*, 295–318.
28. Guillet, "Sintesi dell'attività operativa del Gruppo Bande a Cavallo Amhara". I am indebted for this information to General Franco Apicella.
29. "Santa guerriglia in Africa Orientale. Patrioti italiani si battono contro gli invasori in Etiopia," *La Stampa*, June 9, 1944.
30. O'Kelly, *Amedeo*, 255. The British placed a bounty on his capture, but it is questionable that they were expecting or even willing to pay the extremely high ransom of £1000. I wish to thank Sebastian O'Kelly for this information.
31. Malatesta, "I dandy alla guerra," November 20.

32. Segre, *La Guerra*, 136–7.
33. O’Kelly, *Amedeo*, 192.
34. Ibid.; Segre, *La Guerra*, 138.
35. O’Kelly, *Amedeo*, 198ff.
36. Ibid., 204.
37. Who is also portrayed as a benign colonizer and as “a patriot, of a vigorous pre-Fascist stamp,” in *ibid.*, 203.
38. Ibid., 210–11.
39. Ibid., 198ff.
40. Segre, *La Guerra*, 164. We learn nothing about the subsequent fate of his men. Two had been killed in the only combat reported in some detail, in O’Kelly, *Amedeo*, 201.
41. Segre, *La Guerra*, 167.
42. Mongelli, *Amedeo Guillet*, 27.
43. Ferrari, “Gli Eritrei, gran guerriglieri in cerca d’identità,” June 8.
44. Guillet, “Sintesi”.
45. TNA, Prime Minister’s Office Files (PREM) 3/278/7, War Cabinet. Military Policy for East Africa, May 23, 1941, folios 90–1.
46. Labanca, *La guerra d’Etiopia*, 209.
47. Ortona, *Anni d’America*, 401. Italian veterans of the African theatre created the Associazione Nazionale Reduci e Rimpatriati d’Africa (ANRRA) that published its monthly journal *Il Reduce d’Africa* (The Veteran of Africa) since 1961. Despite its strong focus on military events, the Duke of Aosta received more attention as heroic figure than Guillet, see Burdett, “Colonial Associations,” 135–6. Another noteworthy journal was *Mai tacli*, which was issued by former Italian settlers in Eritrea since the late 1970s and largely featured nostalgic colonial (and mostly personal) memories. Again, the references to military individuals were mainly to the Duke of Aosta and General Orlando Lorenzini. Thus, even if a memory of Guillet lingered in these circles it appears that, for example, the figure of the Duke of Aosta loomed larger and these publications never developed a wider impact; *ibid.*, 129, 133.
48. Persichelli, *Eroismo eritreo*, 102f.
49. Leone, *La Guerra in Africa Orientale*, 118.
50. Several examples are listed in O’Kelly, *Amedeo*, 312.
51. Rapisarda, “Drammatica testimonianza dell’ambasciatore italiano,” July 12.
52. TNA, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 33/1516, WRJ 25/1, New Italian Ambassador to India, July 27, 1971.
53. For example, in his book *Il Generale della Rovere*, which Roberto Rossellini successfully put on screen.
54. Montanelli’s unit had mainly fulfilled rear duties and saw little to no combat. He himself had already been sent to hospital in December 1935. Thereafter, he gained fame as a journalist for the Fascist newspaper *La Nuova Eritrea*, about which he never spoke after the war.
55. Cesare, “Montanelli: ‘Ma tra i conquistatori fummo i più umani,’” November 25.
56. Del Boca, *L’Africa nella coscienza*, viii; Gerbi and Liucci, *Montanelli*, 29, 31ff.
57. Montanelli, *Facce di bronzo*, 158ff. The brief sketch on Guillet, entitled “Communtàr-as-Sciaetàn” (Devil commander) was later reprinted in his *Gli incontri* (1961).
58. An attack by the Savoia Cavalleria against Soviet forces on 24 August 1942. Interestingly, Guillet was a close friend of Alessandro Bettoni Cazzago, who led the charge at Izbushenskij – like himself a professional rider, see *Corriere della Sera*, April 18, 2000.
59. Montanelli and Cervi, *L’Italia della disfatta*, 136.
60. *Corriere della Sera*, April 18, 2000.
61. Segre, *Memoirs*, 51, 70.
62. Gagliano, “Amedeo Guillet. Corsaro nel deserto,” April 24; Ferrari, “Gli Eritrei, gran guerriglieri in cerca d’identità,” June 8.
63. Segre, *Memoirs*, 207ff.

64. Segre, *La Guerra*, 226–9; Romano, “12 giugno 1946: un caldo pomeriggio romano,” June 5.
65. *La Stampa*, April 24, 1993.
66. Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents*; Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory*; Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco*.
67. Cuomo, “Il nostro Lawrence d’Arabia”.
68. Malatesta, “Il comandante diavolo,” April 1.
69. Trama, “Vittorio Dan Segre”.
70. *Ibid.*
71. Guillet, “Intervento”.
72. O’Kelly, *Amedeo*, xvii.
73. Botti, “Guillet. L’epopea del diavolo africano,” June 7.
74. Romano, *Le altre facce*.
75. Romano, “Valore del soldato italiano tra realtà e leggenda,” April 3.
76. Cazzullo, “Io, Comandante Diavolo, a cavallo contro i tank,” October 24.
77. Cazzullo, “Un tatuaggio e 27 decorazioni. Addio a Guillet, Grande Italiano,” June 20.
78. Carroll, “Italians’ Last Action Hero,” May 26.
79. He remained famous for the raid on the British fleet at Alexandria 1941, fought on the side of the Southern Kingdom (that is, against Junio Valerio Borghese’s *Decima Mas* in the North), and later became a successful politician for the Liberal Party. The Italian Navy named a destroyer class after him and he featured prominently in the movies *I sette dell’Orsa maggiore* (Hell Raiders of the Deep) (1953) and *The Valiant* (1962). Durand’s deeds and post-war vita would justify more work on him.
80. “Cosi perdemmo la nostra innocenza,” *Corriere della Sera*, May 7, 2000; *Corriere della Sera*, June 29, 2001.
81. Montanelli, “Poveri eroi, in mezzo a una massa imbecille,” September 19.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Ettore Muti (1902–1943) had been a stormtrooper in the First World War, early Fascist, and subsequent aviator. Killed in August 1943, he became a Fascist hero.
84. Montanelli, “La pretesa di essere un popolo guerriero,” April 26.
85. *Corriere della Sera*, February 16, 1997.
86. *Ibid.*
87. See note 67.
88. See note 31, 2005.
89. *Ibid.*
90. Gagliano, “Amedeo Guillet. Corsaro nel deserto,” April 24.
91. Bettanini, “Amedeo Guillet, A 20th Century Italian Hero, 100 Years Old,” *Corriere della Sera*, February 16, 1997. I would like to thank Alberto Malvolti of the Fondazione Montanelli Bassi for this information.
92. Segre, *La Guerra*, 156. Her face covers the English paperback of Sebastian O’Kelly’s biography, which creates an “English patient” aura with Guillet as another László Almásy. Indeed, their love story formed the basis for the film *Looking for Kadija* by Francesco G. Raganato.
93. Canosa, *Graziani*.
94. See note 78, 2002.
95. Segre, *La Guerra*, 30ff, 38, 46.
96. See note 85, 1997.
97. Romano, “Il guerrigliero Amedeo Guillet e i suoi amici-nemici,” May 24; Magri, “Amedeo Guillet;” O’Kelly, *Amedeo*, 309; Segre, *La Guerra*, 224, 232–5.
98. Guillet had signed his post-war report as Major, but was apparently promoted to higher rank (upon retiring), see Mongelli, *Amedeo Guillet*, 39.
99. Breda, “Il Quirinale scommette sull’ accordo: ‘Dobbiamo essere responsabili,’” November 7.
100. Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution*.
101. Romano, “Waugh: Italiani bravi imperialisti,” June 5.

102. Montanelli, "Ricordo i miei askari, buoni soldati," June 7; *Corriere della Sera*, April 27, 1999.
103. See note 43 above 43, 1998.
104. Alberizzi, "Anche noi ci trincerammo a Keren prima di essere travolti dagli inglesi," 20 May.
105. Quirico, *Squadron bianco*, 8.
106. Baudino, "L'Eritrea non dimentica il suo eroe italiano," April 18.
107. "Trionfali e calorose accoglienze in Eritrea".
108. *Corriere della Sera*, May 11, 2000.
109. Scoza, "Viaggio della memoria".
110. Eydoux, "Il presidente".
111. Maurizi, "Dopo Ablyazov, il caso Eritrea," July 18.
112. Cazzullo, "L'ex colonia e il nostro dovere di dare asilo," August 22.
113. Dieni, "Amedeo Guillet".
114. See note 67.
115. "Amedeo: vita, avventure, amori di Amedeo Guillet."
116. I wish to thank General Franco Apicella for this information.
117. For example by Sergio Romano, see Romano, "Gli eroi non invecchiano. I 100 anni di Amedeo Guillet," February 7.
118. Apicella, "Amedeo Guillet".
119. Caprettini, "Il Lawrence d'Arabia fedele al re e alla Repubblica," January 18.
120. Sensi, "I 100 anni," 29.
121. Romano, "Guillet, cavaliere solitario," June 26.
122. "Amedeo Guillet," *The Telegraph*, July 1, 2010.
123. "20th Century Italian Hero Amedeo Guillet Passes Away" http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stamp/archivionotizie/approfondimenti/2010/06/20100621_guillet.html (accessed 20 October 2017).
124. "Morto Amedeo Guillet".
125. Patricelli, *L'Italia delle sconfitte*.
126. Guillet's habitually dismissed accounts of his irregular war as mere 'exaggerations', see Montanelli, *Gli incontri*, 378.
127. See note 119, 2009.
128. See note 112, 2009.
129. Riall, *Garibaldi*, 388.

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