
Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935–1940

ALEXANDER DE GRAND

Mussolini as imperialist

In a moment of unintentional humour a nonplussed Colonial Minister Alessandro Lessona met with the Duce after the conquest of Ethiopia to discuss plans for the new territories. Lessona found Mussolini not very interested in the subject: 'To him the political result of proclaiming the empire was enough. I also had the impression that he did not exactly realise Ethiopia's importance as a solution to the vital problems of the Italian people.' Lessona was convinced that 'if, instead of Abyssinia, we had conquered Syria or whatever territory, for him it would have been about the same'.¹ In fact, Mussolini responded as an unabashed imperialist. Colonial territories were merely geopolitical assets. Lessona compounded his misunderstanding by noting that the value of the empire was not so much for Mussolini as for Italy – an opinion that indicated an almost impenetrable stupidity.²

How, then, did Mussolini, who seemed to care so little about the colonies themselves, come to shift resources in their direction on massive scale? What did this shift signify for the development of the Fascist regime both at home and in the empire? After the failure of the corporative experiment in 1934, the next phase of the regime, from 1935 to 1940, became racist, imperialist and colonialist. The purpose of this article is to suggest some of the reasons for this turn of events and to attempt to bring together studies of Italian imperialism with an analysis of the internal dynamic of the Fascist regime.

Italian fascism lacked a consistent ideological structure, except for radical nationalism and the cult of the Duce. For much of its history the regime spun from point to point like a broken compass. In 1919 and 1920 fascism was a vague leftist, republican, populist anti-party movement. Then, in 1921, it became a monarchist right-wing party. It believed in *laissez-faire* economics under Alberto De Stefani from 1922 to 1925, then shifted to policies of state control and cartelisation under

¹ Alessandro Lessona, *Memorie* (Rome: Edizioni Lessona, 1963), 269. All translations are by the author.

² *Ibid.* 347. Aldo A. Mola distinguishes between imperialism and colonialism. The latter was the occupation of overseas territory as an outlet for emigration, the expansion of metropolitan society and commercial development. A. A. Mola, *L'imperialismo italiano: La politica estera dall'Unità al fascismo* (Rome: Riuniti, 1980), xiii.

subsequent economics ministers. From 1929 to 1934 corporatism was the hallmark of Fascism; in 1935 and 1936, the regime declared a corporative pause and moved to a war footing and autarky. During the late 1930s, for reasons we will attempt to determine, imperialism, colonialism and racism took over as central themes. If Hitler had won the war, Fascism would almost certainly have taken on a stronger, Nazi-like orientation.

Despite this instability in Fascist policy, Mussolini's personal beliefs remained constant. He believed that imperialism was a law of nature, just as life was struggle, conflict and conquest. Expansion and the conquest of territory were manifestations of national virility.³ However, combined with a strong sense of insecurity over Italy's status as a great power, aggression easily turned into pure brutality. In 1918, Mussolini spoke disparagingly of Italy's reputation as a nation of mandolin players, peddlers and storytellers. Past military defeats at Lissa, Custoza and Adua weighed heavily on the Fascist present. Mussolini, along with all other Fascists, was convinced that Italy had been wronged by other powers because it was weak. Resentment was never far from the surface.⁴

Mussolini viewed colonies as the projection of resurgent Italian power. One conquest became the springboard for further demands. By the late 1930s Fascism's appetite had expanded exponentially and without much contact with reality. Giuseppe Bottai recounts a meeting of the Grand Council at the end of November 1938, when the leadership was treated to a Ducean diatribe on future plans for expansion: 'We have revenged Adua with the conquest of Ethiopia. We will revenge Vullona with the annexation of Albania. Albania is necessary for balance in the Danube region. We will balance German penetration on the Danube along the line from Durazzo to Istanbul. I come to the Mediterranean. Our position in this sea is very difficult. We must improve it. We need Tunisia and Corsica. Then there is another issue with France, Djibouti. Finally, we will focus on Switzerland. Switzerland is crumbling'. In February 1939 Mussolini rambled on about the Mediterranean as a prison, the bars of which were Cyprus, Malta, Tunisia and Corsica; Suez and Gibraltar were the gates. The ultimate aim was to break out into both the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. The old expression, 'if wishes were horses, beggars would ride', comes to mind. We are not dealing with a well-thought-out foreign policy, but neither were Hitler's late-night dreams of a racial utopia. Both men carried expansionist aims to an extreme.⁵ In theory, Mussolini's model was imperial Rome and its domination

³ On Mussolini's imperialism, see Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce: Gli anni del consenso, 1929–1936* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974); Macgregor Knox, 'Conquest, Foreign and Domestic, in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany', in Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 60–2; Pier Giorgio Zunino, *L'ideologia del fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985), 356–7.

⁴ Knox, 'Conquest, Foreign and Domestic', 61–2; De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce*, 334. Mussolini deeply resented British obstruction of his plans for war in Ethiopia. See Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933–1940* (Houndsmill: Macmillan Palgrave, 2003), 53.

⁵ Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario 1935–1944*, ed. G. B. Guerri (Milan: Rizzoli, 1982), entry for 30 Nov. 1938; for another version of the same speech, see Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937–1943*, ed. Renzo De Felice (Milan: Rizzoli, 1980), entries for 30 Nov. and 2 Dec. 1938, 219–20; 'Il duce proclama che le

of the Mediterranean and North Africa; more immediately, Mussolini envied and sought to displace the British empire – something he could only do in alliance with Nazi Germany.⁶

A poor man's empire

That such grandiose schemes could be conjured out of a colonial tradition whose most striking feature was its marginality throughout much of its history up to 1934 is quite extraordinary. Nicola Labanca noted that the Italian colonies attracted neither peasant farmers nor any significant commercial and economic base. Italian trade with Africa in the 1860s represented only 1.6 per cent of total imports and 1.69 per cent of exports. By the 1890s these figures inched up to 2 per cent and 2.6 per cent. Labanca concluded that 'the narrowness of the commercial interests says a lot about the restricted bases of the colonial imperialism of the last of the great powers.' Colonial expansion became the special interest of certain parts of the Italian ruling class who were motivated by questions of national prestige.⁷

Italian pre-Fascist colonialism was also marked by a determined effort to economise, a sentiment shared by most colonial empires, but one that took on special urgency for impoverished Italy. Once Francesco Crispi departed the scene in 1896 after the defeat at Adua, Italian governments, unwilling to withdraw from Africa, adopted the next best tactic by cutting costs. For instance, Italy held Eritrea with a minimum of troops and cost. The result was a small Italian community of 2,410 people by 1913, in which the military, service and craft workers and simple proletarian types predominated.⁸

For those involved in colonial ventures, Adua added an additional emotional element. Memories of the defeat would be recalled at every setback or hesitation as a sign that Italy might once again buckle under pressure. Adua created a deep wound

rivendicazioni italiane hanno nome: Tunisi, Gibuti, Canale di Suez', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 37 March 1939; G. Bruce Strang, *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 213–15. On Mussolini's concept of 'spazio vitale', see Aristotle Kallis, *Fascist Ideology: Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922–1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 50–1.

⁶ Paolo Orano, ed., *L'espansione coloniale* (Rome: Casa editrice Pinciana, 1940), 37, 83–115, 151–3. The *Popolo d'Italia* explicitly referred to the drive for parity between the Italian and British empires. 'Sul piano del impero', 4 Jan. 1939. In a very anti-British editorial, the *Critica fascista* argued that Italy could never be a great power until it gained mastery over the Mediterranean by displacing Britain. See 'Guerra di liberazione' and 'Dall'Africa all'Europa', *Critica fascista*, 15 May 1940.

⁷ Nicola Labanca, *In Marcia verso Adua* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), 163–4, 79. Labanca does not deny that major economic groups profited from colonial expansion, even if Italy as a whole did not. On the forces behind expansion, see Daniel Grange, *L'Italie et la Méditerranée* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1994), II, ch. 20, 'Éléments d'un consensus expansioniste', and ch. 22, 'Les groupes de pression'.

⁸ Labanca, *In marcia verso Adua*, 144; Giulia Barrera, 'The Construction of Racial Hierarchies in Colonial Eritrea: The Liberal and Early Fascist Period (1897–1934)', in Patrizia Palumbo, ed., *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-unification to the present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003). Giulia Barrera generously put this and other unpublished manuscripts at my disposal.

that would not heal. It lingered as evidence that Italy could not meet the challenge of prevailing in Africa.⁹

The First World War began with high hopes but brought one disappointment after another to Italian colonialists. During the war Italy lost effective control over a large part of newly conquered Libya. Though Italy aspired to major additions to the existing colonies of Eritrea, Somalia and Libya, it returned from the Paris peace conference with nothing to show for its efforts. Thus, at the end of the war Italy had to start from scratch in reassembling its empire. Italy faced difficult problems in Eritrea; Somalia was in a state of semi-anarchy; Libya was in open revolt.¹⁰

When the Fascists took power in October 1922, they inherited a well-developed colonialist ideology, insecurities about Italy's great power status, and a decidedly unfavourable balance of power situation. Italy simply did not have much leverage to force concessions from either France or Britain. From 1922 to 1934 Mussolini could do little to remedy the situation. He inherited the colonial programme that was designed by the Italian Nationalist Association and by the career diplomats in the Colonial and Foreign ministries. Apart from verbal flourishes and a minor accord in 1925 with Britain on spheres of interest in Ethiopia and the cession of Jubaland to Somalia, little of substance was accomplished in the colonial sphere during the 1920s.¹¹ On 26 May 1926, after aggressive speeches in Tripoli that provoked negative reactions in Britain and France, a deflated Mussolini declared to the Senate that Italian imperialism was not warlike: 'I must declare . . . to the world, to the entire world, the Fascist government follows and can only follow a policy of peace'. It must have been galling to retreat so publicly, especially for a man who detested the status quo. Acceptance of the international order created in 1919 meant for Mussolini the acceptance of secondary status as a great power. In the eyes of the Duce and most Fascists, the rules of the game were loaded against Italy.¹²

The reconquest of Libya

If Mussolini could do little to enlarge his empire, he could reassert control over what he already had. Fascism's fundamental brutality, uninhibited by any moral constraints and so prevalent in the years leading to the March on Rome, spilled over with a vengeance into the colonies. During the First World War efforts were made to

⁹ Nicola Labanca, 'Memorie e complessi di Adua: Appunti', in Angelo Del Boca, ed., *Adua: le ragioni di una sconfitta* (Rome: Laterza, 1997), 399, 402–6; Giulio Pescosolido, 'Il dibattito coloniale nella stampa italiana e la battaglia di Adua', *Storia contemporanea*, no. 4 (1973), 675–711; L. Marcantelli, 'La Waterloo africana', *La Tribuna*, 13 March 1896, cited in Luigi Goglia and Fabio Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua allo'Impero* (Bari: Laterza, 1981), 59–60.

¹⁰ Giampaolo Calchi Novati, 'Studi e politica ai convegni coloniali del primo e secondo dopoguerra', *Il Politico*, 55 (1990), 501–3.

¹¹ Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, vol. 2, *Conquista dell'Impero* (Bari: Laterza, 1976), 7, 19, 74–5; Labanca, *In marcia verso Adua*, p. 22; De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce: Gli anni del consenso*, 364–5. De Felice contended that Mussolini lacked a coherent foreign policy programme on taking office and that his impressions were those of a nationalist journalist (p. 331).

¹² Mussolini's speech was cited in Del Boca, *La Conquista del Impero*, 11–12; on Fascist Italy's rejection of the status quo, see Zunino, *L'ideologia del fascismo*, 315–16.

associate Libyan Arabs with the Italian administration through consultative assemblies, and a 1919 reorganisation of the colony offered opportunities for representative government. Arabs were allowed their own schools with instruction in native languages. Access to Italian citizenship was possible. These and other concessions were withdrawn under Giuseppe Volpi, who was sent as governor under the last pre-Fascist cabinet. Volpi was retained by Mussolini and managed the first stages of the reconquest of Tripolitania. A new organic law for Libya in 1927 accentuated the centralising and authoritarian rule that the Fascists had already imposed on the mainland. Gone were any guarantees of free speech and assembly. A regime imbued with concepts of natural aristocracies and hierarchies at home could hardly resist imposing them on colonial subject peoples. Volpi clearly distinguished between Italians and Arabs in terms of access to political rights, career opportunities and citizenship.¹³

Volpi's policy of large-scale land confiscation marked a second development under fascism. In April 1922 all lands belonging to rebels or their supporters were taken by the state. Land in Tripolitania was then used to reward powerful agrarian interests and prominent figures in the regime, beginning with Volpi himself. General Rodolfo Graziani, Amerigo Dumini who was the murderer of the socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti, and Mussolini's secretary Alessandro Chiavolini also received substantial holdings.¹⁴

By the time that the repression in Tripolitania was over in 1930, Graziani, vice-governor of Cyrenaica, had begun a similar crackdown in the eastern half of the colony. Graziani and Pietro Badoglio, appointed governor of Libya in 1929, isolated the rebels in Cyrenaica by separating them from support from the general population. The Fascist administration physically eliminated any Libyan who opposed the reconquest. The Fascists had even less respect for their colonial opponents than they had for socialists, communists and democrats. On 20 June 1930 Marshal Badoglio wrote to General Graziani about the methods for fighting the war: "As for overall strategy, it is necessary to create a significant and clear territorial separation between the controlled population and the rebel formations. I do not hide the significance and the seriousness of this measure, which might be the ruin of the so-called subdued population... But by now the course has been set and we must carry it out to the end, even if the entire population of Cyrenaica must perish".¹⁵ Large numbers of people were moved into concentration camps; Omar al-Mukhtar, the leader of the Sanusi rebels, was hanged in 1931 before 20,000 concentration camp inmates. In what Angelo Del Boca called a small genocide, fifteen camps were set up that

¹³ Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia*, 50, 121–2; Gennaro Mondaini, *La legislazione coloniale italiana nel suo sviluppo storico e nel suo stato attuale (1881–1930)*, 2 vols. (Milan: Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale, 1941), II, 634; Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (London and New York: Longman, 1976), 36, 42. Concessions made to Arabs in 1919 were considered humiliating and unbearable by the Fascist radical Asvero Gravelli. See Asvero Gravelli, ed., *Africa: Espansionismo fascista e revisionismo* (Rome: Editrice Nuova Europa, 1933), 8.

¹⁴ Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia*, 52–5; Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, 38.

¹⁵ Piero Pieri and Giorgio Rochat, *Pietro Badoglio* (Turin: UTET, 1974), 614.

eventually took in half the population of Cyrenaica. The population of the province had been roughly 200,000 in 1911, during the Ottoman period; by 1931, it had declined to 142,000, with 20,000 in exile in Egypt and 40,000 dead. A way of life for the nomadic tribes disappeared, but the Fascists had little concern for these details. The government even experimented in a minor way with the use of poison gas in violation of the 7 June 1925 convention against chemical and biological warfare.¹⁶

The tactics chosen are less surprising when we see some prominent *gerarch*i (Fascist leaders) serving as administrators in the colonies. Libya and East Africa became places to park inconvenient *gerarch*i, such as the buffoon Cesare Maria De Vecchi. This incompetent served in Somalia from 1923 to 1928. Colonial Minister Luigi Federzoni urged his appointment on grounds that his stupidity would do less harm there than elsewhere, but this did not stop his eventual advancement to Minister of National Education! After a stint in the latter post, De Vecchi served from 1937 to 1943 in the Dodecanese Islands, where he applied his hamfisted policies to the annoyance of the Greek population. While in Africa, De Vecchi ordered the extremely bloody action by Fascist squads against Somali dissidents on 28 October 1926 that caused about one hundred deaths. Emilio De Bono, another embarrassment, who as head of the police was involved in the Matteotti murder and had to disappear temporarily, was shipped off to Tripoli as governor from 1925 to 1929. Italo Balbo, who had become too popular as Aviation Minister, was also dispatched to a gilded exile in Libya after 1933.¹⁷

An empire on the cheap

Until 1934, the Fascist regime continued earlier policies of diverting as few resources as possible into colonial development. What little that was spent went for military campaigns. The impact of the colonies on the Italian balance of trade was also relatively slight. In 1925 imports from the colonies were 4.29 per cent of total imports and exports from Italy to the colonies were 6.63 per cent of total exports. These figures crept up slightly by 1930, to 4.8 per cent and 7.3 per cent. Even under its economic policy Italy was putting more into the colonies than it was getting from them.¹⁸

Military expenditure ranged from 31.6 per cent of total expenditure in 1926 down to 27.4 per cent in 1931 and 22.9 per cent in 1934, before rising steeply at the beginning of the Ethiopian war. In 1931 military expenditure for the colonies was

¹⁶ Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia*, 182–3; Giorgio Rochat, 'Le guerre coloniali dell'Italia fascista', in Angelo Del Boca, ed., *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 1991), 177–9; Habib Wadaa al-Hasnawi, 'Note sulla politica coloniale italiana verso gli arabi libici (1911–1943)', *ibid.*, 43–5; Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, 40–41; on the use of gas, see Del Boca, 'I crimini del colonialismo fascista', in *idem*, *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, 237–38; Giorgio Rochat, 'L'impiego dei gas nella guerra d'Etiopia', *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 17 (January 1988), 78.

¹⁷ On De Vecchi, see Del Boca, *Conquista del impero*, 51–3; 'I crimini del colonialismo fascista', in *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, 243–4; Nicholas Doumanis, *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean: Remembering Fascism's Empire* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997), 82–4.

¹⁸ Felice Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche fra le due guerre*, ed. Luciano Zani (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988), 654.

only 2 per cent of total expenditure.¹⁹ Using data from the state accounting office, Giuseppe Maione calculated that between 1923 and 1934 the colonies absorbed 1.9 per cent of total spending, but he cautions that many items were concealed in other accounts. Maione then went back to Antonino Repaci's work on public finance to raise the estimate to 2.14 per cent. Whatever the amount, Italian forces in the colonies were kept to the minimum necessary in those years. Even the reconquest of Libya was accomplished with relatively few troops against lightly armed rebels. Italy relied on its technical superiority, high mobility, good communications, Libyan irregulars and Eritrean auxiliary forces. In Eritrea and Somalia, 8,000 troops including native units sufficed.²⁰ These figures also reflected the small population of the colonies. Pre-1935 Eritrea had a population of fewer than 5,000 Italians and Somalia only about 1,000. A report of Colonial Minister Emilio De Bono to Mussolini on Eritrea in 1931 stressed a lack of investment across the board, especially in infrastructure. A chronic shortage of funding was made worse by the depression-era budgets from 1928 to 1932.²¹

'The empire is swallowing Italy'

Between 1935 and 1940 these trends were abruptly reversed as a massive transfer of funds to the colonies took place. The years from 1935 to 1940 marked Fascism's imperial-colonialist phase, but until recently historians have not integrated this into the general history of the Fascist regime.²² To start with, the war in Ethiopia took between 21 and 28 per cent of public spending. In addition, by 1936, the colonies took 33.89 per cent of all Italian exports, while accounting for only 7.3 per cent of imports. This meant that roughly one-third of Italian exports went to the colonies in 1936 and one-quarter in 1937. Between April and June 1936, when League of Nations sanctions really bit, the figure soared to 45 per cent. In real terms, Italian exports to the colonies went from L 248 million in 1931 to L 2.5 billion by 1937.²³ No previous government had felt that such costs were sustainable, nor had any government attempted a similar redirection of resources from the mainland to the colonies. The shift was impressive, but, according to the Minister of Foreign Exchange

¹⁹ Mola, *Imperialismo italiano*, 308–12.

²⁰ Giuseppe Maione, 'I costi delle imprese coloniali', in Del Boca, *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, 401, 403–5, 413; Rochat, 'Le guerre coloniali dell'Italia fascista', *ibid.*, 177; De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce*, 603.

²¹ Giulia Barrera, 'Mussolini's Colonial Race Laws and State – Settler Relations in AOI (1935–1941)', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8, 3, (2003), 428; Del Boca, *Conquista del impero*, 158–9.

²² Nicola Labanca noted the relative lack of studies on colonialism. None of the general histories of the regime attempts to integrate the colonial experience. It is either ignored or treated as a diplomatic problem. See Nicola Labanca, 'Il razzismo coloniale italiano', in Alberto Burgio, ed., *Nel nome della razza: Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999), 157–9.

²³ Maione, 'I costi delle imprese coloniali', in Del Boca, *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, 401, 413–15. Mola saw similar sharp increases in total military expenditures between 1935 and 1940. The colonies absorbed 29.6 per cent of public expenditures in 1936 and 23.5 per cent in 1939. Mola, *L'imperialismo italiano*, 308–21; Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche*, 654, 750–1. Exports reached L350 million in 1937. Alberto Asquini estimated that the negative commercial balance in 1937 would be as high as L 1.75 billion. Costs would run at about 1 billion lire per year, but road building was in a separate budget category (L3 billion) as were other public works (L2 billion). Alberto Asquini, 'La politica economica dell'Italia in Etiopia', *Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, 1 (1938), 855–6.

Felice Guarneri, also impossible for the Italian economy. In the first half of 1937 the empire drained L 650 million in foreign exchange for things that could not be found in either Italy or the colonies (Suez canal tolls, rental of foreign passenger liners for sick and wounded Italians, trucks and tractors from French and American sources, payments to workers from the Sudan and Yemen). A vast new imperial capital was to be constructed at Addis Ababa, but, of course, most of the building materials had to be imported.²⁴

The general colonial government, the various colonial administrations that sponsored mining offices, various parastatal agencies, such as the Agenzia Mineraria Africa Orientale (AMAO), which was set up to prospect for precious metals, and the Agenzia Generale Italiana Petroli (AGIP) which sought oil and gas deposits, and a number of other public and private ventures all worked to turn the empire into a profitable enterprise, but had little to show for their efforts. Wealthy parastatal institutions, such as the Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale (INPS), the major national old age and health insurance agency, had its assets plundered in order to pour money into the colonies. The Libyan Hotel Tourism Office, the Hotel Real Estate Office for East Africa, and the Istituto per la Case Popolare in Africa Orientale financed building projects. According to the Minister of Italian East Africa Attilio Teruzzi, 4,000 km of roads had been built by 1939, in many cases at very high cost per kilometre.²⁵ Increased spending could hardly be helped, with the exploding Italian population. Giulia Barrera estimated that the Italian population of Eritrea increased from 5,000 to 73,000 by 1941, and over 300,000 soldiers trained there at various times. Ethiopia went from having almost no Italian inhabitants in 1935 to 62,000 in 1940. Somalia had a smaller increase.²⁶

Libya also underwent a similar costly expansion. Giuseppe Volpi and Emilio De Bono, governors of the colony during the 1920s, had already invested large amounts in the reconstruction of Tripoli. The Italian population of the city increased from 819 in 1911 to 21,756 in 1931, and by the late 1930s, 36 per cent of Tripoli's population was Italian.²⁷ Especially during the boom years under Italo Balbo after 1933, Libya remained a costly venture. Tripoli had little in the way of productive enterprises outside sawmills, a few factories, and small shops. The economy rested on subsidies

²⁴ Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche*, 757, also 494, 751; Ciro Poggiali, 'La nuova Addis Abeba', *Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, 1 (1938), 457–93.

²⁵ See Teruzzi's report, 'Il potenziamento dell'Impero', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 26 Oct. 1939; 'La strada della vittoria', *Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, 1 (1938), 194–95. Not only were the roads difficult to build, they were hard to maintain. See 'Le opere pubbliche', *Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, 2 (1939), 326–7; Krystyna Clara von Henneberg, 'The Construction of Fascist Libya: Modern Colonial Architecture and Urban Planning in Italian North Africa (1922–1943)', Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, University of California at Berkeley, 1996, 72–3, 193. Maria Quine recently analysed the plundering of the INPS. A 1935 reform allowed its vast funds to be diverted to public works projects, housing construction, land reclamation and even private ventures. Huge amounts were diverted to Africa at the same time as the regime cut back on its own contributions to the social insurance, old age, maternity and health funds that the INPS managed. See Maria Quine, *Italy's Social Revolution: Charity and Welfare from Liberalism to Fascism* (Houndsmill: Palgrave, 2002), 115–16.

²⁶ Barrera, 'Mussolini's Colonial Race Laws', 428.

²⁷ Von Henneberg, 'Construction of Fascist Libya', 193.

by way of public works contracts. It was, as one observer put it, not a city but rather a large government ministry.²⁸

Up to 1937 land policy favoured a few individuals and large agribusiness enterprises at the expense of mass colonisation. Of the 188,000 hectares that were given as concessions, 75 per cent went to seventy-one agencies and individuals who held over 500 hectares; only 5 per cent or 8,400 hectares went to family farms of under 50 hectares.²⁹ After 1937, Balbo aimed to change course by increasing the Italian population at the rate of 20,000 per year. A decree of 17 May 1938 opened this era of mass colonisation. Ten thousand Italians and double the number of Libyans constructed rural villages and housing for the colonists who began to arrive in 1938. A second migration followed in 1939 and another was planned for 1940, but the war intervened. In all, probably 34,000 people were resettled. The creation of a rural society in Libya was described by Krystyna von Henneberg as ‘one of the most expensive, massive, and labour-intensive undertakings in the history of Italian colonialism,’ and by the time it was over, it had absorbed two-thirds of the state budget for the colony (excluding military expenditure) and employed 33,000 labourers to build the new rural centres.³⁰ Ciano wrote in his diary that the colonists were something of a mixed blessing for the Duce, who was jealous of the publicity that Balbo attracted. Moreover, Mussolini feared that the spotlight would give the peasant settlers the illusion that their presence was symbolic and that they were not there to work. Something similar occurred in the new town of Littoria, where the peasants seem to have considered themselves state officials and not labourers.³¹

Ethiopia and the relaunching of the regime

War on the cheap, a localised colonial war, was the initial aim of the Duce. In the beginning, Mussolini believed that rapid and easy victory could be achieved if Italy moved with enough force and with the tacit acceptance of Britain and France. The venture in Ethiopia was initially attractive precisely because it appeared to run few risks of complications with other major powers. In October 1934 Mussolini reassured industrialist Alberto Pirelli that the financial and military costs of any incursion would be much less than a sceptical Pirelli assumed. Although the Duce had already decided to take Ethiopia, he denied that anything had been finalised. Unconvinced, Pirelli commented: ‘I leave persuaded that the enterprise is decided in his mind’. He recalled the remark of a British diplomat to the effect that, if Ethiopia had been worth anything, his country would have already taken it.³²

²⁸ *Ibid.* 258–62.

²⁹ Pieri and Roachat, *Pietro Badoglio*, 630.

³⁰ Von Henneberg, ‘Construction of Fascist Libya’, 329. Two agencies, the Istituto Nazionale Fascist della Previdenza Sociale and the Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia, paid out almost L300,000,000. Carlo Basili, ‘L’Armata del lavoro’, *Annali dell’Africa Italiana*, 1 (1938), 757.

³¹ Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia*, 260–6; Goglia and Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 221. Ciano wrote that Mussolini wanted in future smaller contingents of settlers and less publicity. Ciano, *Diario*, entry for 7 Nov. 1938, 209.

³² De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce: Gli anni del consenso*, 414–15; Lessona, *Memorie*, 149, 166–7; Alberto Pirelli, *Taccuini 1922–1943* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), 121.

How, then, did this low-cost venture become a massive investment that involved over a quarter of the resources of the regime and led to a permanent rupture with the Western democracies? The reasons can probably be found in the convergence of domestic pressures and the evolving international situation. This article is mainly concerned with the former.³³

By the mid-1930s the Fascist regime was at an ideological dead-end. The corporative experiment had reached the limits of its propaganda usefulness. It had been shunted aside with the creation of the Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale (IRI) in November 1933 and then, a year later, with the delegation of great economic powers to Felice Guarneri, a former official of the Industrialists' Confederation, who was put in charge of all foreign exchange transactions. Fascist technocrats were clearly stymied by the failure of corporatism and looked elsewhere to apply their plans for remaking society. By 1935, no doubts existed that the Fascist regime faced a formidable competitor in a dynamic Nazi Germany. Hitler had broken free of the initial compromises into which he entered to gain power, while Mussolini was mired in similar compromises worked out with conservative power centres between 1925 and the early 1930s. While these compromises with industry, the Church, the monarchy and the military consolidated his personal power, they left little room to jump start the Fascist revolution.

Most of all, Mussolini was unhappy with the Italians themselves. Little progress had been made in creating the long-sought 'new Fascist man'. Increasingly, his hopes centred on the future generation which might be infused with new martial values. War would shake up a contented bourgeoisie. At the conclusion of military manoeuvres on 23 August 1933, the Duce declared: 'We are becoming and we will become ever more a military nation. Because we are not afraid of words, we will add, militarist. In full: warlike'.³⁴ The next year the regime instituted courses on pre-military instruction for males from eighteen to twenty-one followed by a period of reserve duty. The entire propaganda apparatus, especially the schools, geared up to stress military values, the glories of war and Italy's destiny in the Mediterranean and the colonies.³⁵ Giuseppe Bottai's *Critica fascista* intoned that in times of moral decay and physical weakness, military virtues were viewed with horror and disdain. The soft and materialistic bourgeoisie considered the military to be unproductive. Hard physical labour was offensive to human dignity. The bourgeois ideal was a comfortable state job. Of course, all this would have to change.³⁶

³³ A number of recent works have analysed Mussolini's diplomacy from the Ethiopian war to 1940: Strang's *On the Fiery March*; Reynolds M. Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935–1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War*. All show an increasing recklessness on the part of the Duce.

³⁴ Cited in Del Boca, *Conquista del impero*, 233. Lessona suggested that one of the reasons for war was the desire to remake Italians. Lessona, *Memorie*, 172.

³⁵ Luigi Ambrosoli, 'Recherches sur les thèmes imperialistes dans les programmèmes et les livres de textes de culture fasciste', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 41 (Jan. 1991), 51–66, esp. 55–9.

³⁶ 'Educazione guerrieria', *Critica fascista*, 15 Feb. 1935; Giuseppe Lombassa, 'Lavoro e costume', *Critica fascista*, 18 June 1935.

Bottai, who left the governorship of Rome to volunteer for service in Ethiopia, placed the war in an anti-bourgeois context. War would become the measure of how much fascism had succeeded in altering the character of Italians. It would toughen them and, in the process, restart the stalled revolution.³⁷ But Bottai's reaction represented something of a mid-life crisis for the generation that had created the regime. Ethiopia made him recall the feelings he had as a young volunteer during the First World War. He realised how war had been an intrinsic part of his life. It had been a liberating experience in 1915 and remained such: 'Perhaps the spur given me by Mussolini to profit from the new experience awakened this desire in me to live war in the depth of my consciousness; war, this fact that dominated my life after 1914. Twenty years and more of life *inside war*'.³⁸ A similar mood gripped the younger generation of Fascists who had missed out on the First World War and the March on Rome. The group around *Il Bargello* – Berto Ricci, Romano Bilenchi, Vasco Pratolini, and Alessandro Pavolini, the new *pezzo grosso* (major figure) of Florentine Fascism – saw the war as a way of freeing Fascism from the stagnation into which it was sliding by the mid-1930s. A writer from *Il solco fascista* raised the stakes even higher. Ethiopia was not just a war for colonies but rather 'a revolutionary enterprise of our new European imperialism'.³⁹

Then there was the ever-present factor of revenge for the humiliation of Adua. When Lessona heard that the Italian army occupied Adua, it seemed as though the stain of defeat had been removed. Bottai noted that vengeance was a powerful factor among the military and the Fascist militia. A member of the younger generation, the poet and journalist Fidia Gambetti, followed the propaganda campaign that called for retaliation against those who had defeated Italy at Dogali and Adua. Revenge easily blended into the ideals of patriotism, the civilizing mission and a place in the sun.⁴⁰

Pressure had been building for a more radical and totalitarian restatement of ideology and practice. Almost the entire sphere of private life remained outside the regime's control. The Duce champed at the bit; according to Ciano, Mussolini was extremely irritated 'at these factions of the bourgeoisie that were always ready to sit on their hands. He spoke of a third wave, to begin in October, resting on the peasant and worker masses. He intends to create concentration camps with the harshest police restrictions. A foretaste of this turning of the screws will be given by the torching of Jewish, Masonic, Francophile writings. Jewish writers and journalists will be banned from any activity. . . . The revolution must start to affect the comportment of Italians. They must learn to be less tender-hearted, to become hard, implacable, hateful. That

³⁷ Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario 1935–1944*, ed. G. B. Guerri, (Milan: Rizzoli, 1982), entry for 5 Jan. 1936, 74–5; See also Giuseppe Bottai, 'Soldato fascista', and Gherardo Casini, 'Accelerazione rivoluzionaria', *Critica fascista*, 1 Dec. 1935.

³⁸ Bottai, *Diario* entry for 4 Dec. 1935, 62; for similar feelings, see entries for 8 Dec. 1935, 36, and 19 Dec. 1935, 38; Giuseppe Bottai, 'Abissinia: Impresa rivoluzionaria', *Critica fascista*, 15 July 1935.

³⁹ Del Boca, *Conquista del impero*, 287–8, 344; 'Collaudo delle generazioni', and Sergio Panunzio, 'Africa italiana e i giovani', *Critica fascista*, 1 Jan. 1936.

⁴⁰ Lessona, *Memorie*, 186; Bottai, *Diario*, entry for 14 Jan. 1936, 81; Fidia Gambetti, *Gli anni che scottano* (Milan: Ugo Mursia, 1967), 244.

is to say, masters.’ Of course, Mussolini had already experimented with the use of concentration camps in Libya.⁴¹

As usual, the Duce set the tone for others. The *Critica fascista* chimed in that there was no place for the old bourgeois ruling class or for the old culture. Fascism’s essence was to believe and fight. The Italian people had to be reshaped into a militarily efficient nation: ‘The education that Italy needed and needs is this [the military], not the bookish one’. The goal was to form ‘organised and disciplined masses, educated physically and morally to meet any eventuality, any task, any risk’.⁴² The *Popolo d’Italia* made it even clearer. Carlo Ravasio argued that ‘the Fascist idea does not tolerate contrasts with private life. The man and the Fascist are one and the same’. ‘The terrible enemy’ was intelligence and ‘egotistical intellectuals’.⁴³ The petty rules on the use of *voi* instead of *lei* in everyday conversation, the replacing of the handshake by the Fascist salute, attacks on the use of Christmas trees, and Achille Starace’s endless choreographed rallies no longer appear as stupid absurdities, but as part of a larger strategy to intervene in and to regulate private conduct. Giorgio Pini, writing in the *Popolo d’Italia*, made it clear that this cultural revolution extended from foreign policy to racism to economic and cultural autarky.⁴⁴

As Italy became committed to victory in Ethiopia, conquest took on a life of its own. The regime poured money into the colonies to create a parallel but artificial Italy overseas. Eventually, even Mussolini was taken aback at the way the movement seemed to take off. He commented to Guarneri in 1937 that ‘the empire is swallowing Italy’. This excess occurring in the twilight of the imperialist age boggles the mind.⁴⁵

Colonies as a laboratory for fascist totalitarianism

The war soon merged into Mussolini’s larger project to impose a totalitarian direction on Italy. The empire became a gigantic testing ground for a Fascism that sought to free itself from any constraints. What had not been done in Italy for some years or could not be done at all, now could be experimented with in Africa. After the war the Fascist regime suddenly controlled an Africa empire many times larger than Italy itself. From the Fascist point of view, Ethiopia and the rest of the empire lacked any real structure. A whole new society could be created without the encumbrances and compromises that limited the regime in Italy. The totalitarian tendencies of late Fascism could be imposed on the colonies by the military and party officials and then, if possible, exported back into Italy. Krystyna von Henneberg describes how the

⁴¹ Ciano, *Diario*, entry for 10 July 1938, 156.

⁴² ‘Adolescenti in grigioverde’, *Critica fascista*, 15 Sep. 1937; erba, ‘Fascismo e borghesia’, *Critica fascista*, 15 Jan. 1939. It is surprising how anti-intellectual the supposedly cultured *Critica fascista* had become in the late 1930s. For an extreme example, see Giuseppe Lombrassa, ‘Lavoro e costume’, *Critica fascista*, 15 June 1935.

⁴³ ‘Rivoluzione morale o autarchia del costume’, *Popolo d’Italia*, 16 Oct. 1938; ‘Questo “borghese”’, *Popolo d’Italia*, 4 Nov. 1938.

⁴⁴ ‘Difesa della razza’, *Popolo d’Italia*, 4 Aug. 1938; and ‘Orgoglio della razza’, *Popolo d’Italia*, 5 Aug. 1938.

⁴⁵ Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche*, 749.

Fascist impulse to social engineering was redirected to the colonies. Italian architects and city planners drew up projects in the late 1930s for the complete rebuilding of ‘empty’ colonial territory without regard to local history or traditions: ‘For the Fascist architects and their allies in the regime the real division was not between country and city. The division was between space that could be controlled and space that could not be. Nor was there a distinction between modern and conservative values. With time the technocrats were able to assimilate both’. The key point was to create ‘social arrangements that could be regulated from above’. In the uniform new towns of Libya, no dance halls, cinemas, *bocce* courts or soccer fields were included. All leisure activity was to be regulated by the Fascist Dopolavoro organisation or the Casa del Fascio. Vast and ambitious plans were drawn up for the destruction of Ras Menelik’s Addis Ababa and its total reconstruction with a monumental civic centre surrounding the viceroy’s palace, the Fascist headquarters, a large Catholic church, and several cinemas. Strict separation between the races in the new urban space was to be imposed. The Fascist *podestà* (administrative head) of Addis Ababa made it clear that there was nothing worth saving in the city.⁴⁶

A world without moral limits

The first thing that strikes an observer is the arrogant sense of superiority that allowed those in power to do what they liked. Giuseppe Volpi, the former governor of Tripolitania, described the Italian policy of prestige in terms of imposing on the conquered not just a sense of Italian military power, but also its moral superiority: ‘A civilisation like ours cannot bend to the slightest transaction with regard to the native’. Or, as His Royal Highness Adalberto di Savoia-Genova stated to the third colonial congress in 1937: ‘Therefore must civilisation in contact with barbarism yield? Must we admit that all the conquests of civilised man, of intelligence, of learning, of practical knowledge break down before a world that stopped at a level of twenty centuries ago?’ For Saverio Ilardi at the same meeting Italy needed a new legal system which would correspond to the country’s ‘rank of powerful colonising nation’.⁴⁷

Fascist brutality in Ethiopia reflects the essential nature of the movement from its inception. It was no renegade aberration in the African ‘heart of darkness’, but part of the bleakness at the centre of fascism itself. In Libya, Fascist Italy proved once again that it had no sense of moral limits on what it might do in the face of opposition – a fact that would not have surprised the anti-Fascist exiles. Badoglio’s and Graziani’s

⁴⁶ Von Henneberg, ‘Construction of Fascist Libya’, 50–1, 55, 153, 201, 340 (citation), 371; Eugenio Giovanetti, ‘Il viaggio di S.E. Teruzzi in AOF’, *Annali dell’Africa Italiana*, 1 (1938), 440, which expressed the need to start from scratch in Ethiopia; Gianni Granzotto, ‘La vita d’Africa e il costume degli italiani’, *Critica fascista*, 1 June 1938. ‘Il volto nuovo di Addis Abeba’, *Popolo d’Italia*, 3 May 1939.

⁴⁷ Giuseppe Volpi, *A politica coloniale del fascismo*, cited in Goglia and Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all’Impero*, 266; Adalberto di Savoia-Genova, ‘Impressioni e riflessioni sull’Etiopia’, in Centro di studi coloniali/Istituto Coloniale Fascista, *Atti del terzo congresso di studi coloniali*, 9 vols. (Florence and Rome: Istituto Coloniale Fascista, 1937), I, 74; Saverio Ilardi, ‘Appunti per una nuova sistematica del diritto coloniale’, *Terzo congresso*, III, 15.

'small genocide' for the reconquest of Cyrenaica showed an utter disregard for human life. The suppression of the rebellion in Libya was only a foretaste of the tactics that would be applied in East Africa. Ethiopia was the place where fascism could shed any inhibitions, escape from the shadow of defeat and feelings of inferiority, and impose its core beliefs of hierarchy and absolute obedience. As Mussolini put it on 30 December 1934: 'For a rapid and decisive war, but one which will be also difficult, overwhelming power must be deployed. Alongside 60,000 native troops, a similar number of metropolitan soldiers must be sent. At least 250 aircraft must be concentrated in Eritrea and fifty in Somalia. Absolute superiority in artillery and in gas'.⁴⁸ Later in the war, Mussolini urged the use of bacteriological weapons but met resistance from Marshal Badoglio, not on moral grounds but because they were no longer necessary after the military situation had been stabilised in Italy's favour.⁴⁹ According to Angelo Del Boca, the appointment of Badoglio to replace Emilio De Bono at the end of 1935 marked a shift to a war of unlimited destruction and annihilation. No Ethiopian target was henceforth secure from air attacks, including cities, roads, hospitals and simple peasants working in the fields. Mussolini's son Vittorio (a true chip off the old block), boasted of the impact of air power on fleeing individuals and of the effect of incendiary bombs on terrorised civilians. In December 1935 Badoglio showed no reluctance to use poison gas, even before he received Mussolini's authorisation (which was forthcoming in any case). Badoglio found the gas quite effective in the battles of January 1936: 'Rumours circulate of terror from the use of gas'. A delighted Duce responded on 19 January with a blanket authorisation: 'I authorise Your Excellency to use all means of war necessary. I say all, both from the air and on the ground. Maximum decision'.⁵⁰ Mussolini continued to press for unrestrained warfare. On 5 June 1936 in a message to the brutal Graziani, who needed no encouragement, the Duce called for mass executions to stop the continuing rebellion. A few days later, he urged Graziani to use gas and on 8 July he issued the following: 'I once again authorise Your Excellency to initiate and carry out systematically the policy of terror and extermination against the rebels and the complicit population'.⁵¹ After the Anhara rebellion of late 1937, Mussolini instructed Graziani that 'prisoners and their accomplices and the uncertain will have to be executed' to achieve 'the gradual liquidation' of the rebellious population.⁵²

The sense that there were no limits in the pursuit of victory moved down from the top to the *gerarch*i and to ordinary soldiers. Ciano told Bottai that National Fascist Party (PNF) secretary Starace used a group of prisoners for target practice,

⁴⁸ Rochat, 'L'impiego dei gas' 80.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 86.

⁵⁰ Del Boca, *Conquista del impero*, 440, 487–90; Rochat, 'L'impiego dei gas', 90–1. Mussolini had assured Pirelli, who was concerned about international outrage, that he would not use gas. Pirelli, *Taccuini*, 16 October 1935, 133–5. Of course, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon lied about Vietnam, as George W. Bush does now about Iraq, so perhaps the Duce may be forgiven.

⁵¹ Del Boca, 'I crimini del colonialismo fascista', in *idem*, ed., *Le Guerre coloniali del fascismo*, (Rome: Laterza, 1991), 250.

⁵² Mussolini to Graziani, 19 Jan. 1938, cited in Strang, *On the Fiery March*, 22.

but then decided that they were not suffering enough and started to shoot them in the testicles before finishing them off with a shot to the heart.⁵³ Ciro Poggiali, a journalist for the Milanese *Corriere della Sera*, recorded a comment of Graziani to the effect that all Ethiopian intellectuals should be destroyed if there was to be peace in the empire. Poggiali indicated that the Ethiopian leadership was the target of many executions. The measures taken by the Fascist regime in Ethiopia were ‘socially and humanly the equivalent of what Bolshevism inflicted in Russia’.⁵⁴ His diary recounts so many acts of mindless violence that they had to have been openly tolerated, if not actively encouraged. After a rebel attack on 28 July 1936, mass arrests followed: ‘superlatively brutal treatment on the part of the carabinieri who delivered kicks and rifle butts as if they were sugar candy’. He asked himself whether it might be better to punish the guilty and let the innocent go, ‘but this would presuppose tact, intuition, investigation, psychology, humanity: all very difficult things, especially in the colony’.⁵⁵

In July 1937, Poggiali was told of a checkpoint on the road to Leketni where executions routinely took place. The accused was led to a ditch and dispatched with a revolver shot in such a way that he would simply fall into the hole. Often the victim was asked to present himself with no indication that he was to be executed.⁵⁶

The attack by the Fascist squads in Addis Ababa between 19 and 21 February 1937 after the attempt on Graziani’s life recalled the violence of the squads during and just after the March on Rome. However, the beatings and destruction of property meted out then were now accompanied by unchecked murder. The *federale* of Addis Ababa ordered reprisals that continued for three days; however, the executions went on for months. Estimates of the number of dead range from 1,400 to 6,000 in the immediate rampage but the carabinieri executed a further 2,500 in the succeeding four months.⁵⁷

Of course, victory, achieved by these methods, was tenuous and partial. Giorgio Rochat points out that the triumphalist attitudes of the Fascists led them to underestimate what it would take to hold such a vast territory. The journalist Poggiali, who was in Ethiopia from mid-1936 to late 1937, makes it clear that Italian control

⁵³ Bottai, *Diario*, entry for 16 May 1936, 102.

⁵⁴ Ciro Poggiali, *Diario AOI (15 giugno 1936–4 ottobre 1937: Gli appunti segreti dell’inviato del ‘Corriere delle Sera’)* (Milan: Longanesi, 1971), entry for 23 Oct. 1936 and 17 March 1937 for citation, 106, 195; Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*, 78. The Fascists also sought to destroy the Ethiopian cultural past. Poggiali described the destruction of the monument to Menelik in Addis Ababa: ‘It appears that the order for the destruction came from the minister Cobolli [Minister of Public Works Giuseppe Cobolli-Gigli] in Rome. You cannot imagine anything stupider than to remove monuments from the places where they were built. They are testimonies to an indestructible history. Can anyone deny that before us Abyssinia belonged to the Abyssinians?’ *Diario AOI*, entry for 17 Oct. 1936, 101.

⁵⁵ Poggiali, *Diario AOI*, entry for 28 July 1936, 73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, entry for 27 July 1937, p. 248.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, entries for 19, 20, 26 February, 23 March 1937, 182, 184, 187, 194. Incidents ranged from the mass execution of 130 rebels at an airfield on 26 Feb. to the murder of a taxi driver by an Italian who then stole the taxi: ‘effectively, you no longer see black taxi drivers in the piazzas’. Entry for 2 June 1937, 231. Also Del Boca, ‘I crimini del colonialismo fascista’, 243–4; Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*, 79.

was limited to certain strong points. Italians controlled the railway lines and the cities but not the countryside beyond. Ciano was still receiving promises from the military in September 1938 that rebel resistance would be wiped out by Christmas, but these assurances came from General Ugo Cavallero, who felt that he could mount a successful attack on British positions in the Sudan and Aden and within two years on Egypt. In fact, active Ethiopian resistance continued in the central and northern parts of the colony for four more years. Mistakes, caused by Fascist arrogance, abounded. Mussolini and Lessona decided to exclude working with the Ethiopian population in any way. Instead, they opted for direct rule from Rome and for segregation as the foundation of this rule. It was a stupid and costly decision, but par for the course in Mussolini's Italy.⁵⁸

Racial policy in the empire and in Italy

Fascist racial attitudes in Africa make a mockery of any notions of 'spiritual racism' that have been advanced to distinguish the Fascists from their Nazi counterparts. Fascism was endlessly adaptable, and nothing in its doctrine of an all-pervasive statism precluded moving in a Nazi direction, as certain parts of the 1938 Manifesto of the Racial Scientists (dictated by Mussolini) revealed. However, until the mid-1930s, the Fascist regime rarely took a position on colonial race relations. Giulia Barrera stresses that the small size of the Italian community in Eritrea and the large numbers of workers and artisans within that population made it impossible to restrict business to whites only, despite the unofficial policy of segregation. Moreover, few Italian women ever went to Eritrea and long-term relationships between Italian men and African women were common.⁵⁹ Even fewer Africans visited Italy, and when they did they were on official business. Nonetheless, when the lines were blurred, the state did step in. In 1928 Colonial Minister Federzoni informed Mussolini that two Eritreans were about to be repatriated, but that one had served in the local Fascist organisation of Biella. The admission of an African to one of the metropolitan Fascist organisations was an affront 'to the prestige of the dominant nation'. Federzoni urged that under no circumstances should Africans remain permanently in Italy. Emilio De Bono, Federzoni's successor, reiterated this position by forbidding Italians to bring Africans with them on their return without official permission.⁶⁰

For the radical Fascists of the periodical *Antieuropa*, Italian expansion in Africa inevitably raised the issue of relations between Italians and natives, but for these young Fascists the issue was clear: 'The white commands and the black obeys, the white directs and the black works, the white is served and the black serves him'. It was simply a question of intellectual capacity, according to these 'experts'. The

⁵⁸ Rochat, 'Le guerre coloniali dell'Italia fascista', 186; Poggiali, *Diario AOI*, entry for 9 July 1936, 61.

⁵⁹ Giulia Barrera, 'The construction of Racial Hierarchies in Colonial Eritrea: The Liberal and Early Fascist Period (1897–1934)', in Patrizia Palumbo, ed., *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming); by the same author, *Dangerous Liaisons: Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea 1890–1941* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

⁶⁰ Gianluca Gabrielli, 'Africani in Italia negli anni del razzismo di stato', in Burgio, *Nel nome della razza*, 201–2.

Italians, as the dominating power, were an aristocracy, blessed with a Ducean *droit de seigneur*.⁶¹ Judging from the widespread acceptance of colonial racism after 1936, attitudes similar to those of *Antieuropa* had to have been circulating in the Fascist party for many years. In fact, as Roberto Maiocchi has shown, black African racial inferiority was taken as a given by the Italian scientific establishment, even as most Italian science rejected the fixed biological racial categories that were so popular in the Third Reich.⁶² Certainly, the decision to embark on official racism did not come from the settler community; it came from the government in Rome. Giulia Barrera argues that the settler community was too recent and weak to pressure the central government. With very few white farmers and a large number of labourers and common soldiers (50,000 unemployed men were sent to work on roads), Mussolini seems to have been preoccupied with the prestige of the colonisers. When reports reached the Duce that Italians and natives played cards together, orders went out to ban this sort of fraternisation. The short-term mentality that many Italians brought to Africa also played into the decision to impose racial legislation. Eager to make as much money as possible, Italians often cheated Africans, borrowed from them, or acted in other ways that threatened their status as conquerors. Of course, the Fascists treated Italian workers in the colonies much as they treated them in Italy and marginally better than they treated Africans. The Eritreans joked that the Italians brought their own white slaves with them. In 1936 rumours spread within the Fascist party of tensions between officers and ordinary soldiers, between headquarters and the front and between the army and the Fascist militia.⁶³

Racial policy on the mainland and in the colonies must be seen as part of a vast re-education project. Gabriele Turi argued recently that fascism had at the centre of its conception of a new national community a series of exclusions – Slavs, socialists, communists, Freemasons and democrats were some of the early victims; Africans and Jews followed in the 1930s. From this point of view, Turi argues, the distinction between Nazism and fascism blurs. What was important was the context of the racial policies as part of the larger re-education programme. During the 1930s, racial legislation became an instrument to form a new type of Italian – to make them, as Mussolini put it, ‘less tender-hearted’. It was an essential element in the totalitarian invasion of the sphere of private life.⁶⁴

In the colonies and on the mainland race would become part of the framework of a new hierarchical society. As a writer for the *Critica fascista* expressed it, ‘Only

⁶¹ Edoardo Zavattari, ‘Dottrina fascista e governo delle colonie africane’, in Asvero Gravelli, *Africa: Espansionismo fascista e revisionismo* (Rome: Editrice ‘Nuova Europa’, 1933), 115, 120–21.

⁶² See Roberto Maiocchi, *Scienza italiana e razzismo fascista* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1999), 210, also 158–69 for a fuller discussion.

⁶³ Barrera, ‘Mussolini’s Colonial Race Laws’, 426–30; Giulia Barrera, *Dangerous Liaisons: Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea 1890–1941*, African Studies Working Paper 1 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 3; Poggiali, *Diario AOI*, entry for 26 June 1936, 34; Gambetti, *Gli anni che scottano*, 261. Barrera also notes the high number of expulsions from the colonies of rebellious workers and of people engaged in various illegalities.

⁶⁴ Gabriele Turi, *Lo Stato educatore: Politica e intellettuali nell’Italia fascista* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2002), 121, 125.

after the proclamation of the empire was it clear that the conquest of Ethiopia was an endeavour, initiated in Africa, but developed and completed in Europe'.⁶⁵ Racial policy cut to the key issues of hierarchy and authority. Race defined who commanded and who was a member of the nation. Mussolini clearly felt strongly on these issues of separation and superiority when he attacked Balbo for softness towards Jews and Arabs. Sexual contacts particularly bothered him: 'The problem must be posed clearly. If we do not take remedies, we lose the empire'. Ciano noted in his diary that Mussolini felt that his racial policy towards both Africans and Jews was fundamental to the establishment of the empire. Of course, Ciano groused that the Italians were still racially unprepared.⁶⁶

At the third colonial congress in 1937 Gennaro Mondaini worried about how 'dominators and dominated', civilised peoples and barbarians would interact in everyday labour relations. Excluded was any possibility that a white might work for a native, 'given the political impossibility of that for the prestige of the dominant race'. What Mondaini envisaged was a system of economic discrimination which would parallel legal, social and moral exclusion.⁶⁷ In 1937 Africans were defined as subjects of the nation, never to be citizens. The logic of fascism proceeded inexorably. Up to 1937, biological – racial exclusion had not been written into Italian legislation. The racial legislation for the empire in 1937 introduced a principle that would be expanded the following year to the mainland. Since Africans could not be members of the nation, they could not be members of the state or the empire, except in a subordinate way. This was the status given to German Jews in the 1935 Nuremberg laws and what Mussolini would have liked to impose on the Italian Jews with his 1938 legislation if he had not been afraid of international repercussions.⁶⁸ Marriages between Italian Aryans and those of non-Aryan races (Jews and Africans) were forbidden under the 1938 laws. In fact, government officials, both civilian and military, could not marry foreigners without official permission.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Mario Rivoire, 'Direttrici politiche del regime: Fine di un antitesi', *Critica fascista*, 15 Nov. 1938. The author linked autarky, domestic mobilisation and the alliance with Nazi Germany within the imperialist framework. For the connection between the growth of the empire and radicalism within the Fascist movement, see Grasso and Goglia, *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'Impero*, 210–11, 219; Luigi Goglia, 'Note sul razzismo coloniale fascista,' *Storia contemporanea* 19 (Dec. 1988), 1223–66, esp. 1238.

⁶⁶ Bottai, *Diario*, entry for 6 Oct. 1938, 136; Ciano, *Diario*, entry for 30 July 1938, 162. For a passing reference to Somalia as a place for resettling Jews, see Ciano's entry for 4 Sep. 1938, 173. Maiocchi argues that racial legislation against blacks was the 'Trojan horse' by which antisemitic racism would penetrate into Italy (310).

⁶⁷ Gennaro Mondaini, 'I problemi del lavoro nel nuovo impero', *Terzo congresso*, II, 17–18.

⁶⁸ Michele Sarfatti stated that 'in Sep. and Oct. 1938 Mussolini considered revoking the citizenship of all or some of the Jewish Italians'. He limited the measures to foreign Jews who had acquired citizenship after 1918. See Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista: vicende, identità, persecuzione* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), 165. Once Libya was made an integral part of Italy, the Arab population was given a special status, short of citizenship. Luigi Silva, 'L'organizzazione politica della Libia', *Terzo congresso*, II, 84; Goglia, 'Note sul razzismo coloniale fascista', 1261, 1263.

⁶⁹ In 1937 the racist Lessona presented legislation to ban long-term relationships between Italian males and African females. In July 1937 Italians were forbidden to live in native sections. On the racial regulations of April and July 1937, see 'La legislazione per l'impero', *Annali dell'Africa Italiana* 2 (1939).

A grey area or ‘zone of disorder’ was certainly the existence of mixed-race individuals. A law of 29 June 1939 created a new crime, damage to the prestige of the race. The law set prison terms for long-term sexual relations with Africans that resembled marriage, relegated mixed-race people to the status of the native community, forbade legal recognition of children and the assumption of the father’s name by the mixed-race child. However, the law did not take citizenship away from those who already obtained it. Any future child born to an Italian parent and a subject partner fell into the category of subject native.

Racial separation was the new watchword on the mainland and in the colonies. In 1938 Mussolini ordered a census of the African population of Italy, just as he ordered one for the Jewish population. As it turned out, the threat to Italian purity came from seventy-two African individuals.⁷⁰ In a regime that abandoned liberty, equality and fraternity in favour of order, authority and hierarchy, individual rights gave way to collective ones. The interference of the Fascist state in the lives of individuals was most evident in matters of race. The interest of the state in order, hierarchy and discipline meant that the dignity of the superior race had to be maintained at all costs. This was the new *coscienza imperiale*. In the empire consciousness of being masters meant residential separation, separate transportation for blacks, no mixing at public entertainment. Party secretary Starace even ordered that Fascist officials could no longer shake the hands of native dignitaries. Lessona, in a perfect demonstration of the Fascist *beau geste*, dutifully refused to shake hands on his tour of East Africa.⁷¹

The clash of totalitarian theory and Italian reality

As happened repeatedly during the Fascist *ventennio*, ideological purity, corporative theory and totalitarian aspirations yielded to the realities of power and material gain for favoured groups, who were often the very bourgeois power centres against which Mussolini was railing. The empire was, in fact, a place where money could be made rapidly. Initially, the Ethiopian war satisfied an idealistic need within the Fascist party and militia. At the start of the war, the party organised scrap drives and worked to involve ordinary Italians in the war effort. But soon baser motives emerged. For the *gerarchici*, three months’ service in Ethiopia in whatever capacity would earn them a campaign medal.⁷² The war brought a bureaucratic explosion and an influx of party members to the colonies. Youth and women’s groups, organisations to run social and leisure-time activities sprouted like mushrooms under the umbrella of the Istituto Fascista per l’Africa Italiana. A government decree of April 1938 extended the Dopolavoro organisation’s bureaucracy to Italian Africa. A complete syndical

60–2, 70. On the ban on mixed race marriages, see ‘Il supremo Concesso riunito sotto la presidenza del Duce’, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 7 Oct. 1938.

⁷⁰ Renzo Sertoli Salis, ‘Problemi indigeni sul piano dell’impero’, *Terzo congresso*, II, 112–14; Gianluca Gabrielli, ‘Africani in Italia negli anni del razzismo di stato’, in Burgio, *Nel nome della razza*, 204–8.

⁷¹ Italo Neri, ‘Caratteri della politica indigena fascista’, *Terzo congresso coloniale*, II, 140–1; Poggiali, *Diario AOI*, entry for 15 Oct. 1936, 99.

⁷² Gambetti, *Gli anni che scottano*, 254–5.

and corporative bureaucratic structure was envisaged for Africa to parallel similar bureaucracies in Italy.⁷³

The colonies became a pot of gold for insiders. Already in June 1936, Poggiali remarked on the scale of construction of the Casa del Fascio in Asmara, where the *federale* doubled as the director of the local newspaper, *Corriere del Impero*, and aspired to build a mini-empire within the Fascist empire.⁷⁴ In the planning for the new Addis Ababa, provision was made for the headquarters of the Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale (which financed so much construction from its plundered reserves), the Unione Militare, the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio and the Bank of Rome. Fiat, Alfa Romeo, Lancia, the Gondrand transport firm and a major electrical company all projected headquarters.⁷⁵ An intense traffic in government contracts and concessions for the construction of roads and railways and for the sale of farm equipment, trucks and other vehicles developed. Minister Teruzzi boasted that there were twenty-five well-equipped hospitals in Italian Africa and half a billion lire were spent on health and sanitation. Almost 300 million lire were spent on water and hydroelectric projects. But to stress the waste in all this is to miss the point, 'because one got rich without limit, scandalously'. Lessona complained that contractors were fleecing the state and that roads cost twenty times what they might have cost in Italy.⁷⁶ The Compagnia Italiana Trasporti Africa Orientale (CITAO) supervised private and public transportation projects. Hotels were financed by the Italian Company for Hotels in East Africa. Banks and insurance had a similar state umbrella organisation. By mid-1939, 4,785 firms were operating in the empire with a capital of L 2.7 billion. The Duca d'Aosta described the colonial bureaucracy as made up of 50 per cent incompetents and 25 per cent thieves. Foreign Exchange Minister Guarneri told of a constant battle to curb illegal currency trading, corrupt officials, political appointees and technocrats who had no clue about the land that they were reworking. It really did not matter. State subsidies and guarantees made it a low risk operation for all concerned, except for the Italian people. As the Italian expression goes, *Che cuccagna!* (What a goldmine!).⁷⁷

⁷³ For a description of the bureaucracy that was to be moved to the empire, see Carlo Giglio, *Partito e impero* (1938), cited in Gogli and Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'Impero*, 316–21; for the party, Davide Fossa, 'L'intervento del Partito nel governo dell'Impero' in Gogli and Grassi, 313–15; on the Dopolavoro, 'Il Duce presiede il Consiglio dei Ministri', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 24 April 1938.

⁷⁴ Poggiali, *Diario AOI*, entry for 26 June 1936, 32.

⁷⁵ 'Le opere pubbliche', *Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, 2 (1939), 375.

⁷⁶ Poggiali, *Diario AOI*, entry for 13 April 1937, 202; Gambetti, *Gli anni che scottano*, 276; Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, 110 for Lessona's comment. Roughly 12,000 cars were exported to the colonies in 1937 along with a vast quantity of parts, with a combined value of over half a billion lire. See 'Le cronache dell'Africa Italiana', *Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, 1 (1938), 481. Poggiali noted that the nephew of his boss, textile magnate Aldo Crespi, appeared in Addis Ababa to develop various business ventures, as did representatives of the Rinascente department stores. He wonders how a reporter from *La Tribuna* could predict that Italy would gain 12 million consumers, when it was not at all evident that the country could sell anything that the Ethiopians really wanted. See *Diario AOI*, entries for 24 Aug. and 8 Dec. 1936 and 12 Jan. 1937, 84, 132, 171; also Mola, *Imperialismo italiano*, 224–6.

⁷⁷ Ciano, *Diario*, entry for 21 June 1938, 151; Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche*, 748–9; Teruzzi, 'Il potenziamento dell'Impero', for the status of the colony on the eve of the war.

Conclusion

The colonial experience reminds us of what Fascism was really about. We have in recent years devoted much attention to Fascist cultural policies, to the use of ritual and symbolism and to the consensus that Mussolini was said to have achieved. But, as Paul Corner recently argued, fascism was at its core about violence and control.⁷⁸ It was also about educating Italians to accept fascism's view of the national community, who would be included and who excluded. Italians were to be re-educated to become more brutal and warlike and more hostile to those on the outside. The regime's basic nature becomes much clearer as we integrate the colonial experience more fully into the entire Fascist experience.

Mussolini hoped to use imperialism and the empire, racial legislation and a total alignment with Nazi Germany in foreign policy to relaunch the Fascist revolution. The process began with the overt aggression in Ethiopia and had its tragi-comic climax in the attack on Greece in late 1940. The regime worked along two parallel paths. First, war would become a means of reshaping the Italian character and of re-educating Italians with Fascist values. Bourgeois values of material comfort and the good life would have to be set aside. Second, the empty space in the colonial world could become a laboratory to design and test instruments of social control. The overall objective was to integrate Italians more and more completely into the state.

However much the Italians wanted to revive the Fascist regime and to create a new wave of the Fascist revolution (probably the third, but who is counting!), Mussolini faced a dilemma. His regime could not free itself from the compromises with the industrial, religious and cultural establishment that allowed the Duce to consolidate his power after 1925. In reality, Fascism was a huge make-work project for various levels of bourgeois Italy that directed the economy and staffed the state, the para-state and party bureaucracies. Mussolini might have abhorred normalisation but most Italians did not. The framework of the regime was conservative–authoritarian, not totalitarian. The move to relaunch the revolution via the empire was an enormously costly effort that was doomed to fail unless Mussolini's Nazi allies had won the war, and then Italy would have been a subordinate vassal in the German empire. In June 1939 Felice Guarneri, the Minister of Foreign Exchange, complained to Ciano and Mussolini about the depletion of Italy's reserves and warned of bankruptcy: 'he said to avoid it a halt must be imposed on the imperialist policy'. But it was much too late. Mussolini was committed to aggression. The Duce and his son-in-law Ciano thought that Guarneri was being hysterical, but reality has a way of biting back.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Paul Corner, 'Italian Fascism: Whatever Happened to Dictatorship?', *Journal of Modern History* 74, (2002), 325–57.

⁷⁹ Ciano, *Diario*, entry for 2 June 1939, 305–6.