

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

General Della Rovere (Il generale della Rovere) 1959

Roberto Rossellini

OVERVIEW

The plot for this film is based on the true story of a conman as told by Indro Montanelli, a prominent journalist in Italy during the war. It was made at a time when Rossellini was in search of a box-office success to offset the financial failure of a documentary about India. Later, he would distance himself from the film, saying it was a 'professional film' and not one of his 'experimental' films for which he prided himself. Nevertheless, it is significant in that it took the director back to World War II, the topic for which he will always be remembered as a result of his famous war trilogy. The film was also assured success by casting Vittorio De Sica in the lead role. De Sica is known outside Italy as another great neo-realist director, but inside the country he was better known as a hugely popular actor. The film went on to make a lot of money and won the Golden Lion at Venice.

SYNOPSIS

The story begins in 1944 in German-occupied Genoa, where Bardone, a middle-aged conman, is saddled with gambling debts and tries to sell a fake sapphire ring that he gave to his girlfriend. He also makes money by taking cash from local families and using it to bribe German officials into releasing their loved ones from prison. When he himself is arrested by the Gestapo, Col Müller decides to use him to identify a prominent man in the local resistance, whom they have captured along with eight other men without knowing which one he is. Bardone is told to impersonate General Della Rovere, the leader of the resistance across the country. The general has actually been killed, but no one except the Germans knows about his death. Bardone is sent into prison, where he successfully pretends to be the general, until he slips up and nearly blows his undercover identity. In order to re-establish his reputation as the general, he is beaten up. Gradually taking on the character of the dead general, Bardone refuses to reveal the identity of the imprisoned resistance leader (though we aren't sure if he actually knows who he is) and joins his comrades when they are executed.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Bardone	Bardone, who calls himself Col Grimaldi, is a conman.
Valeria	Valeria, a singer, is his girlfriend.
General	General Della Rovere, the head of the resistance, is killed halfway through the film.
Müller	Col Müller is a Gestapo officer.
Fabrizio	Fabrizio is a resistance leader.
Banchelli	Banchelli is a prisoner who is also a barber.

STORY

Hard times On a street in German-occupied Genoa, Col Grimaldi helps Col Müller get his car repaired. Grimaldi shows sympathy for the German war effort and leaves after giving a Hitler salute. At home, we discover that Grimaldi is a gambler down on his luck. He begs his girlfriend, Valeria, to give him some jewellery to pawn so that he can pay a gambling debt to a Gestapo officer; otherwise, one of his friend's sons will be sent to Germany. Fed up with his failed promises, Valeria refuses to help him.

Transactions Grimaldi goes to the local Gestapo office, where he is well-known. When mothers and wives ask the officer where their son or husband is, they are told he was arrested as a member of the Resistance. Grimaldi tries to comfort the women while also complimenting the German officer on his 'understanding.' When they are alone, Grimaldi tells the officer that he couldn't raise the money he owes him. We learn that Grimaldi is a go-between, taking money from families and paying bribes to the Germans (after taking a cut himself) in exchange for the release of their loved ones. Moved by the grief of a young woman, Mrs Fassio, whose husband appears to be a hopeless case, he offers his services to her.

Gift Grimaldi, who is really Emanuele Bardone, tries to sell his girlfriend's ring without success. He visits Olga, an old flame in a brothel, who is not pleased to see him and knows the ring is fake but later gives him 30,000. With this capital, Grimaldi goes back to the gambling table, but the game is cut short by a bombing raid.

Della Rovere A man is shot and killed while trying to pass a German checkpoint. Col Müller, however, is not happy because that dead man is General Della Rovere, a leader of the partisan resistance army, whom he had hoped to capture and use as a hostage. Müller decides to bury the body quickly and spread the news that they have captured Della Rovere.

Arrest Grimaldi telephones Mrs Fassio and arranges to meet her at a bar, where he claims that he has made the necessary contacts and takes 100,000 lira from her. Rushing to the Gestapo office, he bumps into Col Müller, whom he helped when his car broke down. Grimaldi explains the situation with Fassio, inventing a half-plausible reason why her husband refused to join the Germans. Charmed by Grimaldi, Col Müller orders Fassio to be released. Grimaldi is about to give Mrs Fassio the good news when she tells him that her husband has been already executed. Grimaldi is then seized by two plain-clothes men and brought before Col Müller, who also questions his girlfriend. Next, when all of Grimaldi's 'clients' are brought in, he explains how he helps them to get their loved ones released. But he didn't always tell them the truth, that their husband or son was beaten and sent to a concentration camp.

Plan Listening to all this, Col Müller says he can charge him with any number of crimes, some of which would mean death. He then looks over his dossier of Emanuele Bardone, his real name, and sees that he was an officer in the Italian army and convicted for several crimes. Müller then proposes a plan: Bardone will impersonate the dead General Della Rovere.

Impersonation Transferred to Milan, Bardone (aka Grimaldi, now Della Rovere) is imprisoned along with other Italians, who have been arrested for being resistance fighters. When he introduces himself to his fellow prisoners as General Della Rovere, they are full of admiration and joy. He is given special attention and put in a cell by himself, where he reads the graffiti of previously executed men.

Prison life One of the prisoners takes ill (or was tortured) and is carried away to a chorus of 'Murderers!' by the other inmates. A man in a nearby cell asks the 'general' if he remembers his brother who served with him in North Africa. Others pledge their support to the 'general,' who tells them to keep up their spirits. A local resistance leader, Fabrizio, is arrested with eight others, but the Gestapo do not know which men he is.

Offer of freedom Col Müller offers freedom to Bardone if he can identify Fabrizio. Not only will Bardone be released, but he will be allowed to cross into Switzerland and collect one million lira. Bardone reluctantly accepts the deal, although he's not sure how he will be able to identify Fabrizio.

Bardone takes charge During an air raid, the prisoners become afraid and demand that their cells be opened. Bardone, who is gradually assuming the personality of the general, takes command and encourages everyone to 'show dignity and courage. Show those swines that you're not afraid of dying.'

Coded message After the barber, a fellow prisoner, shaves him, Bardone discovers that he has left him a note with a coded message. Bardone shows it Müller, who tells him to reply through another note to the barber, who is obviously a conduit for communicating with Fabrizio. One of the guards notices Bardone passing the note and Müller gets angry at him: 'You can't even pass a note without being noticed!' Now the plan is blown and Müller regrets that he will have to torture the barber.

Mrs Della Rovere General Della Rovere's wife visits the prison and asks to see her husband, which would unmask Bardone. Müller manages to convince her that her husband is in good spirits because he thinks his wife and children are safe in Switzerland. Seeing her in Milan would make him worry, he says. She leaves without seeing her husband.

Torture and suicide The barber is brought to Bardone's cell, tortured and badly beaten. Genuinely moved, Bardone swears, 'Damn them!' He asks the barber if he knows who Fabrizio is and told no. Later, when the barber kills himself to avoid more torture, Bardone becomes more incensed and demands to see Müller. Müller blames him for the suicide and is angry that he hasn't identified Fabrizio. He throws him out of his office like a true prisoner. Bardone is beaten up, which prompts the other prisoners to raise a racket in their cells.

Letter Bardone receives a letter written by the general's wife and enclosed with a photo of her with the children. Another man reads him the letter: 'I've told the children what you said: "When you don't know what path to take, take the difficult one".' As Bardone listens, he feels what the real general might have felt.

Condemned men The insurgency becomes intense in Milan, and Müller is ordered to retaliate. Rather than fight on the streets, he decides to execute eleven men, including Bardone. The condemned men are put in a special cell, but they don't know why. They argue among themselves, some thinking they'll be sent to a labour camp and get off early. Some, who claim they're innocent of political crimes, are called cowards. Others are told they're guilty because they're Jews. The Jewish prisoner pray together and then the Catholics. Bardone listens to a man speak of his commitment to a 'better world' and to a second who laments the grief his death will cause his wife.

Execution One by one, the men are called by name and led outside. On their way to the courtyard, Müller intercepts Bardone and asks if he knows who Fabrizio is. Bardone asks for a pencil, writes a short note and tells Müller to give it to Mrs Della Rovere. Müller reads the note: 'My last thoughts are for you. Long Live Italy!' Müller appeals to Bardone, but he joins the ten men tied to posts. All eleven are shot dead. One of Müller's assistant says that they made a mistake because it should only have been ten. Müller says, 'I got it wrong.'

THEMES

1. Politics Curiously, this is a political film without politics. It concentrates on the relationship between two men, one Italian and one German, neither of whom has any real political commitment. Col Müller dislikes torture and all the barbarity associated with the Gestapo, while Bardone gets along just fine with the occupying German army. These two chaps become friends, share a drink and laugh about the oddity of war. In one key scene, Bardone says, 'These are difficult times, for everyone. Both sides need to show understanding. The propaganda of hatred ruins the soul. Don't lose hope. Our German friends are almost always understanding.' Both men seem to be saying, 'Let's not have any animosity just because your army is killing my people. Let's respect each other while our armies are fighting to the death.' The film's apolitical stance reflects the attitude of a large portion of the Italian population. Italy was always muddling up its politics, first an ally of Germany and then joining the Allies. The real-life General Della Rovere was a committed anti-fascist and passionate leader of the resistance, but the film is not about him. It is about a man who pretends to be that hero without sharing his politics. When Bardone accepts death at the end, it is more a person moral decision that one based on ideology. Significantly, the film is based on the story of the real-life hero as told by a journalist who himself switched from supporting fascism to fighting it. If there is any clear political message, it is that collaboration is as Italian as pasta.

2. Appearance and reality Underlying the overt politics of the film is the more intriguing theme of appearance versus reality. Who is the protagonist? He is a distinguished-looking, well-dressed, charming, middle-aged man named Emanuele Bardone, who is a gambler and a conman. However, he introduces himself to others as Col Grimaldi, now an engineer, though once an officer in the Italian cavalry. In truth, he was dismissed for debts and embezzlement and then convicted for various crimes from fraud to bigamy. Then this man impersonates General Della Rovere as part of a bargain to free him if he identifies a partisan leader held in prison. In effect, this is the story of a double imposter (Bardone who is both Grimaldi and Della Rovere) who is charged with the task of identifying another man. Such deception, lying and spying is unavoidable in a country occupied by a foreign power, when one loyalty is laid on top of another. But the film emphasises this ambiguity in both plot detail and characters. First, there is the prominence of the ring, a fake ring that Bardone has given to his girlfriend. For the opening third of the story, he tries to sell it, claiming it is 'rare' and 'oriental' and a 'sapphire,' when, in fact, it is practically worthless. Second, there is Bardone himself, who is a fantasist, a man who believes in his own lies. He even appears to be convinced that the ring is genuine. His most significant example of self-deception, however, is his successful impersonation of the general. When he dies at the end, we are left wondering if he might have really become the hero he so desperately would have liked to be.

3. War Despite this ambiguity, the film does present the true suffering of war, though not as prominently as in Rossellini's famous war trilogy. In the opening shots, for example, we see a poster on a wall: 'Deserters and draft-dodgers will be shot and executed'. Stray cats scavenge in dark, empty streets. Air raid wardens emerge from bombed-out buildings. Groups of women line up to get

water from a single pump. One of the women looks up and says, 'It's cloudy today. They probably won't bomb us today.' Later on, there are bombing raids and blaring sirens, which remind us that while Bardone/Grimaldi is playing out his games, others are suffering and dying. Indeed, the death of the real General Della Rovere in the film (when he tries to evade a checkpoint) is terrifying. Then, there is the torture in prison and the cold-blooded murder of the men by the firing squad. The film is not about war but everything that happens does so as a consequence of war.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Bardone Emanuele Bardone is an aging, petty swindler, who finances his gambling addiction by selling fake jewels and bilking money from the families of men held by the Gestapo. He is thoroughly deceitful, from first to last, although this does not mean that he lacks empathy for the suffering of his fellow citizens or that he cannot rise to heroic heights as he does in the end. By choosing to focus the story on this man, with his tangled web of motives, the director emphasises the ambiguous attitude of many Italians toward the war.

Accommodating Bardone's first scene reveals an essential trait of his complex character. It is early morning as he walks along the street in German-occupied Genoa. Suddenly, a German officer calls to him and asks for help in repairing his car, sabotaged for the fourth time by partisans. Bardone smiles and, speaking politely, gives directions to the nearest telephone, from where a garage can be contacted. He accepts a cigarette from Col Müller and begins to chat about Naples, like two old friends in a pub. Even when Müller begins to complain about the Italy, its people and weather, Bardone replies with smiles and chuckles. When Müller comments that Italians don't like the war, he shrugs and says, 'We don't like wars in general.' Müller says it's a necessary war, and Bardone agrees. Bardone avoids confrontation at all costs, preferring to find common ground with everyone, even (or maybe especially) with a Gestapo officer.

Devious Bardone's first profession is that of a conman. That quality is illustrated during the first segment of the story when he repeatedly tries to pawn or sell a 'rare Oriental' ring. The full complexity of his financial entanglement with the Gestapo is revealed in a scene when he tries to flog this fake ring to the officer who is his contact for getting Italians released from prison. Right after another petitioner leaves the officer, Bardone whips out the jewel. 'It's a sapphire mounted in platinum,' he says, holding it out for his would-be-client to admire. The young officer says he wants cash, not a ring. Bardone says the ring is worth more than his debt to him and that it's an investment. 'Think, when you want to get married,' he says in an avuncular tone. 'I wanted you to have it, for your future.' Bardone fails to offload the fake jewel, but this scene reveals all the devious tricks he has up his sleeve.

Empathetic When he's not gambling, Bardone plays the role of a broker who tries to get men released from prison. Although his motives for these transactions are mixed (he takes a cut from the money with which he bribes the Gestapo), he is certainly moved by the suffering of the families who seek the release of their loved ones. Midway through the story, he goes to his old friend Müller and pleads on behalf of a friend, whose son has been arrested for refusing to join the Italian fascist army. Using all his charm, Bardone pretends that the young man is related to him and explains that he is just a little confused. 'He's proud, very proud,' he says to the German. When the son is released, Bardone rushes to the telephone and conveys the good news to his friend. As he speaks, his voice is brimming with joy and his face is beaming like a light. There is no doubt that Bardone feels sympathy for the people he helps.

Defiant In the final scenes, at the hour of his death, Bardone shows a defiance that we hadn't expected from a man who has lived by fraud and lies. He is among a group of men who are about to be executed on the orders of Col Müller. As they are led out to the courtyard, Müller keeps Bardone behind and asks if he knows who Fabrizio (the leader of the resistance) is. Bardone looks steadily at the Colonel for some time before he says, 'Give me a pencil.' With it, he writes a short note, presumably identifying which prisoner is Fabrizio. But it is written to Mrs Della Rovere, offering her comfort and calling for the independence of Italy. He brushes past Müller and hurries into the courtyard, where he is shot dead along with the others. Commentators have argued about whether his final act is that of a hero or a fantasist. Either way, he has shown bravery when he could have simply named one of the condemned men as Fabrizio and gone free himself. Instead, he chooses to defy Müller and die with his compatriots.

Col Müller Col Müller is a soft-spoken Gestapo officer. Charming, polite and reluctant to resort to torture, he fits the profile of the 'good Nazi'. From the beginning, he makes friends with Bardone and jokes with him. He is dignified in his interview with the real Mrs Della Rovere and even, feels a tinge of remorse, when he orders executions at the end of the story. In some ways, he is portrayed as Bardone's German alter ego: apolitical, convivial and wanting to avoid confrontation. But war is war, and like Bardone, he must do his duty.

Charming The trope of the 'good Nazi' is perhaps overdone in the case of Col Müller, but he plays the role well. A single detail in one scene is telling in this regard. He is sitting in his office when he is told that Mrs Della Rovere has come to see him, obviously to seek the release of her husband. Before she enters, he prepares for this difficult interview. Pursing his lips and wondering what to say to her, he rises from his chair, buttons his coat and straightens his tie before receiving the high-born wife of a man who is not, in fact, in his prison: he is already dead. When she is shown in, he greets her with respect, calls her 'countess' and offers her a seat. Then he butters her up by commenting on her 'courage and devotion' in leaving her sanctuary in Switzerland to come to Milan. He does not grant her request to speak to her husband because she would see that Bardone is not the general. However, he manages to convince her that her husband would be distressed at seeing his wife in Milan and not in Switzerland. This is Col Müller at his most charming. A little deceptive, but that is part of his pleasing character.

Conflicted Müller is more than the stereotypical 'good Nazi.' He has a genuine dislike for the torture that the Gestapo use to extract information from Italian citizens. Still, he is committed to his 'duty', as he puts it. That conflict is dramatised when the prisoner Bardone is caught passing a secret note to the barber. Müller berates Bardone for being so stupid that he was seen. 'Now, I'll have to make Banchelli [the barber] talk,' he says. 'I hate doing those things.' He makes the same point moments later when he questions the barber. He offers the man a deal: tell me who the note was for and I'll commute your death sentence. When the barber refuses to talk, the exasperated Müller cries out, 'Why are you [Italians] all so stubborn? You know we have ways of making you talk.' Again, he gets nowhere and loses his temper. 'Don't force me to use these methods!' he screams. In the end, he does torture the barber, so badly that the man commits suicide to avoid a second session. Müller, however, did not want to hurt the man. He is shown as a conflicted character, torn by his humanity in one direction and by his duty in another.

Ruthless Although he is conflicted, Col Müller will not shirk his duty, however unpleasant it may be. That ruthless streak is illustrated in a scene that follows directly on the barber's suicide, which prompts a near-riot among the other prisoners. Müller summons Bardone and castigates him for ruining the whole plan by getting caught passing the note. He shoves Bardone toward the door, telling him to go back to his cell. But Bardone is afraid the other inmates won't still believe that he's the general and might kill him. Müller tells him, coldly, that 'none of that will happen. You'll go back as a victim. And be welcomed as a hero.' A moment later, we see what Müller means when Bardone staggers to his cell after receiving a savage beating. Müller does not spare his friend Bardone when torturing him is necessary in order to maintain his impersonation of the general. Nothing is more important to Müller than identifying and eliminating Fabrizio. He is ruthless in pursuit of that goal.

Remorseful The Gestapo's cruel character is then modulated again, in the final scene of the film. Ten resistance fighters and Bardone have just been shot by the firing squad. A junior officer says to Col Müller, 'We got it wrong, sir. Ten men were supposed to be executed.' Müller pulls out the short letter that Bardone gave him (including the slogan 'Long Live Italy!') and sighs. 'I was wrong, lieutenant,' he says with a weary face and then repeats that sentence a second time. After a priest blesses the souls of the dead, the film ends. Müller realised that he misjudged Bardone, thinking that he would take the easy way out and save himself. Müller is brave enough to admit responsibility for the error and also seems to feel remorse that his 'friend' has died. With those words, the last spoken in the film, Müller has regained his status as the 'good Nazi'.



(Müller talks to Bardone in prison)



(Müller and Bardone before the execution)



(Bardone arranges to rescue Fassio)



(Bardone attempts to sell a fake ring to a German officer)