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Italy

Milan mayor refuses to remove defaced statue of Italian journalist

BLM protesters targeted monument to Indro Montanelli, who admitted buying 12-year-old Eritrean girl



The statue of Indro Montanelli has been vandalised after becoming a flashpoint in Italy's Black Lives Matter protests. Photograph: Andrea Fasani/EPA

Milan's mayor has rejected calls to remove a statue from a public park of an Italian journalist who acknowledged having bought a 12-year-old Eritrean girl to be his wife during Italy's colonial occupation in the 1930s.

Giuseppe Sala said in a Facebook video that he was perplexed by "the lightness" with which Indro Montanelli had confessed to buying the child from her father, in a widely circulated video of a 1969 talkshow appearance, but said "lives should be judged in their totality" and he believed the statue should stay.

"Montanelli was more than that. He was a great journalist, a journalist who fought for the liberty of the state, an independent journalist. Maybe for these reasons he was shot in the legs," Sala said, referring to a 1977 attack on Montanelli by the Red Brigades.

The statue of Montanelli, inside a Milan park that bears his name near where he was attacked, has been a flashpoint in Italy's Black Lives Matter protests, which have renewed the focus on Italy's colonial past. As well as taking the 12-year-old when he was aged 24, Montanelli led a battalion of 100 Eritreans during the fascist regime's colonial rule.

Protesters over the weekend covered the statue with red paint and scrawled "racist" and "rapist" on the base - the first time Montanelli's past has faced a serious reckoning.

"In Milan, there is a park and statue dedicated to Montanelli, who until the end of his days said with pride that he bought and married an Eritrean child of 12 years to turn her into a sex slave during the fascist regime's aggression against Ethiopia," the anti-fascist I Sentinelli group said on social media.

Montanelli, who died in 2001 aged 92, chronicled contemporary Italy from its colonial era through fascism, the postwar reconstruction and the anti-corruption scandals that overturned Italy's political class in the 1990s.

He worked for many years at Corriere della Sera, before becoming the founding editor of Silvio Berlusconi's Il Giornale.

Initially a proud fascist, Montanelli later distanced himself from Mussolini and was arrested by the Nazis in 1944 during the occupation of Italy, avoiding execution thanks to a cardinal's intervention. His prison experiences inspired a story, Il Generale della Rovere, which was later filmed by Roberto Rossellini and won the Venice Golden Lion in 1959.

He freely acknowledged his relationship with the girl, named Desta, on several occasions. "I think I chose well. She was a beautiful girl of 12 years," Montanelli told the talkshow in 1969, adding with a smile: "Excuse me. But in Africa it was another thing."

An Eritrean-born journalist, Elvira Banotti, who was in the audience, challenged his romantic account, accusing him of rape and of "violent" colonialist behaviour. He defended himself, saying there was no rape because girls in Eritrea married at the age of 12, but acknowledged it would have been considered rape in Europe. "What difference is there physically, or psychologically?" Banotti then replied.

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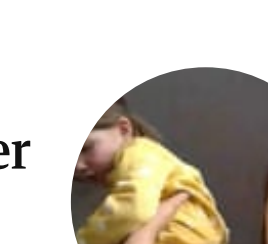
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