

## Violence and the politics of prestige: the fascist turn in colonial Libya

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*(Received 3 February 2014; final version accepted 8 September 2014)*

In 1922–1923, Fascist Party leaders hoped to define a sharp break from previous approaches to colonial rule and imperial expansion in Italy's Libyan territories. Mussolini's nomination of Luigi Federzoni, a leading figure of the Italian Nationalist Association, as the Minister of Colonies at the end of 1922 signalled a new era in Italian colonial administration focused on aggressive expansion and the institution of what was known as a 'politics of prestige'. This definition of a fascist style of colonial rule appealed to the enthusiasm for violence among blackshirt militias and early fascist supporters in the Libyan territories. This definition of a fascist style of colonial rule, however, inspired immediate reaction from both colonial officials, with stakes in maintaining a measure of continuity and stability, and from those within the nascent Fascist Party who wanted to promote an alternative model of fascism in the colonies. This article examines contests to define fascism and fascist colonial rule in the Libyan territories through the employment of voluntary militias, the competing voices of Fascist Party outposts, and various programmes for the development of a colonial culture.

**Keywords:** colonialism; violence; Libya; modern Italy; Federzoni; squadristo; fascism

### Introduction

In the autumn of 1923, Fascist militias arrived in Italy's Libyan territories. Acting under the auspices of the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN), the armed squads wreaked havoc in the streets of coastal cities in the Libyan regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. The militias targeted Arab and Jewish inhabitants, looted mosques and shops and, in at least one instance, shot into groups of Arab youth at an Italian-run school.<sup>1</sup> The behaviour of the militias generated an immediate reaction from Italian officials. Under considerable pressure from military command and colonial police, the Minister of Colonies Luigi Federzoni decried the violence as acts that were 'less tolerable in the colonies than anywhere else and all the more objectionable coming from those who had taken on a special obligation of patriotic discipline and loyal collaboration in the work of the National Government'.<sup>2</sup> The fact that he was responsible for the original proposal to send fascist militias to the Libyan territories did not mitigate Federzoni's insistence that the Governor of Tripolitania take whatever measures necessary to gain control of the armed squads.

The arrival of the Fascist militias offers rare insight into a messy period of transition from a liberal to a fascist style of rule in the Libyan colonies. The historiography of Italian colonialism associates the shift to the Fascist regime with an increased use of violence to establish direct rule,

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a transition that mirrored international trends of the early 1920s (Finaldi 2009, 28). The colonial administration of the liberal era went to great lengths to reach out to Libyan notables, an approach known as the 'politica dei capi'. This approach culminated in 1919 with the passage of the Libyan Statutes that extended Italian citizenship and afforded a measure of political representation to 'native' elites, though identifying who was 'native' in the Libyan territories was open to the interpretations of those taking census data, often with little knowledge concerning the ethnicities and identities of peoples in the region (Dumasy 2004–2005, 11–34). Critics condemned this approach as expensive and ineffectual since it placed individuals with questionable influence on the Italian payroll while limiting direct state control to a few urban centres on the coast. Following Mussolini's 1922 March on Rome, the colonial administration rejected conciliatory approaches and denounced previous treaties with regional elites in favour of military action to increase the territory under direct control of the Italian state. The use of violence escalated after 1926 when the military campaign known euphemistically as the 'reconquest' of the Libyan interior began in earnest, during which Italian forces (mostly composed of Eritrean troops) instituted a reign of terror.<sup>3</sup> Assuming the direct complicity of the entire population, they rounded up tens of thousands of civilians and placed them in internment camps in an effort to isolate armed rebel groups. The capture and execution of the Sanusi military commander Omar al-Mukhtar in 1931 in the remote oasis of al-Kufra gave proof to the effectiveness of this wave of military actions (Labanca 2002, 2005, 2012).

Despite this broad shift in the style of colonial rule, one can identify a measure of continuity from the liberal to the fascist era, especially in the period before the 'reconquest' began in earnest. The conciliatory approach to colonial rule that characterised the liberal administrations and the willingness to employ violence that characterised the fascist era often coexisted; it seems more useful to think of the Italian approach to colonial rule as shifting along a continuum of violence instead of switching from one mode to the other. Even while the liberal administrations in the first decade of occupation focused their attentions on the establishment of power-sharing relationships, they remained prepared for direct military action (Labanca 2012, 99). Even the idea of a 'reconquest' emerged before the transition to the Fascist administration under Federzoni's predecessor as Minister of Colonies, Giovanni Amendola. Likewise, the practices that characterised a liberal style of colonial administration did not end abruptly in the early 1920s. Colonial governors continued to negotiate with notables even as the military destroyed villages in the Libyan interior, and Mussolini engaged in a public relations campaign in an attempt to deflect international condemnation for the treatment of civilian populations.<sup>4</sup>

Fascist officials certainly constructed the illusion of a clear break between a liberal and a fascist administration in order to claim the beginning of a new and improved approach to colonial rule (Del Boca 1986–1988, 12–13). The establishment of a fascist administration in the Libyan territories promised to usher in a new era defined by what many enthusiasts of the new political movement referred to as a 'politics of prestige' and an infusion of new blood to the colonial setting. Concern with proving Italian prestige on a world stage drove the movement for colonial expansion abroad, and during the liberal era the issue of prestige informed anxieties over the socio-economic status of Italian settlers in the Libyan territories. Despite widespread hopes that the Libyan territories could serve as a destination for mass Italian immigration to relieve a perceived problem of overpopulation on the peninsula, officials denied permission to emigrate to the Libyan territories to the poorest applicants, those who stood to benefit most from Italian colonial schemes. The fear was that Italian settlers of less secure financial means would generate a lack of respect among 'native' populations, thereby harming Italian prestige in the region (Dumasy 2004–2005, 22).

The rhetoric of prestige in the colonies shifted from a concern over the socio-economic status of Italian settlers to an argument in favour of the ability and willingness to use force in the fascist era. Del Boca (1986–1988, 6) characterised the fascist ideal of prestige within the colonies as a call for moral and military superiority, but the ‘politics of prestige’ also served as code for the establishment of a clear racial and cultural hierarchy in the colonies through the sanctioned use of violence against non-Italian (non-white or non-Christian) inhabitants of the region and a rejection of power-sharing tactics.<sup>5</sup> Fascist enthusiasts saw their ability to utilise violence against Arab populations in the Italian-controlled areas in the Libyan territories as a measure of support in the region for the fascist movement and the emerging Fascist Party, but also as a measure of Italian cultural and racial superiority.<sup>6</sup> Attempts at negotiations with regional powerbrokers and tolerance for local custom were seen as threatening what the Chief of Police and the Commander of the National Militias, Emilio De Bono, called the ‘prestige’ of the blackshirt militias.<sup>7</sup>

The use of violence and the defining characteristics of Italian imperial prestige, however, were highly contested both in the Libyan territories and within the Fascist Party in the 1920s. Tensions over violence reflect one part of the larger process of the confrontation between fascism and the Italian state in the 1920s when competing claims over the control of violence convulsed the Italian peninsula during the rise of the fascist movement (Ebner 2011). Those competing claims were amplified and distorted across the Mediterranean. Many within the colonial administration saw the indiscriminate use of violence as a disruption of colonial relationships that had developed over the first decade of the Italian occupation and as a detriment to the very ‘prestige’ of Italian colonial rule many fascist supporters claimed to hold paramount. Debates over where the fascist style of administration would position itself on the sliding scale of violence in colonial rule carried with it ramifications for the identity of Italy as an imperial power and for the position of the Libyan territories as part of a fascist brand of Italian nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

This article examines three issues related to debates over prestige and violence to discover how they expressed tensions involved in the transition from a liberal to a fascist colonial administration in the 1920s. First, it looks more carefully at Federzoni’s introduction of militias to the Libyan territories. As young enthusiastic proponents of violence, the decision to send militias to the Libyan territories represented both an inexpensive form of colonial force and an opportunity to rid the Italian metropole of an impediment to establishing a legitimate Fascist Party in Rome. Next, the article looks at the development of local Fascist Party branches in the Libyan territories. Positioning themselves as the vanguard of the Party in the colonial world, these enthusiasts of fascism saw the political transitions after the March on Rome as an opportunity to direct the future of the colonial administration towards a particular interpretation of a ‘politics of prestige’. The article ends with evidence of an abiding concern among colonial administrators for the development of a sustainable culture of colonialism both in the colonies and in the metropole as an antidote to the raucous violence of the militias and the particular concerns of local Party enthusiasts.

Analysing violence and the politics of prestige in colonial Libya during the transition from the liberal to the fascist era contributes to a growing body of scholarship invested in examining ruptures and varieties within the fascist movement that fit poorly with the claims of fascism to represent a unified front. This recent work aims to counter the tendency in earlier historiography of Italian fascism to focus almost exclusively on Mussolini by turning our attention to other figures within the fascist movement and by examining the regional varieties of fascism to explore, as Corner (2012, 24) put it in his recent monograph, ‘the reality of an early Fascism that

was anything but a monolithic movement driving all before it in unified and disciplined manner'. According to Corner, fascism came to power through local struggles and shaped by local issues, and as such it never reached the fascist ideal of encapsulating a unified national identity. Provincial politics and the rise of local *fasci* had a profound impact on the development of the early fascist movement, most notably in the violence of agrarian *squadristo* (Corner 2012, 27).

The colonial setting offers an opportunity to examine the rise of the early fascist movement from a unique perspective, one that highlights the importance of local issues and the centrality of squad violence. Of course, the particular nature of the colonial space as one defined by racialised differences presents particular difficulty in determining the distinction between a particular fascist approach to colonial rule and the violence of a 'colonial system by essence authoritarian and unequal' (Dumasy 2008, 86). Nevertheless, the position of the Libyan territories as a liminal space in the national imagination in Italy from the beginning of the occupation continued into the fascist administration. Over time, the lack of clarity concerning the role the Libyan territories could play in a fascist national identity translated into what were often contradictory and confusing policies that pitted colonial officials against the intentions of Rome (Pergher 2012, 172). In the early years of Mussolini's government, during a time when the meaning of fascism was open to interpretation, the peripheral nature of the colonial territories offered a space to experiment with issues that proved too incendiary on the Italian peninsula, especially the issue of violence, as fascists attempted to establish a legitimate political party in Rome.

### Exporting fascist violence

The troubled arrival of the fascist militias reflected uncertainty concerning the centrality of militant squads in the fascist movement in a moment of transition to political legitimacy. In 1922–1923, Mussolini and Fascist Party leaders faced the delicate task of creating a centralised organisation out of an amorphous movement that encompassed a wide variety of political, economic and social goals. Though part of the initial appeal of the fascist movement, especially for young Italian men, the violence of *squadristo* became increasingly problematic in this period of transition, and the colonial space offered a convenient dumping ground to rid the peninsula of elements deemed unsuitable for the future of the Fascist Party.

As the first Fascist Minister of Colonies and a leading figure in the decision to merge conservative nationalist forces with the Fascist Party, Luigi Federzoni stood in the centre of debates over the role of violence in this period of transition. Federzoni offered a natural fit for the position of Mussolini's first Minister of Colonies. In his early career as a journalist he reported from the front lines of the Italian war of occupation in the Libyan territories, and as one of the luminaries of the Associazione Nazionale Italiana (ANI), Federzoni was an ardent supporter of Italian imperialism and associated settlement programmes. Besides his focus on imperial projects, Federzoni's writings favoured a pro-monarchical message, and his election to the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 1913 marked a distinctly conservative direction in Italian national politics that brought a measure of traditionalism and gravitas to the fascist movement when the ANI fused with the PNF in 1923 (Bosworth 2006, 49–50). His appointment as Minister of Colonies signalled Mussolini's intention to usher in a new age for Italian imperial interests as an answer to nationalist complaints of the previous administration's inability to maximise Italy's imperial potential or to generate popular support for colonial programmes (Casmirri 1980, 268; Romano 1993, 8). In the nationalist publication *La rassegna italiana*, Federzoni characterised the political shift in Rome as a chance to give the imperial project and the colonial world added weight in Italian public opinion while eliminating previous disdain for African affairs that he

claimed had prevented the realisation of expansionist designs. Federzoni intended to use his position to promote a greater measure of respect for the expertise required for colonial rule and to centre the colonial world in Italian national identity.<sup>9</sup>

In his initiative to send fascist militias into the colonies, however, Federzoni relied on the position of the Libyan territories as a marginal space on the borders of Italian identity where he could export a potential threat to his conservative brand of fascism. Safely across the Mediterranean, the militias could expend their enthusiasm for the call to militant revolution that attracted so many young men to the early fascist movement without disturbing party formation in Rome, but the presence of squads of young men in search of adventure threatened to upset delicate colonial hierarchies established over the previous decade of Italian administration in the coastal cities of the Libyan territories. For some fascist supporters, that was precisely the point; they saw Italy's colonial stagnation as a direct result of an over-reliance on native functionaries and liberal systems that granted too much authority to local notables and local culture.

When Federzoni introduced the proposal to employ squads in the Libyan territories in December 1922, as one of his first measures after Mussolini appointed him as Minister of Colonies, he sold the idea as a solution to several problems in both the colonies and the metropole.<sup>10</sup> In terms of Italian imperial ambitions, the militias answered complaints from colonial military and civil administrators over the lack of adequate troops to expand Italian state influence in the Libyan territories. The need for an increase of Italian armed forces seemed particularly urgent at the end of 1922, just a few months after the previous Minister of Colonies initiated the aforementioned 'reconquest' of the Libyan interior. The increase in military action occurred after a dramatic decrease in military spending in the colonies that resulted from the agreements established in the 1919 Libyan Statutes, and as untrained volunteers the militias offered an inexpensive form of support for the colonial troops. Labanca (2012, 137) has noted that the Libyan Statutes led to the reduction of Italian forces in the eastern region of Cyrenaica by one-third, a reduction that explains both the desire to supplement the troops with fascist militias and the opposition within military circles to the liberal approach to colonial rule.

The presence of fascist militias also promised to increase the number of Italian nationals in the Libyan territories, a central goal of Italian imperialists in general and of the Italian Nationalist Association in particular. One of the primary objectives for the Italian colonial project was to secure territory for Italians emigrating in droves at the beginning of the twentieth century (Choate 2008). The ANI took up the cause as its own in the first decade of Italian occupation of the Libyan territories, and, as one of the Association's leading figures, Federzoni had called for the settlement of at least 300,000 Italian nationals in the colonies over the following quarter century (Cresti 1996, xxiv). Inevitably, proposals to transplant Italian agriculturalists and workers with their families proved prohibitively expensive and infeasible given the limited nature of Italian control in the Libyan territories. The young men who typically volunteered in fascist squads provided a relatively inexpensive source of potential settlers that could help fulfil the objective of transforming the Libyan territories into an Italian space in preparation for further settlement.

Federzoni made it no secret that sending militias to the colonies also fitted within his domestic objectives of checking the dominance of militant squads and their leaders in the transition of the early fascist movement into a political party. In his original proposal, Federzoni noted that the exportation of squad violence to the Libyan territories would answer a need he identified within the Fascist Party to 'find an opportune and convenient use of the generosity and exuberance of its militias',<sup>11</sup> a clear message that sending fascist squads to the Libyan territories would eliminate their troublesome presence in Italy as Mussolini and Party officials established a

legitimate parliamentary government. Exporting militias to the colonies made up one part of a larger programme to curb militia power that included placing them under a centralised administration. In December 1922, the newly formed Fascist Grand Council created the Voluntary Militia for National Security (MVSN) to provide a centralised structure to the loose coalition of fascist squads and incorporate them into the Party framework (Lyttelton 1973, 105). The formalisation of the national fascist militias inspired Federzoni to renew his call for their deployment in the colonies in January 1923. The formal structure of the MVSN offered a measure of security to the colonial administration that the militias would operate under some measure of control, and later that year the MVSN deployed the first units of fascist militias to the Libyan colonies under an eight-month agreement.

The sudden influx of unruly bands of young men, most with little money and zero training, demonstrated the shortcomings of an attempt to rid the metropole of a destructive force quickly and to supplement colonial forces on the cheap. In the relatively small town of al-Khums next to the ruins of Leptis Magna to the northwest of Tripoli, for example, regional military command reported the arrival of over 1000 Blackshirts, completely overwhelming a garrison without adequate space or resources.<sup>12</sup> Over the long term, the process of incorporating fascist militias as one part of the armed forces at the disposal of the Italian colonial administration would lead to a normalisation of violence as a form of behaviour to ‘express the superiority of the colonizer in public space’, as Dumasy (2008, 104) put it in one of the few works to address the introduction of fascist militias in the Libyan territories. In Dumasy’s reading, the normalisation of the violence of fascist militias demonstrated the centrality of racism to the early fascist movement that helped to combine the interests of fascism with those of the colonial government (2008, 100). In the short term, however, the violent antics of the fascist militias, often looting to supplement their meagre supplies, brought them into direct conflict with commanders of the colonial armed forces who saw the arrival of the MVSN units as a direct threat to their control over public order. In a colonial army heavy on Eritrean and Arab troops and light on recognisably Italian commanders, moreover, members of the Italian armed forces were themselves targets of violence as the militia members confused what had been delicate distinctions between friend and foe in the Italian colonial system, especially in an era of increasing reliance on ‘native’ (mostly Eritrean) troops (Labanca 2012, 167–169).

A lack of archives on the MVSN makes it difficult to pin down the exact number and provenance of the militias who arrived in the Libyan territories in 1923. The MVSN operated under its own central administration, the archives of which were scattered throughout the collections of other ministries at the end of the Second World War.<sup>13</sup> One estimate puts the original militias somewhere between 1500 and 3000 volunteers, and the reactions of local commanders to their arrival suggest those numbers represent something at least close to the truth (Saini Fasanotti 2012, 95–96).<sup>14</sup> We do know that the first three militias sent to the Libyan territories arrived from the islands of Sardinia and Sicily and from the central Italian region of Avezzano. It is not clear why the MVSN chose to send militias from these particular regions, but it could indicate an intention to send primarily rural militias with the hope that they would offer the best possibilities for long-term agricultural settlement of the colonies.<sup>15</sup>

One aspect of the fascist militias in the Libyan colonies that is clear is that they were made up overwhelmingly of young men. In fact, many of the new arrivals were young enough to inspire concerned parents to contact the colonial administration asking for the safe return of their runaway sons.<sup>16</sup> The youth of the militias in Libya should not be surprising; many of the earliest supporters of the fascist movement were young men who saw the militant violence of fascism as a clear break with Italy’s past. In his now classic study of the rise of fascism in Italy, Adrian



Lyttelton (Lyttelton 1973, 56) argued that the appeal of Fascist militias for Italian youth fitted into a larger worldview that valorised heroism, sacrifice and adventure above all else. Lyttelton pointed to the example of Adros Maramotti, an early leader of the fascist movement in Reggio Emilia who tried to join the Italian front during the First World War but was turned away for his youth. Maramotti's death in a fascist attack in Turin in 1921 made him one of the most celebrated figures of the early fascist movement. One could easily imagine that his example served as inspiration for the young men who volunteered to join the militias in the colonies; they were there to seek adventure and 'to rebel against what often seemed the tepidity of provincial life' (Duggan 2013, 38).

### The fascist party in the Libyan territories

Besides sending enthusiastic young men from the metropole, the MVSN and the colonial administration also hoped to incorporate a number of members of the Italian settler communities in the volunteer militias. The history of this population of Italian citizens in the Libyan territories merits deeper investigation. Studies of the era of mass Italian immigration to the Libyan territories in the late 1930s have generated more interest, but a small population of Italian citizens established deeper roots in the coastal region during the first two decades of the occupation. A vocal sub-section of this population became early supporters of the fascist movement in the Libyan territories who saw the period of transition after the March on Rome as an opportunity to take an active hand in steering the future of the colonial administration. Local Fascist Party headquarters from as early as December 1922 formed under the leadership of party captains in the city centres of the coastal region. These local *fasci* welcomed the arrival of legions from the MVSN as a sign of the extension of the Italian Fascist Party into the overseas territories and as a promise of a more aggressive approach to colonial rule. Regular reports from local party branches to central party leaders served as a venue for local *fasci* to make specific recommendations on policies and personnel in the Libyan territories and to assert their role as interpreters of the colonial setting for the Fascist Party. Soon after the March on Rome, for example, a branch of the PNF in Derna issued a series of complaints, accusing the local colonial government of favouring the interests of the indigenous population over those of Italian settler communities with the result of 'numbing the national sentiments of Italian residents' and thus preventing the rapid spread of fascist ideals in the region.<sup>17</sup> Members of a branch of the Fascist Party that developed in Cyrenaica, in particular, considered themselves a vanguard of the movement in the colonies, and they seized on the transition to fascism as an opportunity to abandon power sharing and assimilationist tactics in favour of what they called a 'strong government capable of administering with dignity' as part of a politics of prestige.<sup>18</sup>

The recommendations of fascist enthusiasts to central party leaders increased in conjunction with Mussolini's declaration of a dictatorship in January 1925 and the subsequent replacement of state functionaries at all levels as the Fascist Party consolidated control. The Fascist Grand Council and the central offices of the Fascist Party received reports from these local *fasci* on who to purge and who to retain among colonial officials. The local *fasci*, eager to supply information, kept close tabs on the activities of colonial administrators. For example, they reported the use of funds to buy Ford instead of Fiat vehicles for operations in the desert as a sign of insufficient nationalist fervour among colonial officials. Personal relationships in the small world of metropolitan Italian communities also provided a source of criticism; vague accusations of Freemasonry and 'anti-fascist' attitudes served as the basis for calls to repatriate officials regardless of their credentials.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the accusations, PNF leadership ultimately favoured stability over the fervour of the local party enthusiasts that threatened to destabilise the region by displacing key personnel with experience and expertise. A protracted campaign against the Governor of Cyrenaica, Ernesto Mombelli, a veteran of the First World War and, from all indications, a clear supporter of the nationalist message and an aggressive imperial programme, proved one source of irritation for the central party leaders trying to manage competing claims to fascist loyalty in the colonies. As they gained a voice in the consolidation of Fascist Party control, local *fasci* used their position to call for his dismissal, accusing him, as was typical, of questionable alliances with Freemasonry and a 'cold attitude' towards the fascist cause.<sup>20</sup> Over the course of two years, they sent a barrage of reports against Mombelli and the officials he employed in his administration, and in 1926 a renewed series of complaints by militia groups joined the campaign. Accusations of anti-fascism in Mombelli's administration claimed his reluctance to use violence was an affront to Italian colonial prestige; they complained of an atmosphere in which Italian soldiers would face harsh punishments for any act of violence against Arab or Jewish populations. Regional party members saw a total overhaul of the colonial administration as the only solution.

In his defence of his status as an ardent supporter of the Fascist Party, Mombelli noted particular difficulties in the fascistisation of a space that was at once central to a fascist identity and on the edges of national consciousness. Though he followed requirements to purge officials deemed anti-fascist from his administration, Mombelli also called for a greater level of continuity in the administration to face the particular difficulties of colonial rule that required a specialised degree of expertise and experience that the Minister of Colonies had gone to great lengths to cultivate over the first decade of colonial rule. In a number of cases, Mombelli chose to interpret evidence against particular officials as insufficient proof of their potential threat to fascism, especially if they served a purpose he considered to be indispensable and difficult to replace. Mombelli also claimed that the colonial setting distorted the programme of the Fascist Party within its local branches. 'The colonial atmosphere of Cyrenaica', he wrote, 'manifests the repercussions of national political battles, but instead of bursting forth in a field of noble competition, they often come out in questions of personal character often inspired by ulterior motives.'<sup>21</sup>

The campaign against Mombelli's administration ended with the Fascist Party recognising the value in Mombelli's approach to the fascistisation of the colonial administration and with an attempt to moderate the enthusiasm of the local *fasci*. The head of the Fascist Party branch in Bengasi stepped down, and the Fascist Party announced that the *fasci* of the Italian colonies, which had previously been organised under the *Fasci Italiani all'estero e nelle Colonie*, would pass under the control of the PNF. The incorporation of the Fascist Party organisations in the Libyan territories into the centralised party in Rome could be read as a move to draw the Libyan territories more fully into an Italian national identity. In fact, party leaders called for the measure as an opportunity for 'more direct contact, through this new hierarchy of dependency, between the Fascist Party and the lands that have been returned to the dominion of Rome thanks to the valour and sacrifice of the grey-green Military and of the Blackshirts'.<sup>22</sup>

Of more importance for the PNF leadership, however, was that the inclusion of the Libyan *fasci* in a central hierarchy allowed for control over the definition of fascism and fascist activities in an increasingly important sphere of colonial politics. The issue came to an end with a broader directive from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that explicitly forbade the involvement of all *fasci* abroad in attacks against state representatives, a measure meant to prevent *fasci* throughout the world from meddling in Italian international affairs.<sup>23</sup> Following the absorption of the *fasci* of the Libyan territories into the centralised party structure, the Secretary General of the PNF sent



an inspector to report on the conditions of the party in the colonies in order to understand how the party could encourage the settler population to adopt fascism. His report echoed Mombelli's arguments on the insular nature of the fascists in the colonies, and he called for the elimination of those who had claimed leadership of local party organs during the transitional period of 1922–1926. 'Real fascists', he claimed, felt uncomfortable with the distorted fascism of colonial *fasci*, and they welcomed the control of the central party.<sup>24</sup>

### **Prestige and the culture of colonialism**

In the effort to curb the violence of the militias and the combativeness of the local Fascist Party enthusiasts, party leaders in Rome contested the linkage of prestige and violence with a competing ideal of a culture of colonialism based on a process of the production and dissemination of knowledge. Someone like Federzoni – representing a social and intellectual elite with a penchant for the more elegant side of imperial endeavours – frowned upon the indiscriminate use of violence because of its potential for revealing the cultural inferiority of the Italian population in a reverse reading of the 'politics of prestige'. In the second half of the 1920s, the Ministry initiated a series of measures designed to educate officials in Italian overseas territories as part of Federzoni's programme to make fascists into good imperialists and to develop an Italian culture of colonialism.

Unsurprisingly, we can find similar calls for the development of a colonial culture in the liberal era as a way of increasing the efficacy of colonial rule and promoting a greater measure of respect for the work of colonial experts in the metropole. At the beginning of the Italian occupation of the Libyan territories, the concern with developing a culture of colonialism reflected a desire to compete with European powers among imperial connoisseurs – those policy-makers, industrialists and intellectuals most interested in Italian expansion abroad. Because Italian ambitions for expansion came late in the imperial game, the sense that Italians needed to catch up fuelled a drive for expansion that, according to this narrative of national inferiority, did not allow time for the development of a shared set of goals or values in the broader imperial project. Imperialists feared that Italian settlers and even higher-ranking officials in the Libyan territories lacked the weight of experience in the region to inform proper behaviour or effective administration.

The idea that Italy lagged behind, of course, did not disappear with the transition to a fascist administration after 1922. If anything, a shared desire to catch up with European competitors informed the support of nationalists for the new political movement, and efforts to both expand a national awareness of colonial issues in the metropole and to educate officials within the colonial administration on the history and culture of the region straddled the liberal and fascist eras. In the liberal era, however, these efforts focused on identifying regional powerbrokers to act as intermediaries in the extension of Italian influence throughout the region. Federzoni had no interest in mimicking this approach. The culture of Italian colonialism under Federzoni's guidance was to be a fascist culture, with no room for the power-sharing policies of the previous administration that, he argued, fostered 'an insidious false peace'.<sup>25</sup>

As the PNF consolidated control in the late 1920s, Federzoni's approach revealed a tension between the desire to encourage the fascistisation of the colonial administration (meaning changes in personnel) and apprehension over the lack of sophistication or experience among colonial functionaries. The efforts of his administration to educate officials in the colonies were far from comprehensive, but they did include the establishment of an official publication, *Rivista delle colonie italiane*, along with a series of monographs in 1927. A year later, Federzoni

complained to the governors of the Libyan territories of a lack of interest in this desultory programme of professional development, and he made subscription to both series of publications mandatory for officials above a certain pay level. Though it is possible that the lack of interest stemmed from a level of resistance to the direction of Federzoni's ministry, he took it to indicate the absence of a professional attitude among colonial officials that revealed the inferiority of Italian colonial culture.<sup>26</sup>

In February 1928, in one of his final measures as the Minister of Colonies, Federzoni issued new guidelines for the promotion of colonial officials that promised to answer both the possibility of resistance to the fascist administration and the lack of professionalism. Federzoni's new guidelines turned away from a focus on length of service in the advancement of officials through the colonial hierarchy in order to allow for the flexibility to place individuals with the specialised skills needed in the colonial setting and to reward individuals proven to be 'good fascists'. The guidelines for promotion could in part reflect an attempt by Federzoni to prove that he was a party player in a time when he was facing increased isolation from Mussolini's inner circle. More importantly for the current discussion, the measure wrestled with a contradiction: the Ministry of Colonies wanted to have the flexibility to promote officers of solid Fascist pedigree above those with more experience while at the same time creating a sense of continuity within a professionalised administration.<sup>27</sup>

Concern over the lack of professionalisation among colonial officials extended to the colonial armed forces and drew a sharp rebuke from Rodolfo Graziani, the infamous general given primary responsibility for the Italian 'reconquest' of the Libyan interior. In 1928, the same year Federzoni revamped the system of professional advancement, Graziani undertook a public relations campaign to defend colonial officers against two accusations from the Party elite like Federzoni: (1) that they lacked professional skills, and (2) that their service in the colonies would alienate them from the metropole and thus render them incapable of participating in European warfare. Though he cautioned against the risk of officials losing track of technological developments in the metropole (and established a fully stocked library of publications on advancements in military strategy to counteract that risk), Graziani adamantly defended the professional capacity of colonial officials, even the many self-trained officers who learned through direct experience in North Africa. That they required specialised knowledge, Graziani admitted freely; but he argued against the marginalisation of colonial forces or their characterisation as unprofessional in a fully Italian sense.<sup>28</sup> Graziani's defence of colonial forces constituted a defence of the self-made man, trained through experience in the colonies. As a rejection of specialised knowledge and training, it represented the rejection of colonial culture with deeper roots as the Fascist Party took a militant turn in the Libyan territories at the end of the 1920s.

## Conclusion

Fascist enthusiasts in the 1920s did not possess a monopoly over the exaltation of violence in the colonial realm. The liberal regimes of the 1910s engaged in their share of repressive modes of colonial rule; the destruction of the initial wars of occupation and subsequent periodic engagements with civilian populations attest to a consistent willingness to use armed force to establish Italian state rule in the Libyan territories. However, the Italian colonial administrations of the 1910s did expend energy, resources and rhetoric on efforts to establish power-sharing systems of rule through alliances with regional powerbrokers based, primarily, on the recommendations of regional specialists, most notably in the establishment of an emirate in

Cyrenaica through a series of treaties with Idris al-Sanusi during and after the First World War. The political upheavals in Rome in 1922 and the coincidental breakdown of power-sharing relationships in the Libyan territories opened up a discussion on the relative importance of accommodation and coercion in a new fascist style of colonial rule.

In a period in which the relationship between accommodation and coercion within the broader fascist movement was open to interpretation, the Libyan territories offered a space for experimentation. Competing views of how to develop a particularly fascist style of colonial rule confronted a colonial state that was relatively unformed, unstable and lacking in a clear identity. As Fascist Party leaders, local enthusiasts and colonial administrators wrestled over the meaning of the fascist movement in the Libyan territories, they revealed their uncertainties over the nature of colonial rule and the value of colonial space in the Italian nation.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. Archivio Centrale dello Stato [ACS] Ministero dell'Africa Italiana [MAI] 2046, Divisione Carabinieri Reali della Tripolitania to the Governor of Tripoli, September 27, 1923. Most of the information for this article came from the small but illuminating collection of documents from the Ministry of Colonies that found their way into an unexpected corner of the Archivio Centrale dello Stato.
2. ACS MAI 2046, Federzoni to Governor of Tripoli, September 30, 1923.
3. Despite the name, the military campaigns of the 'reconquest' brought many regions of the interior under Italian influence for the first time.
4. For an account of Italian attempts to reach out to Libyan elites in exile during the era of the 'reconquest', see Baldinetti (2010). On Mussolini's public relations campaign, see Wright (2005).
5. Del Boca (1986–1988) identified a shift in political rhetoric that indicated an increased propensity to use violence. For an example, Del Boca looked to Giuseppe Volpi, the Governor of Tripolitania for over a year before the March on Rome who occupied the coastal city of Misurata under his own initiative. Volpi explained fascist colonialism as having fostered the superiority of Italian culture, an approach he referred to as 'a politics of prestige'. Quoted in Del Boca (1986–1988, 6). Also see Goglia and Grassi (1993, 204).
6. ACS MAI 2046, Di Scalea to Mombelli, June 4, 1925.
7. ACS MAI 2046, De Bono to Minister of Colonies, March 31, 1924.
8. Thanks to Rita Krueger for the clarity of the concept of a sliding scale of violence in colonial rule.
9. ACS MAI 2072, Federzoni, 'Il Fascismo per le colonie', from the *Rassegna italiana*, Fascicolo LXV, 1923.
10. Federzoni laid out his plan for the introduction of militias in a memo to the Chief of Staff, ACS MAI 2072, December 1922.
11. ACS MAI 2072, Federzoni to the Chief of Staff, December 1922.
12. ACS MAI 2046, Division Command of Tripolitania to the Governor of Tripolitania, September 24, 1923.
13. The archives of the Italian military (Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, AUSSME) do include some annual reports from the MVSN in the Libyan territories, but not before 1924. AUSSME L8/224.
14. Though published by the Italian military archives, Saini Fasanotti's study fails to cite a specific source for these numbers.
15. On Italian plans for agricultural settlements, see Cresti (2011) and Segré (1974). It is important to note here that there had been an earlier use of fascist militias in the Libyan territories before 1922 when Giuseppe Volpi initiated an illegal campaign to take the city of Misurata in 1921 during which he used fascist militias as a parallel force to pressure both Italian and 'native' populations (Dumasy 2008, 100).
16. ACS MAI 2046, Director of Police to Governor of Tripolitania, September 22, 1923.

17. ACS MAI 2046, Political Secretary of the PNF in Derna, 'Relazione mensile 15 ottobre 15 novembre 1922', December 17, 1922.
18. Ibid. It is important to note that the *fascio* of Tripoli also took an active role in promoting a particular version of a fascist approach in colonial policy, especially when they tried to block the nomination of a functionary known as a player in negotiating peace treaties from the previous administration, peace treaties that the *fasci* complained had 'reduced [Italian] dominion in Libya to a veiled form of protectorate'. ACS MAI 2046, Vice-Secretary of the Fasci Italiani all'estero e nelle Colonie to Mussolini, August 6, 1926. The involvement of the local *fasci* in Cyrenaica, however, reached a higher level as a source of irritation for the central Party.
19. ACS MAI 2046, Secretary General of the Fasci Italiani all'Estero to the Minister of Colonies, March 13, 1925.
20. ACS MAI 2046, Delegate of the PNF to Cyrenaica, Gian Luigi Olmi, to Political Secretary of the PNF, November 8, 1924.
21. ACS MAI 2046, Mombelli to the Minister of Colonies, June 11, 1925.
22. ACS MAI 2072, PNF Foglio d'Ordini, n. 26, 'Fasci delle Colonie', March 19, 1927.
23. ACS MAI 2046, Grandi to Diplomatic Agents, 6/13/1925.
24. ACS MAI 2046, Commissario Straordinario of the PNF to the Vice-Secretary General of the PNF, April 18, 1927.
25. ACS MAI 2072, Federzoni, 'Il Fascismo per le colonie', from *La Rassegna Italiana*, Fascicolo LXV, 1923.
26. ACS MAI 2061, Federzoni to the Governors of Colonies, June 9, 1928.
27. ACS MAI 2061, Luigi Federzoni, New Guidelines for Promotion of Colonial Officials, February 25, 1928.
28. ACS FG 6/8/1, Graziani, 'Cultura professionale degli ufficiale', August 13, 1928.

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