were indeed merely two different sides of the same coin. Soyinka’s fascination for, and closeness to, power sometimes besmirches the moral lens through which to observe and assess its often labyrinthine devastation.

In his writings, Soyinka is also weighed down by his inability to make himself vulnerable or, in a similar manner, cast himself in the role of the uncomplicated anti-hero. Vulnerability may not always mean unattractive weakness, as Soyinka might perhaps think; indeed, it could mean an empathetic demonstration of humanness; a voice seeking a larger context of fellowship and community through innocent disclosure. On the other hand, Soyinka’s lone voice in the midst of supposed moral degeneration can sometimes seem quaint and unreal; an entity that bluntly discourages the establishment of a relationship with the Other. He becomes, as it were, a caricature of the hero as the most unlikely and forbidding anti-hero. You certainly do not want to sanction down a broken provincial path seeking warmth and comfort from that fierce, uncompromising and unforgettable voice.

In a similar vein, some other critics have noted that Soyinka is always the sole hero of all his narratives. There invariably looms the figure of the hero as an all time favourite or an all time pain in the neck. The predictability of this persona sometimes becomes a trifle too heavy; a caricature that floats without an anchor and in urgent need of a puncture to plunge it right back to earth. It appears that Soyinka is congenitally incapable of an inversion of persona to achieve a different set of results and all he has left is his unrelieved anger and righteousness as the mediating ingredients of his writings. With time, all of this can become rather wearisome.

Finally, detractors may add that Between Defective Memory and the Public Lie is a mean-spirited, small-minded little opus, but then how much of Soyinka’s œuvre has really been large-hearted and glowing with visceral warmth? Indeed, outrage and vitriol have always been the largely defining features of his work as a writer and a public intellectual.

J ust before noon on 19 February 1937, nine hand grenades were thrown during an alms-giving ceremony in the courtyard of the Gennete-Li’ul Palace in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Originally built for Emperor Haile Selassie, the palace had been occupied by the Italians less than a year earlier as their administrative headquarters after they had invaded the country from three sides, defeated the Emperor’s forces with the help of bombs and poison gas and proclaimed their sovereignty and their civilised superiority.

The principal target of the attack was Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, whom Mussolini had installed as viceroy and who was officiating at the ceremony, flanked by other dignitaries. An estimated three thousand Ethiopian people, most of them poor and elderly and many with disabilities, were crowded in the courtyard and in an adjoining field. Graziani was wounded by shrapnel but not killed and was promptly driven to hospital. The front of the palace was heavily guarded. Ninety-four Italian soldiers, thirty carabinieri and twenty-five askari — colonial troops recruited from Italy’s other African colonies — responded to the attack, which had injured several other people as well as Graziani, by firing into the crowd. They used two large Fiat-Revelli machine guns mounted on tripods on the palace balcony as well as automatic rifles and pistols.

The killing lasted nearly three hours. The reports filed later that day by the foreign legations in Addis Ababa, as well as subsequent accounts by the few surviving Ethiopian eyewitnesses, said that almost everyone in the crowd was killed. The French envoy, Albert Bodard, described it as ’an indescribable mêlée. … Every Ethiopian was presumed guilty and had to be struck down.’

The killing did not stop there. This was just the first act of a massacre that would move out from the palace to residential areas of Addis Ababa, most of which at that time resembled a sprawling collection of villages more than a modern city. The killing of civilians continued for a further forty hours and resulted in the death of thousands of more people. Most of the killing was done under cover of darkness, was interrupted during the daylight hours and resumed after nightfall. People of all ages were shot, bayonetted or stabbed with daggers, bludgeoned with clubs or shovels, burned alive by flamethrowers in their wattle and daub houses, run over by trucks, tied by ropes to the back of vehicles and dragged along dirt roads. Gold and silver jewellery was snatched from women’s necks and homes were looted. Bodies were piled up,oused with petrol and burned and the remains were thrown into ditches or wells in an attempt to hide the evidence. Telephone and telegraph communications were cut and cameras were confiscated from foreign residents so that there would be no photographic records.

These events would become known in Ethiopia as the Graziani Massacre or the Massacre of Yekatit 12 — the month and day in the Ethiopian calendar corresponding to February 19 — and, despite the attempts by the perpetrators to stop information about them from getting out and despite the fact the Italian media at the time, closely controlled by the Fascist government, were silent about them, they were reported in the foreign press. It was this negative publicity that prompted Mussolini to send an order to Graziani to stop the killing on the third day, 21 February. A number of eyewitness testimonies were also published later and a handful of photographic records survived. Ciro Poggioli, a journalist for Il Corriere della Sera who witnessed the massacre, kept a private diary that was published, after his death, by his son in 1971.

Among the foreign eyewitnesses was László Sáska, a Hungarian doctor then working in Addis Ababa. ‘The shooting never ceased all night’, he wrote, ‘but most of the murders were committed with daggers and blows with a truncheon at the head of the victim. Whole streets were burned down and, if any of the occupants of the houses ran out from the flames, they were machine-gunned or stabbed with cries of “Duce! Duce!!” ’ Sáska’s account first appeared in English translation in 1937, under the name of Ladislas Sasa, in New Times in Ethiopia News, the paper that Sylvia Pankhurst edited in London to support the Ethiopian people’s cause, and it has now been republished by Africa World Press.

The massacre also remained deeply scarred into the memory of Ethiopians who survived it. Several first-hand accounts were later included in a two-volume dossier assembled in 1949 by the Ethiopian government in an attempt to have ten Italians, including Graziani, indicted for war crimes against their people. These crimes included the execution, ordered by Graziani in May 1937, of a large number of monks and deacons from the ancient monastery of Debre Libanos who he maintained were collectively complicit in hiding the two men — identified as Abreha Deboch and Moges Asgedom — who had thrown the grenades at him and then managed to escape. Priests and monks were generally distrusted by the Italians because they were identified with the opposition to their rule by literate élites. Graziani instructed General Pietro Maletti to round up and shoot, without any legal process, all the occupants of the monastery. On two different days and in separate locations — one near Debre Libanos, the other in nearby Engecha — they were driven in trucks to the edge of ravines, made to line up and shot in the back by machine guns so that they fell forward into the ravines. Mass graves were dug and the bodies hidden.

As for the two conspirators on the run, they were allegedly both captured by the Italians and executed in 1938.

Thanks to the meticulous research carried out by Ian Campbell, who...
has spent most of the last 28 years in Ethiopia, we now know much more about the conspirators than was previously
under-reported the number of victims. The
authorised by the Italians to carry guns,
also an insider at the palace, were
approved to be a calculated act of revenge
of the Fascist Party federation in Addis
witnesses, it was Guido Cortese, head
of the massacre and he suggested that this
proved he had always supported military
legality. But this was far from the truth.
It is amply documented that Graziani
was directly responsible for ordering the
subsequent incarceration and deportation
to concentration camps of hundreds of
alleged Ethiopian suspects, the execution
of resistance leaders, including several
who had had themselves up after being
promised safe treatment as prisoners of
war, and numerous acts of violent
reprisal, including the Debre Libanos
and Engecha massacres.
A few months later, in November 1937,
Graziani was removed by Mussolini
from his position as viceregal and replaced
by the Duke of Aosta, a member of the
Italian royal family. Graziani’s brutal and
illegal methods were proving increasingly
counter-productive. They had merely
strengthened popular resentment and
resistance towards Italian rule, as well as
attracting further negative reports in
the foreign press. The Duke promised
to adopt a more conciliatory approach,
and yet mass killings continued, though
perhaps without his assent. A later
massacre of which evidence, including
material remains in the form of bones,
was recently unearthed by a young Italian
scholar, Matteo Dominioni, was carried
out in April 1939 at Zerat in the highland
region of Northern Shewa, where the
armed resistance was being led by Abebe
Aregai. The rearguard of Abebe’s forces
made up largely of family members and
residents of villages where the
Ethiopians were conducting roundups,
took shelter in caves and cliffs in the rocky
hillside. General Ugo Cavallero ordered his subordinate, Colonel Lorenzini, to act. Perhaps misidentifying these people as active combatants, Lorenzini gave orders to use explosives, machine-gun fire and mustard gas (yperite). The latter weapon had been banned by the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which Italy had signed, but the Italians had already used it widely during the invasion of Ethiopia. Dominioni estimates that up to 1,500 people were killed, making the Zerit massacre comparable in scale to that of Debre Libanos and, he suggests, even ‘perhaps more heinous and brutal because the victims were women, children and elderly people’.

None of these events was, of course, exceptional in a century that saw many mass killings and introduced the concept of genocide. Yet it is important to talk about the Ethiopian massacres because they have not received the same amount of historical attention or judicial investigation as many of those other massacres and have therefore remained less well known. There are three main reasons for this. First, as Ian Campbell’s research confirms, the official Italian records at the time, together with the Fascist-controlled media, did a very efficient job of masking or minimising them. Second, most Italian historians after World War Two were either unable or unwilling to deal with the history of colonial occupation. They were unable because access to the relevant archives was restricted for years and the archives were guarded by the apologists of colonialism. They were unwilling because Italy’s colonial adventure had ended with the fall of Fascism; so it was easy for postwar Italians to view it, incorrectly, as bound up with Fascism, part of a generalised badness from which Italy was now moving on, and to forget that it had started much earlier, in the pre-Fascist era of liberal government. The first important historical work to expose the violence and illegality of the Ethiopian campaign, based both on archival research and first-hand testimonies, was Angelo Del Bocca’s La guerra di Abissinia 1935-41, published in 1965, thirty years after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and translated into English in 1969. Third, and most scandalously, none of the perpetrators of these massacres was ever brought to justice. Despite the Ethiopian government’s attempt to get Graziani, Cortese, Lessona, Pietro Badoglio (who had authorised the use of poison gas during the invasion) and others indicted for war crimes by the Nuremberg Tribunal, trials of these men were never held. Because the atrocities in Ethiopia had taken place before the start of World War Two, they were treated as outside the remit of the UN War Crimes Commission, even though the Japanese were held to account by the same commission for their atrocities in China in the 1930s.

In the case of Badoglio, the British refused to consider him a war criminal because he had come over to their side in 1941, negotiating the armistice that had pulled Italy out of its alliance with Germany. To have prosecuted him and others, according to the British government, would also have risked fuelling anti-Fascist revanchism and tipping the precarious postwar balance of power in Italy towards the Communists. So Badoglio was never brought to trial. On the contrary, when he died in 1956 he was buried with full military honours.

The impunity of Graziani was an even graver case. The evidence of his responsibility for ordering the use of poison gas in the Ethiopian campaign, executing resistance leaders who had surrendered to him and ordering the massacre at Debre Libanos was overwhelming already in 1945, when, in the last days of the war in Europe, he handed himself over to the British army in Italy. His position at the time was Defence Minister in Mussolini’s final government, that of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI). In that role, true to his old colonial form, he had given orders to shoot anyone who refused to be conscripted into the army of the RSI. Surrender to the British was a calculated move on his part that saved him from the worse fate of falling into the hands of Italian partisans, who would almost certainly have shot him, just as they shot Mussolini. He was put on trial in 1948 by a military court in Rome, not for his crimes in Ethiopia or in Libya but for having collaborated with the Nazis. Graziani’s trial was widely publicised and it divided public opinion. He was found guilty on several counts and sentenced in May 1950 to 19 years, but he was immediately given remission of nearly 14 of them on the extraordinary grounds that his wounds (including the shrapnel from Yekatit 12, which had never been fully removed) and the fact that he had acted with ‘motives of particular moral and social value’ (namely with patriotic intentions) were significant extenuations. The military judges, in other words, accepted a large part of his defence narrative that he had always put his country first. In the memoirs he wrote and published as he awaited trial were called Ho servito la patria (I Served the Fatherland) – and, since his country had made an alliance with Nazi Germany that had never been rescinded by Mussolini, he had stayed on what he considered the right side. His actions, he had claimed during the trial, had been those of a patriotic soldier, not a politicised Fascist.

In fact, Graziani served only four months, because his time in prison awaiting trial was further deducted from the sentence. Far from retiring to a quiet life, in 1952 this ‘apolitical’ soldier was ordered by Graziani not only in Ethiopia but in Affairs, a small town fifty miles east of Rome. Fifty-seven years later, in 2012, the mayor of Affile, Ercole Viri, obtained €130,000 from the regional government for a park to commemorate the war dead but then proceeded to spend it on a monument to Graziani. Designed in the Fascist style, a brick and marble cube, the words ‘Patria’ (fatherland) and ‘Onore’ (honour) inscribed on the front, the monument caused huge controversy in Italy. The case also reached the foreign media and triggered outraged protests in Ethiopia and elsewhere. The monument was soon defaced with anti-Fascist graffiti and with a large white silhouette of a hanged man, evoking the executions ordered by Graziani not only in Ethiopia but also in Cyrenaica (Libya) when he was vice-governor there in 1930-34. In Bologna, pranksters ‘twinned’ the Affile monument with a similarly-shaped public urinal on which they flyposted the words ‘Patria’ and ‘Odore’ (smell). Viri’s action was subsequently overruled by the President of the Lazio region, Nicola Zingaretti, as an improper use of public money; in 2016, the future of the monument is still uncertain.

The story of the Affile monument is used as a narrative frame for the crowd funded American documentary, If Only I Were that Warrior, directed by Valerio Ciriaci. Following the tradition of Fascist Legacy, the film examines the unpunished war crimes of Graziani in Ethiopia. One of the experts interviewed is Ian Campbell. A group of Ethiopians in New York demonstrate outside the Italian Embassy against the Affile monument with placards saying ‘Italy: stand up against the revival of Fascism’. At a meeting in Addis Ababa, an elderly man with tears in his eyes says: ‘In one morning my five brothers and sisters were burned alive by the Italians’. An eyewitness of the Debre Libanos massacre says: ‘I will pray and cry for Debre Libanos for as long as I live’. But the film also shows an Italian agronomist working in Addis Ababa today who is an avid collector of Graziani’s books, as well as residents of Affile who consider Graziani a hero.

The books and the film reviewed here should help make the facts of the massacres by Italians better known to readers in Ethiopia. It is to be hoped that they may make them better known at least to some people in Italy too. The local protests against the Affile monument show that a few Italians today do have access to critical accounts of their country’s colonial past. However, paucity of reliable information, denial or disbelief about atrocities in Italy’s colonies and recent attempts by right-wing politicians and intellectuals to whitewash the legacy of fascism all put the truth about that past at serious risk of total erasure from Italy’s collective memory.