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Imperial Thinking and Colonial Combat in the Early Twentieth-Century Italian Army

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Abstract

Although designed primarily as a national institution, between the 1880s and the First World War the Italian army's military operations were all in the colonial sphere. By 1914, Italy claimed an extensive empire in East and North Africa. How far did imperialism shape Italian military culture and institutions? I identify 'imperial thinking' across nine areas of army activity. Italian colonialism relied on a pervasive narrative of Italian benevolence – *italiani brava gente* – with Italian conduct in war or as imperial rulers portrayed as inherently mild. This was accompanied by a set of anxieties we might term Adwa syndrome: after Italy's defeat by Ethiopia at Adwa in 1896, the Italian army was acutely afraid of possible violent uprisings by the local people. Many army officers expected betrayal and brutality from their colonial enemies or subjects, and acted accordingly. This outlook shaped the army's conduct both in the colonies and when dealing with European adversaries in the First World War. While the army of late Liberal Italy was structurally and doctrinally a national army, it was increasingly imperialist in mindset and outlook, which directly affected its conduct on and off the battlefield.

On 9 May 1936, following the conquest of Ethiopia, Benito Mussolini proclaimed that 'Italy finally has its empire'. In fact, although he deliberately presented Italian colonialism as a Fascist achievement, it was the Liberal state which had first built an empire for Italy in North and East Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean, between 1889 and 1923. This centrally directed project, closely linked to the original process of national unification, was primarily pursued through military actions.¹ Though supported and enhanced by a variety of soft power initiatives, such as commercial agreements, schools, Catholic missions, and private investments, the formal seizure of territory was chiefly to be accomplished by the armed forces – whether as a matter of

¹ Nicola Labanca, 'Discorsi coloniali in uniforme militare, da Assab via Adua verso Tripoli', in Walter Barberis, ed., *Guerra e pace* (Turin, 2002), pp. 503–45.

necessity, as in the case of Libya and the Dodecanese, or by choice, to emphasize the strength of Italian arms. Colonial expansion was part of a strategy of asserting great power status, which necessitated a convincing show of military strength – particularly given Italy's poor international military reputation and the rather embarrassing performance of the Regio Esercito in the wars of the Risorgimento.² Italy had been barely welcome at the 1884–5 Berlin Conference; nationalists hoped that successful colonial conquests would boost the country's prestige among its European peers. Through both conquest and administration, the army was thus central to Italian imperialism. By 1914 the Italian army, though strategically oriented towards European war, had significant imperial responsibilities to add to its internal role in policing domestic unrest.

The effects and extent of the army's imperial role and functions have yet to be fully understood. How far did colonial wars change the structure, functioning, planning, and practices of the Italian army in war or peace? Did colonial responsibilities take precedence over others, and with what effect? How was national strategy affected before and during the First World War by the state's imperial status? In short, was the Italian army an imperial one? This matters because the army was one of the few truly national Italian institutions within the Liberal state. In 2002, Nicola Labanca wrote, 'Understanding the ways in which the military institutions undertook their colonial duties is an important, even fundamental aspect of the wider history of colonialism in Unified Italy, or – which comes down to the same thing – the history of Italy in the imperial era.'³

Giorgio Rochat was the first to critically address Italy's colonial military history, in 1973.⁴ Since then, military historians have paid increasing attention to Italy's colonial wars, at political, strategic, operational, and tactical levels, accompanied by studies of important military leaders.⁵ A social and cultural history of the Italian army as an imperial institution beyond the battlefield remains to be written, though the lively historiography on the social and cultural history of Italian imperialism may help to point the way.⁶ The 2004 edited collection *Militari italiani in Africa* indicates the breadth of topics which the intersection of cultural, military, and colonial history might usefully address, from gender to policing, from officer training to cinema, as well as

² On Italy's military reputation, see Lucy Riall, 'Men at war: masculinity and military ideals in the Risorgimento', in Silvana Patriarca and Lucy Riall, eds., *The Risorgimento revisited: nationalism and culture in nineteenth-century Italy* (London, 2012), pp. 152–70.

³ Labanca, 'Discorsi coloniali', p. 505.

⁴ Giorgio Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano. Documenti* (Turin, 1973); see also Giorgio Rochat, 'Le guerre coloniali dell'Italia fascista', in Angelo Del Boca, ed., *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo* (Rome, 2008), pp. 173–97.

⁵ The classic accounts are Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale* (4 vols., Milan, 1986); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia* (2 vols., Rome, 1986); Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna, 2002). Important recent contributions include Bruce Vandervort, *To the fourth shore: Italy's war for Libya, 1911–1912* (Rome, 2012); Federica Saini Fasanotti, *Libia 1922–1931. Le operazioni militari italiane* (Rome, 2012).

⁶ Key works include Patrizia Palumbo, *A place in the sun: Africa in Italian colonial culture from post-unification to the present* (Berkeley, CA, 2003); Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds., *Italian colonialism* (Basingstoke, 2005); Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom, eds., *Italian mobilities* (London, 2015).

highlighting the huge range of relevant archival and published primary sources.⁷ The Italian army's underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values are critical in assessing its actions in the colonies.⁸ In Frantz Fanon's words, 'In the colonies, the official, legitimate agent, the spokesperson for the colonizer and the regime of oppression, is the police officer or the soldier.'⁹ In both combat and policing operations, the army's own culture is essential. The many atrocities and war crimes committed by Italian forces in Libya and later in Ethiopia are well documented,¹⁰ but contemporary sources suggest that most Italian officers believed themselves to be engaging in a civilizing mission. How can we understand the relationship between theory and practice?

A first step is to evaluate the nature and extent of what we might call 'imperial thinking' within the army.¹¹ By the late nineteenth century, a culture of colonialism flourished in Italy among the middle and upper classes, shaping literary, scholarly, and artistic works, and reflected in mainstream education, journalism, and popular fiction.¹² Support for colonial expansion became closely tied to patriotic loyalty to the new Italian kingdom, a sign of modernity and national identification. Imperialism linked the new, vigorous, outward-looking national state to the glories of the classical past: the myth of ancient Rome united colonialism and patriotism. For the prime minister Francesco Crispi (1887–91, 1893–96), colonial expansion was the best way to build Italy's national spirit.¹³ Support for imperialism peaked in 1911 with the invasion of Libya, which enjoyed a broad consensus across Italian society among Catholics and Liberals alike.¹⁴

Italian colonialism had its own distinctive cultural formulation, subtly different from that of European neighbours. The key narrative, to which Italians were (and in some cases remain) deeply wedded, was the idea of *italiani brava gente* ('Italians are good people'), an idea applied particularly to the military. Even the experience of intense violence would not brutalize the Italian soldier, it was argued, thanks to his innate humility, his Catholic faith, and the powerful moderating influence of his mother.¹⁵ In the late nineteenth

⁷ Nicola Labanca, ed., *Militari italiani in Africa. Per una storia sociale e culturale dell'espansione coloniale. Atti del convegno di Firenze, 12–14 dicembre 2002* (Naples, 2004). On the officer corps, see Lorenzo Benadusi, *Ufficiale e gentiluomo. Virtù civili e valori militari in Italia, 1896–1918* (Milan, 2015).

⁸ As amply illustrated in John Gooch, 'Re-conquest and suppression: Fascist Italy's pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922–39', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 28 (2005), pp. 1005–32.

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth* (New York, NY, 2007; orig. edn 1961), p. 3.

¹⁰ Nicola Labanca, 'Colonial rule, colonial repression and war crimes in the Italian colonies', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9 (2004), pp. 300–13; Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?* (Vicenza, 2011); Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa massacre: Italy's national shame* (London, 2019).

¹¹ On imperial thinking in policy and practice, see, among others, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY, 1978); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, NJ, 2010).

¹² Giuseppe Finaldi, *Italian national identity in the scramble for Africa: Italy's African wars in the era of nation-building, 1870–1900* (Oxford, 2009).

¹³ Christopher Duggan, *Francesco Crispi, 1818–1901: from nation to nationalism* (Oxford, 2002).

¹⁴ Isabella Nardi and Sandro Gentili, eds., *La grande illusione. Opinione pubblica e mass media al tempo della guerra di Libia* (Perugia, 2009); Luca Micheletta and Andrea Ungari, eds., *L'Italia e la guerra di Libia cent'anni dopo* (Rome, 2013).

¹⁵ Benadusi, *Ufficiale e gentiluomo*, pp. 155–61.

and early twentieth century this translated into the apparently sincere belief that so-called ‘inferior races’ would recognize Italian benevolence. In 1909, the military newspaper *La Preparazione* declared, ‘Italians never leave hateful memories behind them anyway, because of all the superior races ours is the least rapacious, the least overbearing, the most equal towards the inferior or subject races.’¹⁶ The author claimed that Arabs, Berbers, and other subject peoples of the Ottoman empire would therefore prefer to be colonized by Italy than by France or Britain (apparently not entertaining the prospect that they might prefer either independence or to remain within a Muslim polity).

The belief in Italian kindness was commonplace in both civilian and military circles: Italian colonial culture thus entailed not only support for imperial expansion, but also the idea that the Italian empire would be a mild, mutually beneficial institution. Many Italian commentators deployed a Risorgimento-style rhetoric of ‘liberation’ from foreign (that is, Ottoman) or allegedly oppressive rule (as in the Ethiopian empire). In this reading, Italy would free subject peoples, who would then prosper under its good governance.¹⁷ Alongside the myth of benevolence was a secondary but nonetheless significant strand of colonial discourse, that of ancient rights: across the Mediterranean and Asia Minor, Italy was presented as the rightful heir to classical Rome, making Italian claims legitimate and historically unchallengeable. These potent narratives would be mobilized – even weaponized – against European rivals, African enemies, and even sceptical quarters of domestic opinion.

Colonial spaces and practices significantly shape military culture, an analytical framework that military historians have increasingly seen as important.¹⁸ Peter Wilson’s model of military culture shows how ‘values, norms, and assumptions ... enable choices to be made by predisposing people to interpret situations in a limited number of ways’.¹⁹ Wilson proposes that military culture can be analysed through tracing an army’s mission, its relationship to the state and to society, its internal structure, and its access to and use of resources. Across these five areas, historically specific constraints shape particular military cultures. In this article, however, I seek to analyse just one arena in which military culture operates: colonial empire. Isabel Hull’s work on the use of violence by the imperial German army focused precisely on ‘habitual practices, default programmes, hidden scripts and the basic assumptions behind them’ as developed and demonstrated in colonial conflict.²⁰ In *Absolute destruction*, she argues for a direct line of continuity, indeed of

¹⁶ *Preparazione*, 1 July 1909.

¹⁷ Labanca, ‘Discorsi coloniali’, pp. 518–19, 534; on the myth of Italian benevolence, see Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*

¹⁸ Some important recent works in this field include Jörg Muth, *Command culture: officer education in the U.S. army and the German armed forces, 1901–1940, and the consequences for World War II* (Denton, TX, 2011); Laurence Cole, *Military culture and popular patriotism in late imperial Austria* (Oxford, 2014); Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray, *The culture of military organizations* (Cambridge, 2019).

¹⁹ Peter H. Wilson, ‘Defining military culture’, *Journal of Military History*, 72 (2008), pp. 11–41, at p. 14.

²⁰ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute destruction: military culture and the practices of war in imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), p. 2.

escalation, between German colonial violence and the practices of the German army in the First World War. While the Italian and German cases are very different, Hull's analysis of military culture, and the ways in which it develops and solidifies over time, raises important questions. Did Italians, as she argues for the German case, approach 'colonial wars from inside the frames of their military culture as it had developed in Europe'?²¹ Or, on the contrary, did they import practices and attitudes developed in a colonial context back into the metropole?

By identifying 'imperial thinking' – or its absence – we can better understand the role the Italian army expected to play in the acquisition and administration of colonies, and thus the policies and practices it developed in pursuit of its mission. These ideas have implications for the army's conduct in the First World War, where its treatment of Slavs on the Austrian front was in part racially determined and drew on some colonial practices.²² A better understanding of Liberal-era colonialism's effects on the army is also an essential precondition for re-evaluating the military conduct of Fascist Italy in its colonial and European wars.

This article analyses military culture as revealed in the specialist press, including both official army publications and independent journals addressing military matters for professional audiences. I draw chiefly on the most important of these, the widely read *Rivista Militare Italiana*, accurately described by Marco Scardigli as a reflection of the 'closed world' of Italian officers and their 'moods, hopes, ideas and analyses'.²³ These sources illustrate both officially sanctioned colonial views and a more diverse range of imperial discourses circulating within the regular army more generally, in the period between the Italian defeat at Adwa and the outbreak of the First World War.

I

Imperialism shaped European militaries in a multitude of ways, from political and strategic aspects through to social, cultural, and ideological features. I propose that the effects of empire and imperial mentalities within Western armies can be identified and analysed across the following nine areas:

1. Strategy and war planning: where and when did the armed forces expect war? Was empire a key priority, and how did the army support imperial(-ist) foreign policy?
2. Structure: did the army's organization, structure, and mobilization plans take account of imperial needs?

²¹ Ibid., p. 3.

²² Petra Svoljšak, 'La popolazione civile nella Slovenia occupata', in Bruna Bianchi, ed., *La violenza contro la popolazione civile nella Grande Guerra. Deportati, profughi, internati* (Milan, 2006), pp. 147–63; Marco Pluviano and Irene Guerrini, *Le fucilazioni sommarie nella prima guerra mondiale* (Udine, 2004), pp. 198–214.

²³ Marco Scardigli, 'Esercito italiano e guerra di Libia nelle pagine della "Rivista Militare", 1907–1916', *Africa*, 43 (1988), pp. 90–107, at p. 90.

3. Logistics: did the army's supply chains depend on resources from the colonies? How was colonial combat supplied and equipped?
4. Doctrine: was there a different conception of colonial war as against European war? How did the army theorize wars of colonial expansion and/or the repression of insurgency? Did this spill over into other areas of army doctrine?
5. Operational practice: how did the army act in colonial warfare? What impact did colonial experience have on officers and their leadership?
6. Personnel and recruitment: did empire affect the ways the army recruited? Did the army expand the available labour force using colonial troops of colour?
7. Occupation responsibilities: was the army engaged in extensive non-military tasks such as the administration of territory and the government of civilian populations?
8. Social and cultural outlook: what were the armed forces' views of colonized peoples, their potential roles within metropolitan society, their culture, society, and faith?
9. Formal recognition: did the army adopt names, titles, symbols, and awards indicating imperial allegiance and achievement (like the badges of British units such as the Royal Leicestershire Regiment or the South Wales Borderers)?

This list, while not exhaustive, offers a framework for defining, assessing, and comparing the multiple types of impact of empire on armed forces. Collectively, these areas reveal an army's underlying – and often unspoken – conceptions of nation and empire, as well as the effects of race, culture, and identity.

European armies in the era before the First World War varied considerably in these nine fields, with implications for their conduct of both colonial and European conflict. Where Germany maintained an almost exclusively national army, designed for continental European war and poorly suited to colonial campaigning, France evolved two almost completely separate armed forces, one for home and one for the colonies. The British system, integrating white forces from across the settler colonies with home troops, alongside an efficient separate army in India, was perhaps the model to which the Italians would have liked to aspire. But John Gooch argues that Liberal Italy's army was consistently weak in the colonial sphere: the lack of a dedicated colonial force prevented the development of operational expertise, the absence of coherent political leadership militated against the emergence of consistent imperial strategy, and there was no functional policy for relations with indigenous peoples.²⁴ Nonetheless, there were several contradictory tendencies in the Italian armed forces of the late Liberal period – unsurprisingly. Wilson notes that, 'commonly, military culture is fragmented, exhibiting different, possibly contradictory attitudes and behaviour within the same

²⁴ John Gooch, *Army, state and society in Italy, 1870–1915* (London, 1989), pp. 73–7.

army'.²⁵ The conflicting and competing responses to empire show that there is no simple answer to the question of whether the Italian army was in truth an 'imperial institution'. This reflects the complex relationship between Italy and its empire more generally: state and society fluctuated between intense enthusiasm for empire and being almost oblivious to it. In the present brief overview of the colonial culture of the Italian army it is impossible to discuss all nine of the fields proposed above, so logistics and formal recognition are omitted, while doctrine and operational practice are considered together.

II

Early twentieth-century strategic planning reveals much about the Italian general staff's views on colonial war. Before 1911, extensive plans were prepared for possible future war against the Ottoman empire in Libya, but, beyond this, plans were almost entirely focused on the likelihood of a European war, both against France and (more surprisingly, given Italian membership of the Triple Alliance) against Austria.²⁶ Wars on colonial peripheries, or colonial sideshows spilling over from a general European war, were ignored. In Ethiopia, where Italian ambitions had been thwarted but not terminated in 1896, the army held only a watching brief. Planning for the deployment of expeditionary forces, essential for any colonial war, would have been a complex task, involving the ministry of war and the naval ministry, as well as co-ordination between the army and navy. To complicate matters, inter-service rivalry was acute, and co-operation between the civilian and military branches was poor. When, during and after the First World War, Italy finally did deploy a number of expeditionary forces – in Albania, Macedonia, Palestine, Murmansk, Siberia, and Asia Minor – it encountered considerable difficulties, owing to inadequate preparation.²⁷ Logistics and supply chains were a frequent source of problems, as were civil–military relations and the chain of command operating in politically sensitive deployments. Pre-war planning had neglected these possibilities, perhaps owing to the very different shape that a war fought within the Triple Alliance would have taken. The Italian army's mission was primarily national, not imperial, and its strategy and planning reflected this.²⁸ At the same time, growing colonial responsibilities undermined this clarity of purpose.

III

How, from the colonizer's perspective, should an imperial and colonial army best be organized? Should colonies be garrisoned by an entirely separate

²⁵ Wilson, 'Defining military culture', p. 18.

²⁶ Massimo Mazzetti, *L'esercito italiano nella tripla alleanza* (Naples, 1974); Massimo Mazzetti, 'I piani di guerra contro l'Austria dal 1866 alla prima guerra mondiale', in Ufficio Storico, *Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito*, ed., *L'esercito italiano dall'Unità alla Grande Guerra* (Rome, 1980).

²⁷ Vanda Wilcox, *The Italian empire and the Great War* (Oxford, 2021), ch. 7.

²⁸ A useful summary is Andrea Saccoman, 'Note sull'esercito italiano dall'Unità alla Grande Guerra', *Politico*, 62 (1997), pp. 483–97; compare Wilson, 'Defining military culture', pp. 18–22.

institution or should part of the metropolitan army be based in the colonies? Should it be a professional, permanent force or could conscripts be deployed there? What should be the relationship between national and colonial defence? These were not simple questions for any nation to answer: the British army in India, for example, had undergone radical organizational reform under the management of Lord Kitchener in the first decade of the twentieth century. Each empire required its own unique answers, according to varying levels of anti-colonial resistance and other distinct political features. Even the physical distance between metropole and colony would affect an army's optimum organization.

Italian imperial military organization developed in a rather ad hoc way. The Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniale (Royal Corps of Colonial Troops) was created in 1891, initially as a command structure for the permanent colonial forces in Eritrea. The Eritrean corps was followed by a Somalian corps in 1908, and then in 1914 separate corps were created in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Each was a distinct entity made up primarily of locally recruited men, commanded by white officers transferred or seconded from the regular Italian army, and answerable to the governor of the respective colony. These governors were in turn answerable to the prime minister or, after 1912, to the new minister of colonies; this meant that Italy's colonial armies were not directly controlled by the ministry of war (still less the chief of general staff). Moreover, there was no overarching command structure through which to address military issues common to all four corps such as training, equipment, personnel, doctrine, or organization.²⁹ In short, the colonial armed forces were kept separate from the metropolitan army in both structure and recruitment.

As highlighted by a 1911 article in the *Rivista Militare Italiana*, the question of military organization for empire included not only the creation of a colonial army but also rethinking the structure and deployment of metropolitan forces. Captain Achille Vaccarisi, later promoted to general in the colonial forces, and a divisional commander in the Ethiopian war, addressed political, economic, social, and military aspects of imperialism in his essay 'The importance of today's colonial expansion'.³⁰ Was Italy ready, he wondered, to fight a colonial war? After outlining his vision of the country's future foreign policy priorities and strategic direction, he considered the organizational and logistical implications for the Italian armed forces of prioritizing colonial expansion. The army would need a new structure enabling it both to deal with ongoing responsibilities and to exploit any unexpected opportunities which arose. In particular, Vaccarisi thought that both army and navy should be permanently ready to intervene in any case of Ottoman weakness which might open a path to the seizure of new lands in the Mediterranean and North Africa – his essay was published just six weeks before the Italian invasion of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. For Vaccarisi, if Italy were to be a colonial power, the army must

²⁹ Enrico Cernigoi, *Soldati del regno. La struttura e l'organizzazione dell'esercito italiano dall'Unità alla Grande Guerra* (Bassano del Grappa, 2015).

³⁰ Achille Vaccarisi, 'Importanza dell'odierna espansione coloniale', *Rivista Militare Italiana*, 3 (1911), pp. 1685–1702.

'enter into a new order of ideas'. The reorientation of foreign policy held major implications for military organization: he proposed stationing a permanent 'colonial army corps' in Sicily, and providing it with dedicated training and equipment to prepare for colonial campaigns. Specialized colonial staff officers and comprehensive planning were essential, he argued, to successful imperial expansion. This departure from standard practice would be more than justified by the benefits of rapid mobilization and greater effectiveness in the field.³¹

The Italian conquest of Libya rendered Vaccarisi's proposal moot: Libya could serve as a base for future Mediterranean or North African operations, and became home to a fully colonial army corps. But the colonial army that emerged, based on the system of *Regi Corpi di Truppe Coloniali*, was an army of occupation and border defence rather than of expansion, as he had proposed. Vaccarisi's conviction that fundamental differences in staff-work and structure were required to create a successful colonial army would be ignored, although his observations were frequently supported by the experiences of the war in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. The Italian army struggled there with poor and outdated intelligence and low-quality maps; operational-level planning and staff-work were often inadequate too.³²

This brief sketch suggests that divergent positions within Italy over the role and importance of the colonies were reflected within the organization of the armed forces. Conflicting chains of command above the colonial armed forces created scope for inefficiency and internal conflict, which led to many problems in the 1910s and 1920s. Given that civil-military relations had long been characterized by mutual distrust and obstructionism, hampering effective co-operation, it is not surprising that overlapping sources of authority created considerable problems in the colonies too. The leading military newspaper *La preparazione* campaigned on the issue, calling for the emancipation of colonial military forces from the civilian chain of command.³³ The newspaper saw this problem as intimately linked to the resumption of colonial expansion: editorials claimed that both issues demanded an increase in military prestige and autonomy. Instead, the parallel structure and confused command chain of colonial forces reflected the failure to fully integrate the new colonies into established state structures in the Liberal era.

IV

The Italian army's performance in its colonial wars was not impressive: both in operational doctrine and in practice, serious weaknesses were apparent. Its most famous nineteenth-century colonial battles were the humiliating and traumatic defeats at the hands of the Ethiopian empire, first at Dogali (1887) and then at Adwa (1896). The so-called First African War of 1885–96 led to

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1698.

³² Bruce Vandervort, 'A military history of the Turco-Italian war (1911–1912) for Libya and its impact on Italy's entry into the First World War', in Vanda Wilcox, ed., *Italy in the era of the Great War* (Leiden, 2018), pp. 14–29, at pp. 22–3.

³³ *Preparazione*, 29 April and 24 July 1909, cited in Labanca, 'Discorsi coloniali', p. 533.

the acquisition of Eritrea and Somalia but was tinged with failure from the Italian perspective. Ethiopia's successful defence, making it the first African state to single-handedly fight off a European colonizer, left the Italian military reputation in tatters.³⁴ For Italian military men, it was an 'open wound', an 'eternal nightmare', a source of ongoing humiliation and national mourning.³⁵ Later, the Italian army's difficulties in Libya in 1911–12 revealed that a consistent colonial doctrine was still lacking. While the army had planned extensively at a strategic level for a war in Tripolitania, it had not developed effective operational or tactical plans for unconventional or asymmetric warfare.³⁶ Italian troops were neither trained for colonial fighting nor adequately equipped for desert conditions.³⁷ In general, the army was neither doctrinally nor logistically prepared for colonial war.³⁸

The Italian army was not unique in facing what Dierk Walter calls 'institutional resistance to learning within the imperial military apparatus', but it certainly suffered a severe case of the disease.³⁹ The clearest sign of this flaw at an intellectual level was the failure to engage with contemporary international military thinking on the topic. Charles E. Callwell's 1896 volume *Small wars: their principle and practice* embodied state-of-the-art European colonial military doctrine, especially in its 1906 revised form; Douglas Porch, in his preface to the 1996 edition, referred to Callwell as 'the Clausewitz of colonial warfare'.⁴⁰ Callwell's book explored supply lines and logistics in colonial war; effective fighting against guerrilla forces; tactics and training for metropolitan troops; and the importance of achieving a decisive victory which would avoid endless, unresolved 'pacification' operations.⁴¹ He analysed raids, ambushes, the difficulties of acquiring high-quality intelligence about irregular enemy forces, and the effects of challenging and unfamiliar climactic conditions.

Contemporary British analysts of Italian failures might well have instantly prescribed a course of remedial Callwell. While *Small wars* was promptly translated into French by 1899, the first Italian edition would not be published until

³⁴ Richard Pankhurst, 'British reactions to the battle of Adwa', in Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia, eds., *The battle of Adwa: reflections on Ethiopia's historic victory against European colonialism* (New York, NY, 2005), pp. 216–28. On the battle's legacies within Ethiopia, see Maimire Mennasemay, 'Adwa: a dialogue between the past and the present', *Northeast African Studies*, 4, (1997), pp. 43–89.

³⁵ Benadusi, *Ufficiale e gentiluomo*, p. 29.

³⁶ Gooch, *Army, state and society*, p. 139.

³⁷ Vandervort, 'Military history of the Turco-Italian war', pp. 21–2.

³⁸ Arguably this failing was never fully overcome, despite efforts by Guglielmo Nasi in the late 1920s and 1930s to create an Italian colonial doctrine. See Luigi Goglia, 'Popolazioni, eserciti africani e truppe indigene nella dottrina italiana della guerra coloniale', *Mondo Contemporaneo*, 2 (2006), pp. 5–54.

³⁹ Dierk Walter, *Colonial violence: European empires and the use of force*, trans. Peter Lewis (London, 2017), p. 245.

⁴⁰ Charles E. Callwell, *Small wars: their principles and practice*, ed. R. Douglas Porch (Lincoln, NE, 1996), p. xii.

⁴¹ Daniel Whittingham, *Charles E. Callwell and the British way in warfare* (Cambridge, 2020).

2012.⁴² Only three of Callwell's minor works were translated into Italian in the early twentieth century and none offered great strategic or operational insights which might have helped the general staff prepare for its colonial wars.⁴³ Not one mention was made of Callwell in Italy's premier military publication, the *Rivista Militare Italiana*.⁴⁴ As noted recently by a group of Italian military analysts, we can identify 'a certain mistrust on the part of the [contemporary] Italian army towards this author and his thought despite the fact that it was in reality quite insightful'.⁴⁵ The quality of his insights is debatable – they were, after all, rooted in a brutally racist construction of a 'savage' enemy – but the Italian neglect of Callwell was certainly not on these grounds.⁴⁶ Nor was Callwell the be-all and end-all of colonial military thinking in this period,⁴⁷ but the failure to engage with such an important theorist – and not because a rival thinker was preferred instead – is indicative of a serious overall failing. The weakness was less in the army's engagement with colonial issues than in its intellectual development more generally. Callwell was in good company: Clausewitz did not receive his first full translation into Italian until 1942, and Ivan Bloch's influential 1898 work *La guerre future* has never been published in Italy.⁴⁸

Absent a clear colonial doctrine, or a coherent programme of preparation for colonial operations, the army functioned under the influence of a deep-seated sense of insecurity arising directly from the events of Dogali and Adwa. At Dogali, in 1887, a battalion of some 550 Italian infantrymen was attacked by an Ethiopian force more than ten times the size; 470 Italians were killed. And at Adwa in 1896, an ambitious – not to say foolhardy – offensive resulted in a devastating defeat in which more than half the Italian force were casualties; 7,000 Italians were killed, slightly more than in all the wars of the Risorgimento. Particularly horrifying to the Italian public were (unconfirmed) stories of mutilation and prisoner killing by the victorious Ethiopians, though in reality the killing of prisoners was not uncommon in nineteenth-century colonial warfare.⁴⁹

During the Italo-Turkish war, the direct legacy of these two events emerged in the Italian response to events at Sciara Sciat on 23 October 1911. A few

⁴² Charles E. Callwell, *Petites guerres. Leurs principes et leur exécution*, trans. Albert Septans (Paris, 1899); Andrea Beccaro, ed., *Small wars. Teoria e prassi dal XIX secolo all'Afghanistan* (Gorizia, 2012).

⁴³ Charles E. Callwell, *Ammaestramenti da trarsi dalle campagne nelle quali vennero impiegate le truppe britanniche dal 1865 ad oggi: studio* (Rome, 1887); Charles E. Callwell, *Gli effetti del dominio del mare sulle operazioni militari da Waterloo in poi* (Turin, 1898); Charles E. Callwell, *La tattica d'oggi; traduzione col consenso dell'autore e prefazione del colonnello Mandile* (Messina, 1903).

⁴⁴ *Rivista di Cavalleria*, 21 (1908), and *Rivista di Artiglieria e Genio*, 21 (1904), discussed his ideas on cavalry tactics and field fortifications respectively.

⁴⁵ Marco Valigi, Andrea Beccaro, Giampiero Giacomello, and Francesco N. Moro, 'Insurrezioni e controinsurrezione da Callwell a Petraeus', *Politico* 78 (2013), pp. 115–41, at p. 122.

⁴⁶ Kim A. Wagner, 'Savage warfare: violence and the rule of colonial difference in early British counterinsurgency', *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), pp. 217–37, at pp. 220–1.

⁴⁷ For his contemporaries, see Walter, *Colonial violence*, p. 248–51.

⁴⁸ John Gooch, 'Clausewitz disregarded: Italian military thought and doctrine 1815–1943', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 9 (1986), pp. 303–24.

⁴⁹ Walter, *Colonial violence*, p. 151.

weeks after the initially successful invasion of Tripolitania, a major counter-attack was launched by a joint force of Turkish troops and Arab irregulars. During this determined assault, at the oasis of Sciara Sciat outside Tripoli, the Arab forces took no prisoners: 21 Italian officers and 481 men were killed, including some who had surrendered and a number of wounded. Immediately, the Italian army and press interpreted the event as analogous to the earlier humiliations at the hands of the Ethiopians. Atrocity stories circulated, including tales of torture, mutilation, even crucifixion. This was a familiar cultural script in Italy, and media depictions portrayed such acts as the typically 'barbarous' and 'treacherous' conduct of 'the African race' – casually eliding Ethiopians and Libyan Arabs into one.⁵⁰ The Italian response to Sciara Sciat was extremely brutal: some 4,000 local men and 400 women were executed, some by firing squad and others by hanging. Numerous bodies were left on public display; these atrocities were minutely documented by contemporaries, and photographs of the victims circulated widely internationally.⁵¹ Several thousand Arabs were later imprisoned on the Sicilian island of Ustica in horrific conditions, suffering appalling mortality rates.⁵²

This brutal and unjustifiable reaction – the mass killing of civilians in response to a battlefield attack – shows the 'lessons learned' by Italy at Dogali and Adwa.⁵³ This was not the first example of semi-sanctioned atrocity: in 1891, summary execution of Eritreans was used as a tool for establishing local control.⁵⁴ Nor would it be the last: between 1911 and 1915, when a major insurrection was launched, a series of brutal repressive actions were conducted against Arab civilians in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Beyond killing, other forms of harsh repression characterized the army's occupation of Libya throughout the late Liberal period: mass punitive deportation of civilians – with little legal basis – was followed by their internment in appallingly squalid conditions in Italy, causing many deaths by disease.⁵⁵ Only in a few cases of 'spontaneous' Italian violence were the guilty parties punished.⁵⁶ These episodes were clearly criminal by Italian and international legal standards of the day, so we cannot speak here of changing moral or legal norms, but of clear violation of contemporary rules of acceptable conduct.⁵⁷ The concept of 'trauma-learning', as discussed by Hull, is valuable here. She writes that

⁵⁰ An attempt to correct this approach is Adolfo Orsini, 'Tripoli e Pentapoli', *Rivista Militare Italiana*, 56 (1911), pp. 2589–2604, esp. pp. 2593–4.

⁵¹ Pierre Schill, *Réveiller l'archive d'une guerre coloniale. Photographies et écrits de Gaston Cherau, correspondant de guerre lors du conflit italo-turc (1911–1912)* (Grâne, 2018).

⁵² Angelo Del Boca, *Mohamed Fekini and the fight to free Libya* (New York, NY, 2011), pp. 19–29.

⁵³ On imperial anxieties and retributive violence, see Walter, *Colonial violence*, pp. 175–82.

⁵⁴ The military policeman Dario Livraghi was subsequently tried in Massaua for murder and extortion but was acquitted on the grounds of following orders: see Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, I, pp. 435–50.

⁵⁵ Simone Bernini, 'Documenti sulla repressione italiana in Libia agli inizi della colonizzazione (1911–1918)', in Nicola Labanca, ed., *Un nodo. Immagini e documenti sulle repressione coloniale italiana in Libia* (Manduria, 2002), pp. 119–53.

⁵⁶ Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (PCM), Guerra europea 1915–1918, b. 75, f. Colonie, sf. 4. Also Archivio Storico del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, 127/1.

⁵⁷ Labanca, 'Colonial rule'.

militaries do 'a great deal of their learning ... in times of existential threat'; clearly, for the Italian army, the existential threat posed by the traumas of late nineteenth-century military disasters left profound lessons within the army's culture.⁵⁸ Fear of partisan activity, and consequent violence against civilians in occupied regions during the First World War, were also linked to this mentality.⁵⁹

How can 'Adwa syndrome' be understood in the context of the *italiani brava gente* myth? Italian belief in the narrative of their own benevolence was apparently undamaged by these atrocities.⁶⁰ In fact, the phenomena were directly linked. If Italians really *were* more good-natured and mild than other colonizing powers, some officers fretted, might this not encourage insurrections within the colonies? Were Italians actually too good for their own good? The Adwa complex was rooted in a fear that others perceived them as weak – and the narrative of *italiani brava gente* actually increased that fear.⁶¹ Captain Emanuele Attilio, who in April 1915 illegally seized seven civilian hostages, later killing one, wrote to his superiors that 'for the Arab race, goodness, mercy and generosity are seen as signs of weakness and ineptitude for command'.⁶² This attitude was manifest in the shock and outrage of officers over the so-called rebellion of Sciara Sciat, which they saw as treachery and ingratitude. The rhetoric of the Italian invasion as a liberating force bringing good governance reinforced this fury at local resistance: less than a month into the Italian occupation, with the war's end a year away, to describe resistance as 'rebellion' was to assert the absolute legitimacy of Italy's authority. Essays in the *Rivista Militare Italiana* displayed outrage and betrayal, with some advocating the use of scorched earth tactics so that 'the enemy would learn that the theory of the *good Italian* ... was false'.⁶³ Here the narrative of *italiani brava gente* actually served to prompt calls for greater violence. Enrico Della Valle, a junior officer who served in the Libyan campaign, illustrates the consequences of these assumptions in his remarks on how the Arab population should be treated after Sciara Sciat: 'International humanitarian law must be respected only in war between civilized peoples but ... war against the uncivilized should embrace Lord Kitchener's take no prisoners and no wounded approach, adding to this motto a large calibre rifle and some magnificent dum-dum bullets.'⁶⁴

This invocation of extraordinary violence – illegal in European warfare – rhetorically invokes a circular logic: by their own violent action, the

⁵⁸ Hull, *Absolute destruction*, p. 96.

⁵⁹ Compare the dynamics of violence outlined in John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German atrocities, 1914: a history of denial* (New Haven, CT, 2001).

⁶⁰ Benadusi, *Ufficiale e gentiluomo*, p. 125.

⁶¹ Some commentators even lamented the insufficient vigour of Italian repression: *ibid.*, pp. 144–7.

⁶² Cited in Bernini, 'Documenti sulla repressione', p. 194.

⁶³ Cited in Scardigli, 'Esercito italiano e guerra di Libia', p. 99.

⁶⁴ Enrico Della Valle, 'Considerazioni sull'importanza della Tripolitania e Cirenaica', *Rivista Militare Italiana*, 3 (1912), pp. 1377–1400.

indigenous population had placed themselves beyond any protection from brutality, justifying almost limitless ferocity in response.⁶⁵ As Patrick Porter writes, this argument claimed that 'to a degree it was necessary to become the enemy to defeat it'.⁶⁶ An almost identical vision of 'savage warfare' was presented in *Small wars*, suggesting that Italy developed a kind of Callwell-without-Callwell.⁶⁷ This model was not purely theoretical but can be observed in practice. When the military governor of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, Giovanni Ameglio, was faced with a series of murders committed by his troops against Libyan civilians in 1915, he wrote that these 'episodes [were] local in character' and caused by 'the type of war and the type of enemy which we are fighting'.⁶⁸ For the chief of general staff in Tripoli these were the 'painful but largely inevitable consequence of fighting against less evolved peoples'.⁶⁹ The very nature of the enemy led to Italian atrocities, he argued.

It is notable that Della Valle's direct advocacy of Italian brutality (cited above) credited the British empire as its model, both shifting responsibility for the idea of violating international law and asserting – with justification – that other colonial empires would not hesitate to use vicious reprisals. It was, after all, Winston Churchill who wrote in 1897 that the dum-dum bullet's 'result' was 'wonderful' and its 'stopping power is all that might be desired'.⁷⁰ Della Valle implied that imperial success on a British model required not a 'soft' benevolent approach but the embrace of illegal violence. Italian civilian government, in the form of the ministers of the colonies and of justice, was somewhat less inclined to accept these arguments than the minister of war or the army hierarchy.⁷¹

If earlier colonial wars had taught the army to fear and mistrust native violence, they do not seem to have taught it much else. An analysis of the army's prowess in 1911–12 in Libya does not suggest that significant operational, tactical, or logistical lessons had been learned, and inadequate equipment was still in use. Despite enjoying a considerable numerical advantage over their Turkish adversary, and superior firepower, Italian troops struggled to achieve a tactical victory and were unable to effectively respond to the enemy's adoption of irregular warfare.⁷² Even after Turkey agreed to the treaty of Ouchy in 1912, the Arab irregulars supporting the Ottomans did not consider themselves beaten. However, the Italian army rarely made a systematic analysis of its operational defeats in Libya, which were generally ascribed to 'an unlucky day' or sublimated into moral victories, avoiding the need for any serious

⁶⁵ Benadusi, *Ufficiale e gentiluomo*, pp. 127–31.

⁶⁶ Patrick Porter, *Military orientalism: Eastern war through Western eyes* (New York, NY, 2009), p. 42.

⁶⁷ Wagner, 'Savage warfare', pp. 222–3.

⁶⁸ Telegram from Ameglio to the minister of the colonies, 1 Oct. 1915, cited in Bernini, 'Documenti sulla repressione', p. 193.

⁶⁹ Angelo Del Boca, *Tripoli bel suol d'amore, 1860–1922* (Bari, 1986), p. 303.

⁷⁰ Cited in Wagner, 'Savage warfare', pp. 225–6.

⁷¹ Bernini, 'Documenti sulla repressione', pp. 194–8.

⁷² Vandervort, 'Military history of the Turco-Italian war', pp. 23–4.

interrogation of their causes.⁷³ From Dogali onwards, the army had made little systematic attempt to review and improve its colonial performance, despite the regular critiques and proposals put forward by officers in military journals.

Analyses of the Italian performance in Libya were generally complacent: why would a victorious army need reform? One January 1915 analysis of preparations for the imminent European war asserted confidently that the Libyan war demonstrated the unsurpassed excellence of Italian generals and other officers.⁷⁴ A leading proponent of this view was the chief of the general staff, Alberto Pollio, who, in the words of the military historian Bruce Vandervort, adopted ‘an almost delusional bellicosity’ in the aftermath of victory. Pollio enthusiastically embraced further colonial expansion and in 1912 proposed military occupations of Asia Minor around Izmir or Antalya to hasten the ultimate demise of the Ottoman empire. Italian foreign policy had embraced soft power methods of expansion into these areas since 1908, but Pollio was proposing a radical ‘militarization of what previously had been a largely diplomatic effort to expand Italian interests in the Near East’, an approach which would be partially adopted after 1919.⁷⁵ This gung-ho outlook offered little scope for serious scrutiny of existing problems.

By contrast, political critics, and Pollio’s successor as head of the army, Luigi Cadorna, considered that the war had been mismanaged and had led to a crisis of Italian morale. The Italo-Turkish war offered a number of potentially valuable military ‘lessons’: the importance of wireless communications, the need to mechanize transport, the value of close co-ordination between naval and land forces in amphibious operations, the importance of the air force, and the opportunities offered by close air–artillery co-operation. But the Italian army did not use the war either to develop a theory of colonial warfare or to radically overhaul its regular practices. Instead, the main conclusion extrapolated from the colonial experience was a focus on the importance of the ‘aggressive will to fight’. This concept lay at the heart of the new 1913 Italian army doctrinal manual, *Norme per il combattimento* (*Rules of combat*), produced in accordance with Pollio’s views on the Libyan war, which emphasized the necessity of an overwhelming assault and embraced the use of the bayonet as fundamental to infantry success. The manual claimed that the Libyan war proved that moral victory preceded material victory. This analysis was not unique to Italy – it shared common elements with those of many contemporary European armies – nor was it intrinsically ‘colonial’, given that military commentators on the Russo-Japanese war had reached similar conclusions.⁷⁶ As Michael Howard noted, despite concerns about the effect of increased firepower, ‘the general consensus [was] that infantry assaults with the bayonet were not only possible but necessary’.⁷⁷

⁷³ Labanca, ‘Discorsi coloniali’, p. 506.

⁷⁴ Alderigo Redini, ‘La preparazione’, *Rivista Militare Italiana*, 60 (1915), pp. 113–25.

⁷⁵ Vandervort, ‘Military history of the Turco-Italian war’, p. 24.

⁷⁶ Fernando Nucci, ‘Norme per il combattimento’, *Rivista Militare Italiana*, 60 (1915), pp. 998–9.

⁷⁷ Michael Howard, ‘Men against fire: expectations of war in 1914’, *International Security*, 9 (1984), pp. 41–57, at p. 54.

In 1915, the Italian army went to war on the basis of a February 1915 manual by Pollio's successor, Cadorna, which only marginally revised the tactics and operational approach of the 1913 *Norme*. Though many mid-ranked and senior officers in 1915–16 had prior colonial experience, the highest ranks of the general staff and senior command were dominated by men who had not served in the colonies and who by temperament or experience were disinclined to see it as a valuable source of knowledge. One of the few lessons which Cadorna considered the Libyan war to have usefully illustrated was the unsuitability of white Italians for fighting in Africa. Colonial wars, he increasingly believed, should be fought by local troops of colour, while metropolitan forces should be kept for great power conflicts.

V

In the realm of personnel and recruitment, the acquisition of colonies offered the army two key advantages. If emigration – a major source of manpower loss – could be redirected towards the Italian colonies rather than the Americas, it would be easier to draft and mobilize Italian citizens overseas in wartime. While a few conscripts and reservists did still return from across the Atlantic, most ignored their military obligations. In contrast, men resident in Italian settler colonies in North Africa or the eastern Mediterranean would be physically closer to the metropole and subject to the coercive powers of the Italian state. Colonial expansion thus offered a practical solution to one of the army's major areas of concern.⁷⁸

Secondly, as in the French and British empires, colonies brought the prospect of colonial units or, as they were generally known in Italy, 'indigenous troops'. This practice began in 1888 in Eritrea, with the recruitment of *ascari* (infantrymen) and *zaptié* (gendarmes), along with *spahis* (irregular light cavalry) and *méharistes* (camel cavalry). Soon the generic term *ascari* – an Italianization of the Arab word for soldier – was applied to artillerymen, engineers, and auxiliary services. Africans also served in the Italian navy, border forces, and local police.⁷⁹ The majority came from Eritrea but troops were also recruited in Somalia and in Libya after its conquest; African soldiers were always commanded by white officers.⁸⁰

Early twentieth-century Italian views of *ascari* were sharply revealed by the word's use as a derogatory term in political circles for blind obedience and unquestioning loyalty to leaders. Qualities coded as undesirable in elected representatives were actively welcomed, however, among ordinary soldiers. A 1914 article on military education compared Eritrean *ascari* with white troops in a racial analysis of the Libyan war. The author, an infantry

⁷⁸ Vaccarisi, 'Importanza dell'odierna espansione coloniale', p. 1686.

⁷⁹ Ascanio Guerriero, *Ascari d'Eritrea. Volontari eritrei nelle forze armate italiane, 1889–1941* (Florence, 2005).

⁸⁰ On their deployment, see Nir Arielli, 'Colonial soldiers in Italian counter-insurgency operations in Libya, 1922–32', *British Journal for Military History*, 1 (2015), pp. 47–66, <https://bjmh.gold.ac.uk/article/view/612>.

lieutenant, believed that, because the *ascari* were less 'civilized', they were better soldiers than their supposed racial superiors. The *ascaro* was 'undoubtedly braver and more brilliant than the white soldier. Not only is he heedless of danger, but he experiences a kind of voluptuous enjoyment in battle, making him less sensitive, more energetic, highly motivated and almost unstoppable.' By contrast, the white man was 'rational' and thus comparatively self-interested, cautious, and motivated by logic and duty rather than violent instinct.⁸¹ The higher cognitive requirements of officership were implicitly coded as white.⁸² The article drew on this analysis to propose reform of training methods for white troops, showing how the imperial encounter might reshape wider military thinking, and positing the colonies as a useful (if indirect) source of knowledge and ideas for the benefit of the metropole, via the colonizer's study and analysis.

Similarly, another 1914 article, in the *Nuova Rivista di Fanteria*, analysed the effectiveness of Italian recruits along pseudo-scientific racial lines, comparing them to the perceived strengths of troops of colour. Adopting a biological and psychological perspective, the author proclaimed not only that contemporary warfare was more likely than ancient combat to produce nervous collapse, but that contemporary Europeans were psychologically more frail both than white soldiers in earlier times and, importantly, than their non-white contemporaries. The developed peoples of the world, he wrote, were subject to a series of multiple weaknesses, such as alcoholism, overwork, and racial 'degeneration', whereas the less civilized peoples – like the newly colonized population of Libya – had greater energy and resilience.⁸³ Here, the colonial subject of colour served as a convenient other against which the white Italian could be measured – and anxieties about Italians' own imperfectly defined racial status explored. Given the emphasis placed by Italian and other European thinkers alike on morale and discipline as essential to success for modern infantry, martial spirit and its origins were critically important.⁸⁴

Racial thinking thus underpinned military assessments of both white Italians and colonial troops in the era of the First World War.⁸⁵ Eugenics was a frequent component of military assessment in this period: the military psychiatrist Placido Consiglio (1877–1959), a follower of Cesare Lombroso, published prolifically in both medical and military journals. He became a leading figure in the treatment of psychiatric breakdown during the First World War.⁸⁶ The army hierarchy and military commentators alike saw a close link between ideas about race – which quickly spilled over into openly white supremacist

⁸¹ Pietro Giacone, 'Educazione o istruzione militare?', *Rivista Militare Italiana*, 59 (1914), pp. 793–4, 796–8.

⁸² See also, in the same issue, Errardo Di Aichelburg, 'Gli ascari d'Italia', *Rivista Militare Italiana*, 59 (1914), pp. 743–68.

⁸³ 'Note sulla psicologia del combattente', *Nuova Rivista di Fanteria*, 7 (1914), p. 798.

⁸⁴ Howard, 'Men against fire', pp. 54–5.

⁸⁵ Francesco Cassata, *Building the New Man: eugenics, racial science and genetics in twentieth-century Italy* (Budapest, 2013).

⁸⁶ Andrea Scartabellati, 'Un wanderer dell'anormalità? Un invito allo studio di Placido Consiglio (1877–1959)', *Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria*, 134 (2010), pp. 89–112.

attitudes – and prospects for military reform and improvement. In this respect, the Italian army's colonial experiences shaped attitudes and policies towards soldiers of all races in Italy.

VI

The Italian army had significant territorial governance responsibilities: newly conquered colonies were placed into the hands of generals, tasked with exercising a 'civil and military' occupation until a purely civilian administration could be established. In Eritrea, for instance, military governors ran the colony from its creation in 1890 until 1897.⁸⁷ Most administrative roles were held by army officers – far more military than civilian functionaries built their careers in Africa – who were supposed to work within civilian systems; a mismatch emerged between their training and experience and their working milieu.⁸⁸ Officer training included no preparation for administration or any colonial specialisms, so, in terms of language, culture, and practical administrative ability, the Italian colonies were placed into the hands of men who were ill-prepared to manage them. By training and inclination, these administrators were much more inclined to seek military solutions to problems – including the use of force – than civilians were; the nature of Italian colonial power would inevitably be coloured by the personnel exercising it, in a direction tending towards violence.

As the first colony to be established, Eritrea was widely taken as a model. Its legal and administrative system was a complex hybrid of military and civilian authority, with differing chains of command which in theory operated a system of checks and balances. Multiple ministries claimed authority over colonial affairs, not just the ministry of the colonies: the minister of war had a say on military matters; the maritime ministry on affairs relating to transport, supply, and connection with the homeland; and the minister for foreign affairs on matters relating to colonial neighbours. Collectively this was a recipe for disorder and confusion. Senior officers also held radically different ideas over colonial administration, as Olindo De Napoli's research has highlighted: some favoured an entirely militarized system of administration, while others supported an immediate transition to civilian norms; some wanted to integrate the local elites into colonial ruling structures, others to exclude them.⁸⁹

During the First World War, there were continual conflicts between those – like Cadorna – who wanted to send all possible forces to the Italo-Austrian front, and those like the foreign minister Sidney Sonnino, who believed that deploying men and resources in the colonies could be beneficial to the Italian cause. Only some sectors of the military and political world were what we might term 'imperial-minded' during the war, creating difficulties

⁸⁷ Olindo De Napoli, 'For a "normal government" of the colony: Antonio Gandolfi and the first administration of Eritrea (1890–1892)', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 22 (2017), pp. 450–68.

⁸⁸ Maria Chiara Giorgi, *L'Africa come carriera. Funzioni e funzionari del colonialismo italiano* (Rome, 2012); Labanca, 'Discorsi coloniali', p. 517.

⁸⁹ De Napoli, 'For a "normal government" of the colony', pp. 454–6.

for colonial governors. Each was forced to compete for resources, troops, and, perhaps most critically, the allocation of ships, revealing the relative superficiality of the national engagement with imperial concerns. Yet the experience of administering colonies shaped the professional careers and views of a generation of officers, providing ideas, inspiration, and examples to follow or avoid. The army also gave Italians their greatest opportunity for actually interacting with their colonized subjects, so its views of the colonized were both significant and influential within Italian society.

European empires frequently defined themselves with reference to their peers.⁹⁰ For Italian colonizers, British and French methods of conquering, governing, and understanding empire were vital objects of study.⁹¹ The relationship between the British and their subject peoples was generally praised, particularly British practices of studying, classifying, and collecting knowledge about the peoples, cultures, and places they were to govern. In short, it was believed that Italians ought to emulate British 'colonial knowledge'.⁹² Not everyone agreed, either within the army or beyond, but certainly this view was endorsed by many influential figures such as colonial governors and garrison commanders.⁹³ These administrators learned local languages and engaged closely with local elites, drawing on an intrinsically class-bound vision of colonial society. Such officials denounced what they considered the lethargy and complacency of colleagues who failed to regularly visit outlying regions, work with local communities, or inform themselves about 'native affairs'.⁹⁴ Italian authority, they thought, required appreciating local needs and circumstances.

The editors of the *Rivista Militare Italiana* agreed: from 1911 to 1918, 101 out of the 857 articles published were on topics relating to colonial warfare or colonial knowledge.⁹⁵ These included essays on political Islam, the Qur'an, Ethiopian customs, Somali demography, Phoenician culture in ancient Libya, Moroccan history, Arab-Turkish relations, British rule in Egypt, Tripolitanian society, and much more besides. During the First World War, it was the army and navy that surveyed the geological, industrial, and agricultural opportunities inside prospective colonies such as Albania and southern Anatolia.

While Britain was praised for its relations with its subjects, traditional French colonial practice was seen as overly rigid and doctrinaire; in reality, however, the so-called French approach was common. Plenty of colonial

⁹⁰ E.g. Alex Middleton, 'French Algeria in British imperial thought, 1830–70', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 16 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2015.0012>.

⁹¹ For a comparison between Italian and British models, see Giorgi, *L'Africa come carriera*, pp. 45–9; on Italian views of French errors in Algeria, see Emilio Paganisi, 'La conquista dell'Algeria', *Rivista Militare Italiana*, 63 (1918), pp. 48–60, and sequels.

⁹² Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); C. A. Bayly, *Empire and information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁹³ De Napoli, 'For a "normal government" of the colony', pp. 456–7; Labanca, 'Discorsi coloniali', pp. 518–19.

⁹⁴ ACS, fondo Giovanni Ameglio.

⁹⁵ Database of RMI articles kindly compiled by Demetrio Iannone in 2018.

army men stayed safely in their offices, relied entirely on local translators and interpreters, and made no effort to meet or understand the local people. General Antonio Gandolfi, the first governor of Eritrea, from 1890 to 1892, wanted to embrace civilian norms of governance and work together with local elites, but his successor, General Oreste Baratieri, demanded more conquest and militarization while dismissing the capacity and competence of native East Africans.⁹⁶ It was Baratieri whose racially based overconfidence led Italy towards the disaster at Adwa in 1896, and his spiritual successors who similarly overestimated their strength in Libya fifteen years later. Senior officers' suspicion and mistrust of colonial subjects in peacetime and wartime alike held profound implications for the long-term management of the colonies.

VII

In operational and organizational terms, the Italian army was manifestly not an imperial one in the era of the First World War; on the contrary, it was designed and functioned as a national army, a tool of social and geopolitical nation-building. If senior officers intermittently entertained a misplaced confidence about its abilities in the colonial sphere, the army lacked both the doctrinal foundations and the planning, logistics, intelligence, or staff-work which would have enabled it to operate effectively there.⁹⁷ At a deeper level, inadequate funding and a lack of unequivocal political and social commitment undermined the development of a solid approach to colonial warfare.⁹⁸ But increasingly, in terms of mentality and outlook, the officer corps was moving towards the adoption of an imperial mindset. As a result, a damaging gulf very rapidly emerged between the assumptions, discourses, and rhetorics of empire within the army, and realities on the ground. This in many ways served as a microcosm of Italian imperialism more generally: a lot of talking, not much doing; a lot of dreaming and scheming, much less conquering or governing.

The failures of Italian imperial ambitions in the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the First World War further illustrate this point. And this divergence was also dangerous when it came to military effectiveness: for instance, it prevented effective learning and transfer of tactical and operational lessons after the Italo-Turkish war, which contributed to leaving the Italian army in relatively poor shape in 1914. Rhetoric, in this period, was at least as important as reality on the ground in shaping Italian military policy and practice in Africa. Under these circumstances, the myth of *italiani brava gente* was a dangerous one, which fed into anxieties and insecurities prompted by the humiliations of Adwa.

The legacies of this mentality were grave: without downplaying the impact of Fascist ideology, it is significant that the architects of the extreme Fascist

⁹⁶ Labanca, 'Discorsi coloniali', p. 519.

⁹⁷ Gooch, *Army, state and society*, pp. 76–7.

⁹⁸ Or, to put it another way, relationships to the state and to society, and access to resources; see Wilson, 'Defining military culture'.

violence of the 1930s, such as Rodolfo Graziani (commissioned 1904) or Alessandro Lessona (who attended Modena Military Academy in 1910), emerged from precisely this Liberal-era military culture. Excessive or demonstrative violence might be justified in the name of correcting (a fear of) perceived Italian weakness: as Hannah Arendt has written, 'Rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost', for, as political weakness is exposed, 'loss of power tempts into substituting violence'.⁹⁹ However small and insignificant the empire may have seemed to outsiders, and however marginal even to some within Italy, ideas about empire and its values permeated many Italian officers' worldview and political outlook. Fantasies of empire were deeply embedded into Italian military culture well before the rise of Fascism.

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⁹⁹ Hannah Arendt, 'Reflections on violence', *Journal of International Affairs*, 23 (1969), pp. 1–35, at p. 20.

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