

The Embarrassment of Libya: History, Memory, and Politics in Contemporary Italy

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The past weighs on the present. This same past can, however, also constitute an opportunity for the future. If adequately acknowledged, the past can inspire positive action. This seems to be the maxim that we can draw from the history of Italy in the Mediterranean and, in particular, the history of Italy's relationship with Libya. Even the most recent "friendship and cooperation agreement" between Italy and Libya, signed August 30, 2008 by Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and Libyan leader Colonel Moammar Gadhafi, affirms this. Italy's colonial past in Libya has been a source of political tensions between the two nations for the past forty years. Now, the question emerges: will the acknowledgement of this past finally help to reconcile the two countries?

The history of Italy's presence in Libya (1912-1942) is rather different from the more general history of the European colonial expansion. The Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (referred to by the single name "Libya" in the literary and rhetorical culture of liberal Italy) were among the few African territories that remained outside of the European dominion, together with Ethiopia (which defeated Italy at Adwa in 1896) and rubber-rich Liberia. This did not come about because of the combative traditions of Libyans, nor as a result of the economic power of Libya (which did not yet exist), but because of European imperialist rivalries and the Old Continent's fear of suddenly aggravating the health of the declining Ottoman Empire ("sick man of the East,") and above all, the weaknesses of the only European power that could aspire to its control: liberal Italy. Moreover, as a consequence of Mussolini losing the war, Italy would lose control of Libya by 1943. Democratic and republican post-Fascist Italy attempted in vain to regain control of Libya and, when the possibility of controlling Tripolitania alone materialized, was even prepared to renounce the unification of Libya's territory, which had been a great source of nationalist pride. By then, however, the colonial period of Italy in the Mediterranean had passed, and Rome had lost both Benghazi and Tripoli.¹

Thus, the early relationship between Italy and Libya was characterized by the following factors: Libya's prolonged noninvolvement with the colonial European dominion, the colonialist awakening of Italy (the last of the Great Powers), and the brevity of Italy's colonial rule in Libya. It may seem strange, but that thirty-year period, however brief, had its own unique characteristics and had important repercussions for Italian relations with Libya and with the entire Mediterranean. Some decades ago, the historiographic conflict between the old-style colonial history and the young history of Africa coincided with the opposition between those who affirmed that colonialism had transformed the Third World and those who claimed that colonialism had been a mere parenthesis in the history of the "dark continent." Today, postcolonial histories of European expansion seem more interested in understanding how this "parenthesis" transformed Europe itself and Europeans. From this point of view, the Italian presence in Libya had a surprising influence on the people, culture, and politics of Italy.

¹ For a bibliographical survey, see Nicola Labanca, Pierluigi Venuta, *Bibliografia della Libia coloniale* (Florence: Olschki, 2004).

1.

In 1911, the conquest of Libya was an enchanting prospect that many Italians championed. It fulfilled the nationalists' fantasy of a "fourth shore." As sociologist Roberto Michels would later define it; this was a conquest of "demographic imperialism," an expression of the transformation of a united Italy. Even before the conquest, some demagogues had rhetorically praised Libya and the Libyans even while denigrating them:

How dignified, good, and interesting is the Libyan race! Who would have the courage to disturb these primitive people in their tranquil, pastoral life? Entering one of these tents, so many thoughts of the vainglory of civilization present themselves.²

Just before his death, Giovanni Pascoli thought that he could recognize in Libya the spirit of Italy's "*fanciullino*" (the raw, puerile spirit) that would allow for the reawakening of the great proletarian nation of Italy through a socialist-imperialist conquest.

The great Proletariat has stirred.

Before, she sent her workers elsewhere because there were too many here at home, and they had to work for so little The world profited from the Italian laborers; and the more it needed them, the less it acknowledged them: it paid them little, treated them badly, and gave them many names. Carcamanos! Gringos! Cincali! Dagos!

They had become like the blacks in America, these fellow-countrymen of the men who had discovered Her; and like the blacks, every once in a while they were cast outside of the law and outside of humanity, and they were lynched

But the great Proletariat has found a place for them: a vast region washed by our sea, toward which our little islands look, like advanced sentinels; toward which our great island impatiently stretches; a vast region that, through the work of our progenitors, was once abundant in waters and harvests, verdant with trees and gardens; and for some time now, because of the idleness of nomadic and indolent populations, has become mostly desert.³

The conquest of what Gaetano Salvemini terms the "big sandbox," however it may be interpreted, brought with it extraordinary enchantment. For Italy, Libya represented the recognition of its great power; but above all Libya was Africa, and Africa was the desert, which hypnotized all who spoke of it. Even critics of the undertaking spoke of the desert:

The golden softness of the sands. Around me is the inexistent: absolute solitude and silence that create a sensation of emptiness. The same dunes that fade into the infinite lose their lines and hues; they change into the nothingness of a distressing uniformity . . . Only Debussy could render in notes the splendor of that sky without voices.⁴

² Manfredo Camperio, cited in Angelo del Boca, *La nostra Africa. Nel racconto di cinquanta italiani che l'hanno percorsa, esplorata e amata* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2003), 182.

³ Giovanni Pascoli, cited in Salvatore Bono, *Tripoli bel suol d'amore. Testimonianze sulla guerra italo-libica* (Rome: Isiao, 2005), 75.

⁴ Guido Podrecca, cited in Bono 2005, 183.

And again:

If we were to occupy Tripoli now, we would have to begin by establishing public order among these populations that live in a limitless, white, yellowish desert: where you die of heat; where you suffocate from dust; where, to follow the many ghosts that we will never be able to overtake, we will make hundreds and hundreds of our soldiers die from diseases, without ever seeing a single enemy.⁵

Since then, Libya has attracted the attention of all who have reached her shores: travel guides of the colonial period are full of orientalist references; but even in the more recent guides, written with postcolonial and very critical intentions (that are not always fulfilled), Libya fascinates Italians. In short, the spirit of “Tripoli, beautiful land of love” overcame every criticism, and Libya, for Italians, represented simultaneously both Black Africa and the Orient.

Unlike distant Eritrea and poor Somalia, Libya, which is only a few hours’ distance from Italy, immediately attracted thousands and thousands of Italians. Libya, compared to the other Italian territories, became at once a demographic colony, or at least more demographic than the others. It was never the Algeria of the *pied noirs*, not even when the Fascist regime encouraged the expeditions of the thousands of peasants (the Ventimila expeditions). Its oases of “Italianness”⁶ were never principally lands of rural colonization. Even in Libya, most Italians were crowded into the cities and were willing to do more menial jobs than the *petit blancs*, or, as the English say, the “poor whites.”⁷ Demographically, Libya was more costly to maintain as a colony, thirty or perhaps fifty times more than Somalia and about twenty times more than Eritrea. Essentially, the Italian colonial fascination had planted more robust roots here than anywhere else, and the beauty of the Libyan desert held something uncanny (*Unheimlich*) for the Italians.

2.

Liberal Italy and, above all, the Fascist regime boasted considerably about governing Libya. The actual trade figures were not exceptionally high, but colonial rhetoric aimed at exaggerating everything.

Regardless of the relatively large number of colonists, the Italian colonial dominion in Libya exhibited a noted characteristic of every colonialism: very few colonizers were actually familiar with their overseas dominions. For this reason, like many other Europeans, Italians on the fourth shore were simultaneously dominant and ignorant. How many at the time actually knew that, for nearly twenty years, the Italian rule of Libya was essentially a formality and limited to the coast? How many knew about the Arab revolt of 1914-15 and the Italian prisoners in Libya? How many were familiar with the atrocities linked to the “reconquest” of inland Libya? Let us reread the words with which Pietro Badoglio (in a decision reached with Mussolini and Rodolfo Graziani in 1929-31) dictated the final turn of the screw for the reconquest (it was actually a conquest, which started in 1921) of the territories of inland Cyrenaica:

⁵ Leone Caetani, cited in Bono 2005, 78.

⁶ F. Cresti, *Oasi di italianità. La Libia della colonizzazione agraria tra fascismo, guerra e indipendenza, 1935-56* (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1996).

⁷ Nicola Labanca, *Quaderni di “petit blancs”. Diari e memorie dell’“imperialismo demografico” italiano*, cited in Idem, *Posti al sole. Diari e memorie di vita e di lavoro dall’Africa italiana* (Rovereto: Museo storico della Guerra, 2001), v-lxxv.

Above all, we need to create a wide and very precise territorial separation between the rebellious groups and the subjected population. I do not hide the importance or the gravity of this measure that will mean the ruin of the so-called subjected population. But by now the path has been mapped out for us, and we must pursue it until the end, even if the whole population of Cyrenaica were to die.⁸

Later on, a colonial official noted for his moderation would admit:

Prisoners were never taken during engagements between our troops and the rebels, and women and children were shot as well.⁹

Many, if not all, sang “Tripoli, beautiful land of love,” taking pride in the dominion and allowing themselves to take part in the illusion: few knew about the concentration camps into which nearly half of the population of Cyrenaica disappeared between 1929 and 1933. Some ended up dead, others became refugees and exiles. For many Italians, enchantment went hand in hand with ignorance; for some with repression. Pirandello described this in a play that is not often remembered:

It doesn't seem real to me, it doesn't seem real to me that we are here. I am dreaming [. . .]

Everything . . . a daze . . . and it seems like time has stopped [. . .]

And we've already finished repairing the house, and we give each other help and company.

[La Spera:] If only it were true that, coming here and changing our lives, one by one we would become other than who we were...

The colony of the people who were forced to be free!

We came here to make our own life [. . .]. Yes, each one his own, without being subordinate to anyone [. . .] I had come here in order not to be under the law [. . .] of others: yes. Because you and all of us that are here put ourselves outside of that law; and we felt that the orders came to us from outside, like an abuse of power. But now the law of the others is no longer here. There is only our law.

The island won't sink, as long as we don't sin.

And here there's still a lot to do! We're just starting off; everything depends on us; think, think how beautiful this is: that here we make our own life, with nothing, with what there is; we make it rise, from scratch; and it will be just like we make it. All of the earth is already green!

I painted this island like an earthly paradise for everyone [. . .], but if you don't have the means? Freedom! How can you exploit it?

It will destroy everything! [. . .] You have brought laziness, amusement will arise, of course, and jealousy; ambition will arise, and intrigue, of course. You have brought all the vices of the city, women and money. The city, the city that we had escaped, as if from the plague.

⁸ Pietro Badoglio to Rodolfo Graziani, 20 June 1929: Rochat; and in Del Boca 2005, 176.

⁹ Giuseppe Daodice to Giuseppe Brusasca, January 7, 1951, in Del Boca 2005, 179.

Not, no... It's that now, here, don't you hear? Do these shouts and laughs sound right to you? No one pays attention to anything anymore, no one works anymore... and certain things that would never have even come to mind, now, here, seem legitimate. Everything seems legitimate! [. . .] There is no more respect, no more obedience! [. . .] But, after all, it is natural! Here a façade of the law and the church is enough.¹⁰

Following Mussolini's defeat at El Alamein and beyond, when Italy lost Libya after having uselessly attempted to invade Egypt and reach the Suez Canal and eventually the Middle East, Italians had a very strange yet comprehensible reaction. After so much drum banging by the regime about the fourth shore, the loss of Libya, judging by police sources, affected the public spirit differently than the loss of the Empire in East Africa had a couple of years earlier. More than anything else, for Italians the farewell to Libya signaled the approach of the Anglo-Americans, who at this point were still the enemy.

Thus, thirty years of dominion ended abruptly, without time to mourn. At the beginning of the Thirties, the regime compiled a large celebratory volume: *Libya in Twenty Years of Italian Occupation*.¹¹ There was no time to prepare one for the thirtieth anniversary. Italian Libya vanished for Italians like a dream, a dream that lingered, but of which there could be no precise knowledge or understanding.

Political Italy, and especially colonialist Italy, sought in vain to regain control of its colonies in the immediate postwar period. And in fact, in Libya, more so than in barren and small Eritrea or distant and sandy Somalia, colonial Italy boasted substantial agricultural accomplishments. But by 1945, the "return" of Italy to Libya appeared improbable. The idea was formally put to rest when in 1950, convening the Libyan National Assembly that was commissioned to draft a constitution that would lead to a confederate kingdom of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan, the victorious powers of World War II and the United Nations sanctioned the end of Italian rule in Libya. A new kingdom was conjured up, and a king installed, Idriss, a descendant of the al-Senussi, against whom Fascism had fought for so long. Using ancient solidarity among European colonial powers as leverage, Italy was only able to secure the rights of the remaining colonists on most of the lands that had already been acquired. The compromise of December 15, 1950, preserved Italian property in Libya.

There was no longer a reason to sing "Tripoli beautiful land of love." The orientalist fascination of Italians had to find other scenery. Libya, governed by Italy for only three decades, was soon forgotten, or repressed. Repression, however, does not prevent an emotion from returning; instead it just makes that return more uncanny.

3.

Thus, colonial Italy did not taste the bitterness of the wars of decolonization. It was not forced to rethink its colonial experience through any difficult processes of independence and return to self-rule of its former territories. It simply laid this experience aside and repressed it. After so much emotion, repression—if we still want to make a consistent use of this category—is neither easy nor painless. There is no real protection from the return of the repressed.

¹⁰ Luigi Pirandello, *La nuova colonia*, Ed. Marta Abba (Milan: Murisa, 1971 [1928]), 66, 67, 75, 79, 84, 88, 99, 101, 129, 148, 157-167-187.

¹¹ Tomaso Sillani, Ed., *La Libya in venti anni di occupazione italiana. Studi e documenti* (Rome: La Rassegna Italiana, 1932).

A first instance of such a return, known to few yet important, occurred when post-war republican Italy (as the era of the center-left coalition approached) was forced to come to terms with the necessity of a definitive settlement with the ex-colony. The reign of Idriss was moderately nationalistic, and it made moderate demands of Italy. Rome, therefore, got off easy, seeking to blanket everything in silence and above all to shelter itself from embarrassing demands regarding the concentration camps, the Italian repression of the anti-colonial resistance, and the question of Italian entitlement to agricultural land acquired by Italians in Libya during the brief colonial period. With an uncomplicated agreement (the Italo-Libyan Accord of October 2, 1956, ratified in Italy on August 17, 1957, concerning the outstanding postcolonial matters of Italian goods in Libya), Italy sought to prevent any further Libyan demands. The Italians succeeded, and while Italy was following the events of decolonization with increasing attention, the agreement was hardly discussed in the press. At this time, King Idriss was most concerned with his country's present and future oil interests, rather than Libya's colonial past. In 1956, the Libyan American Oil Company sank its first well with mediocre success; it would find its first extraordinary gusher on June 10, 1959 and export the first of many barrels on September 12, 1961. Petroleum gave the Libyans a powerful new identity.¹² In this new atmosphere, Tripoli passed the law of May 24, 1960 regarding the citizenship of foreign landowners. This law made the Italians, especially those who remained in Libya, nervous, even though it had no retroactive power.

Only a few years earlier, in what is recognized as his greatest work, Mario Tobino wrote about the desert and Libya in both inspiring and inspired words:

From that silent morning so softened by the pleated electric rays of the sun, when he disembarked from the steamship into Libya, Marcello had been fascinated by that world. The more time passed, the more his enchantment grew in contact with the wisdom of deeply rooted Libyan traditions, the kind of sensuous meditation of which the Arabs are capable. The soft and clear oases, the palms that swayed in the sky, and the natives nourished by this land (or perhaps it was Marcello's nature that had found its nourishment in the oases) allows the imagination to spontaneously flow into a river of amorous dances that with uncanny grace bleed into scenes of wars with embattled horses and sharp swords flying towards the glistening flesh of the enemy. In short, Marcello, who for many years had been a sleepy dreamer in poor Tuscany, found here the fruits that satiated him [. . .].

The sun was so constant that it permeated everything [. . .]; the landscape that surrounded the encampment did not have colors; the sand and the objects blurred into a single worn-out hue [. . .].

Marcello had lived in almost all the oases, traversed all the deserts, and every place appeared extraordinarily beautiful to him; when he spoke about Cyrenaica, it was as if he remembered his native country, and he described it as an earthly paradise where barley sprouts spontaneously at the feet of the beautiful, rather untamed Cyrenaican maidens [. . .].

Tripoli is divided into Arab and Jewish quarters, equal yet distinct, the wild passion of the Arabs on the one hand, and the feverish dreams of the Jews on the other. These two types of uncommon beauty, if unspoiled, can enrapture the Catholics [. . .].

¹² Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya. State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance, 1830-1932* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

In Libya the stars are so close that they seem to fall into our laps [. . .].
[The desert] is a plain, unblessed by blades of grass; infinite, it extends beyond its horizon.¹³

It was too early to sense the impending changes in the colonial context; at that time, Gadhafi was little more than one of many young admirers of Abd al-Nasser. Even back in Italy, where at the beginning of the sixties it was difficult to remember not only the colonial past, but also the fact that some Italians still remained in Libya, the May 1960 law passed unobserved. Rome was able to delude itself that it had deflected the blow of decolonization; in spite of the new age of oil and of the Seven Sisters, Italy improved the terms of its trading with Libya.

In September 1969, Italy was thrown quite off balance by the Libyan coup d'état of the Free Officers Movement; contrary to King Idriss, the young Colonel Gadhafi quickly utilized the memory of the Italian colonial past to create a national consensus.¹⁴ Some authorities at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs understood the implications of this situation, and they quickly and secretly commissioned a study documenting the Italian colonial past in Libya. Notably, even though the Committee on the Documentation of Italian Activity in Africa (which was formed in 1953 and mostly composed of ex-colonial functionaries, an emanation of circles still embroiled in the colonial past) was still functioning; the Ministry gave the task to scholars independent of the committee. The report still lies in the archives.¹⁵

Gadhafi immediately made Italians understand that they were no longer welcome in Tripoli and that the Accord of 1956 would be subject to revision. In the spring of 1970, after expelling the Jews, the new regime decided to drive the Italians out of Libya. Three special laws were promulgated on July 21, 1970. With the establishment of the new regime, the Italians who had not already left between 1956 and September 1969 were forced to leave. Socialist leader Pietro Nenni wrote in his diary:

Terrible news from Libya. The revolutionary government has confiscated Italian property. The decision comes with a resounding decree against Italian residents of Libya, all accused of being just colonialists and Fascists. There are twenty thousand workers, among whom there is only a small nucleus of entrepreneurs and speculators [. . .]. There is something inevitable in the Council of the Revolution. But as always, even those who have nothing in common with colonialism or Fascism are paying the price.¹⁶

For the Italians, the expulsion of 1970 was a more traumatic event in the history of relations between Italy and Libya than the events of 1943, 1956, and 1969. It represented that uncanny return of the repressed that until then Italians had sought to defer.

¹³ Mario Tobino, *Il deserto della Libia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966 [1955]), 22, 52, 82-3, 92, 131-2, 199.

¹⁴ Angelo del Boca, *Gheddafi. Una sfida dal deserto* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1998).

¹⁵ Nicola Labanca, *Gli studi italiani sul colonialismo italiano in Libia*, in Nicola Labanca and Pierluigi Venuta (Eds.), *Un colonialismo, due sponde del Mediterraneo. Atti del seminario di studi storici italo-libici* (Pistoia: CRT, 2000), 15-28; and updated in Nicola Labanca, *Fasi e tendenze negli studi italiani sulla Libia coloniale*, in *La Libia tra Mediterraneo e mondo islamico. Atti del convegno di Catania, 1-2 dicembre 2000. Aggiornamenti e approfondimenti*, Ed. Federico Cresti (Milan: Giuffrè, 2006), 3-18.

¹⁶ Pietro Nenni, *I conti con la storia. diari 1967.1971* (Milan: Sugar, 1983) pp. 494-6; cited in Angelo del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia. Dal fascismo a Gheddafi* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1988).

4.

Yet, not even with the expulsion of 1970 did a process of reflection and civic discourse on the Italian colonial past in Libya begin. Angelo del Boca commented that the event “provoked more astonishment than disdain in Italy.”¹⁷ Italians – now in the midst of the seventies – missed even this opportunity to reconsider the emotions and infatuations that their grandparents or parents had felt for the conquest, or reconquest, of the fourth shore. The colonial memory was not decolonized. This was true for Italians both in Libya and on the Peninsula.

The Italian population in Libya was of course much smaller in 1970 than during the colonial period. Furthermore, they were very different from the old colonial community. While many of the richest landowners remained, most of the poor whites with so little to lose had returned to their homeland.

All colonialisms are based on the failure to recognize the rights of human beings, and every colonial power has always been aware of this. However, these last Italians driven out of Libya in 1970, who previously had not accepted Libyan citizenship, suffered retaliation as colonizers even though they could hardly be considered personally responsible for the actions of the colonial regime, especially the youngest ones. Even if their fate was much less tragic than that of other colonial communities (for example the French in Algeria), it was difficult for them to leave their goods and property on such short notice. After the discovery of petroleum, the majority of Italians in Libya were not integrated into this new dimension of Libyan wealth. Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI) and Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli (AGIP) had entered the Libyan oil market, but the new Italians that these firms brought and the revenue that they produced were only a small part of the extraordinary “new world” that had penetrated Libya at the beginning of the sixties.¹⁸

As for the Italians on the Peninsula, we have already mentioned their reaction to the arrival of Italians from Tripoli and Benghazi: it was distracted and inattentive, yet suspicious. Who were these Italians from Libya that seemed to come to Italy from a bygone colonial era? How different was the national imaginary that these “Libyans” brought with them, compared to the Italian reality of the economic miracle and youth and worker protest. For many Italians, the brutal fate of the Italo-Libyan community was the least of their worries in a country that risked being swept away by the tension and intensity of civil unrest, the oil crisis of 1973, and the spread of double-digit inflation.

A few took action. To the more nostalgic right wing, the “Libyans” catalyzed their own yearnings (return to the days of empire, national honor, and opposition to the decolonizing processes on the “Dark Continent,” etc.), and for this reason they sought to enlist them into their ranks. The government introduced goodwill legislation in favor of the many refugees, but these “Italians of Libya” were again quickly forgotten. At the same time, the Italians of Libya were adversely affected by the political oscillations and nonchalance with which the Libyan events and the personality of the “Qaid” himself were viewed on the Italian peninsula. Gadhafi, who for many Italians represented the new Libya, was sometimes demonized and other times exalted. The words with which a correspondent for *l'Unità* painted the council of Gadhafi's revolution seem significant:

¹⁷ Ibid., 472.

¹⁸ Many studies and biographies on the figure of Enrico Mattei have recently appeared that discuss the role that Mattei played in the post World War Two reorganization of Italian petroleum and energy interests in the Middle East and Libya, in particular.

The new leaders of republican Libya are twelve, like the Apostles, They are the sons of poor Bedouins and nomads [. . .], of peasants [. . .], of livestock herders and farmers [. . .], of priests venerated for their religious rigor and holy zeal.¹⁹

This certainly cemented the distance between Libyan Italians and Italians.

Perhaps these Italo-Libyans themselves contributed to this isolation for several reasons: From the start, aside from the particularly complexity of their own history, these new refugees' failed to speak with one voice, and their chosen political allies were not the most suitable for making their voice heard in Italy or for creating vast political alliances. In addition, their understandable demands for reparations alienated possible listeners in a difficult politico-economic moment, even though it was vital for the country gripped by the energy crisis to seek any means of reinsertion into the Libyan petroleum and gas industry. Finally, many of these industrious refugees went to work reinserting themselves with optimal results into the economic life of the country, setting aside (but not forgetting) their former identity as "Libyans." Their own success in overcoming an adverse fate eventually obfuscated their demands for reparations. For all these reasons, Italians did not critically reexamine their colonial past on the fourth shore.

In the meantime, businesses such as ENI and politicians such as Giulio Andreotti, patiently mended the fabric of a difficult dialogue with the new Libyan regime. The ongoing repression of the Italian colonial past in Libya was still useful now due to the convergent effects of the expulsion of 1970 and the return of Italian companies to Libya; both could do without memory.

Even the work, or rather, the silence, of historians means something. Libya was only a page in the vast book of the Italian colonial past. In the process of removing this past – both the Libyan past and the longer one in East Africa – from national memory, the silence of the historians, who carefully avoided any critical examination, is all the more significant.

What little was not repressed is due to the critical and vigilant research of a distinct contingent of independent historians and researchers who broke courageously with the nostalgic, or reticent, climate of scholars of colonial history and politics and African history and institutions. The insistent requests by the new Libyan regime (which by now had instituted its own "Libyan Studies Center") regarding the damages inflicted by colonialism on the Libyan people and economy reverberated across Italy and had some effect. In the seventies and eighties, the little that it was possible to do for the memory of the colonial past is due to these factors.

On the Italian side, many elements conspired for a silence, a silence that would endure. The historic Taormina Congress of 1989 is a symptomatic episode. As the world was changing, as the Berlin Wall was coming down, a public fund of unusual size was allocated to organize the largest (and most surreal) congress of historians on Italian colonialism. It was conceived without any sense of critical distance from Fascist colonialism, organized without a single African scholar, and with the freshest and most critical research left out of its conference rooms.²⁰ It occurred just as boats of Libyan citizens (organized by the Libyan regime) headed for the former Italian penal detention islands to attract the attention of the Italian and international public and

¹⁹ Arminio Savioli, *l'Unità*, March 8, 1970, cited in Angelo Del Boca, *Gheddafi. Una sfida dal deserto* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1998), 33.

²⁰ Several years later, the congressional proceedings were edited in *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana. Atti del convegno. Taormina-Messina, 23-29 ottobre 1989* (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1996).

remind them of the deportation of Libyans there by the Italian government after the defeat and massacre of Italians at Sciara Sciat (1911).

Although small, this demonstration revealed the short attention span of public opinion and the cultural insensitivity of the Italian people, causing diplomatic embarrassment and the further distancing of two nations -- all this when decolonization had already ended and the Cold War was waning. The sacrifice of the Italians of Libya in 1970 seemed to have been in vain. The memory of colonialism in Libya was still uncanny for Italians.

5.

In the fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the relationship between Italy and Libya went through several phases, apparently changing along the lines of the Italian politics of the moment. However, on the Italian side, a deeper continuity with the past characterizes this period.²¹

The first discontinuities came from Libya. After Berlin, Gadhafi veered toward Africa, distancing himself from pan-Arabism. The involvement of the Libyan regime in the Cold War, and perhaps even in Italian terrorism, was used as a justification by the Americans for the attack of 1986 and then for the international embargo. The end of the Cold War saw an end to the embargo against Tripoli and Libya's eventual return to the arena of international politics and economy. This was already the time of the "war on terror" and the "clash of civilizations."

Political Italy tried to face up to these discontinuities. In the initial phase, it sought to alleviate the weight of the embargo and to enter into contact with the new Libya, culminating in the historic repudiation of the colonial past by Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema. Had that political line been better conceived and negotiated, it might have led to momentous consequences for the collective Italian historical memory and mindset (one should remember that at this same moment, the President of the Republic, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, was traveling repeatedly to Ethiopia and emphasizing his detachment from Italian colonialism in East Africa). But this new policy remained in the realm of foreign affairs; not much was done to bring it to the level of the people and national civic debate; even the implementation of the culturally symbolic acts (such as the restitution of the Obelisk of Axum) that would have translated the new policy into practice were handed over to the usual suspects (with some meaningful but hardly significant changes), and overall the very same political majority that had promoted this historic cultural shift collapsed within a few months. The international context, too, was hardly favorable for such a change (the embargo against Libya was still formally valid until 2004).

In a second phase, which coincided with the arrival of a center-right majority guided by Silvio Berlusconi, Italian policies toward Libya changed. Despite great promises in the media, the new policy was neither developed nor implemented; and after September 11, 2001, Rome almost completely aligned itself with American foreign policy. The consequences of this alliance were immediately evident: Tripoli greatly cooled its relations with Rome, and even when the embargo was lifted, Libya granted the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany more diplomatic and economic privileges than Italy. Italian dependence on Libyan energy resources continues, yet Italy has not been able to take advantage of its ex-colony's return to the international market despite having busied itself in the nineties with diplomacy critical of the embargo. An evident symptom that captured the Italian public's attention was the *commedia dell'arte* act put on by the Italian government representatives in Tripoli who tried, apparently by making empty promises,

²¹ The author has developed these themes further in *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*. (Bologna: il Mulino, 2002).

to tempt Gadhafi into abolishing the “National Day of Revenge” in autumn 2004. Faced with the shallowness of Italian promises, Libya reintroduced it in autumn 2005. Incidentally, even the “veterans of Libya” suffered the consequences of this. Although suspicious, they had hoped that after D’Alema’s rapprochement they might be able to once again touch the fourth shore, yet at the same time, they had rejoiced at the advent of the center-right government. The diplomatic cooling off between Tripoli and Rome has for the time being frozen any hope, not only for the return of their assets, but of ever seeing them again.

While all of this was happening in the realm of politics, Italians rekindled a part of their ancient fascination with Libya, particularly after the end of the embargo. By 2003, Libya had wedged itself through the tight network of the embargo and began attracting more international tourism. So, for now, the fourth shore is yet again being tread upon and has become a niche market for high-end vacations, even by Italians. The ancient appeal of “Libyan nature” and “Libyan antiquities” is once again being praised in travel magazines, and new guidebooks are also being published. In these new accounts, the well-known uncanny fascination for the desert reemerges, and the disorientation of modern man faced with the Libyan landscape is once again evoked:

Today Libya is perhaps the last Mediterranean country where tourists can feel the same emotions that travelers felt in past centuries while wandering around the archeological ruins and listening to the sound of their own footsteps.²²

It is impossible not to notice how in these accounts contemporary histories as well as the history of the Italian colonial presence are almost completely erased. This deepens the uncanny effect of it all.

As they return to walk on the sand of what was once the fourth shore and is now re-legitimized as a useful ally in the war on terror, what do Italians know about colonialism that is not blurred by nostalgia and exoticism? How many Italian tourists at Leptis Magna know that nearby Solluch and el-Awjila were once site of Italian raids and concentration camps?

6.

Beyond the politics of the “war on terror,” a war fought not only with weapons but also with propaganda and words, in this age of international migrations, Libya begins to assume a new value for Italy. The desert that inspires new emotions in tourists represents a new boundary where, with respect to the colonial past, the present postcolonial seems to be at the point of being overturned. Before the pride of a “greater Italy” seemed able to dominate the world, but now from behind the dunes, a new specter haunts Italy and makes her uneasy.

From the second half of the seventies through the eighties, the international migrant flow into Italy was characterized by the presence of Africans. With the post-Glasnost disappearance of the single-party regimes and artificially planned economies in Eastern Europe, during the nineties and the first years of the new millennium, the citizens of these countries constituted the largest group of immigrants. Now, instead, increasingly “merchants of human flesh” cross the Mediterranean and challenge Italian controls with their barges. When they do not shipwreck, the boats land hundreds of immigrants without residence permits on the coast of Southern Italy, to be lost forever to their families in trans-Saharan Africa. In the warm nights of spring and the

²² Oriana Dal Bosco and Maria Teresa Grassi, *Libia mediterranea e romana* (Vicchio di Mugello: Polaris, 2005 [1998]), xiii.

sweltering heat of the Mediterranean summer, the unloading of *clandestini*, *extracomunitari*, and migrants is continuous. Unlike the Italian expedition of 1911, this is not a conquest, but for the many impoverished boat people, this voyage represents hope for the future.

These migrants have never constituted a particularly consistent flow, but they have always been visible, unlike those who cross land borders in a thousand other furtive ways. They land in well-known beaches or places with great tourist appeal like Lampedusa, whose inhabitants are hardly more numerous than the crew of one of these barges. For this reason, they are overrepresented in the media and in the imaginations of Italians.

Many of these migrants do begin their journey in Libya.

Gadhafi has long denied this, since such journeys suggest that the Libyan regime possesses less control over the country than it claims, and at the same time, the immigrants offer Gadhafi a useful instrument of political pressure toward Italy. Ten boat landings weigh a hundred times more than a missile and cost a thousand times less.

[Or alternatively the original version:]

Gadhafi has long denied this, both to contrast with the image of a regime that controls its country with less power than it claims to have, and to brandish an instrument of political pressure toward Italy. Ten boat landings weigh a hundred times more than a missile and cost a thousand times less.

It is not surprising that on the Italian side, several fearful entrepreneurs joined by a Minister of the Interior shook their finger at Tripoli. Intervening many times and always increasing the number as if in a bidding war, the minister spoke first about one million, then one and a half million, and finally two million Central and sub-Saharan Africans crossing the Libyan desert, ready to cross the Mediterranean and attack the Italian coast. It seems like an image from demographic colonialism in reverse, with definite emphasis on ancient imagery. Others have objected by saying that immigration is not fought with words: top-level spokespersons for the center-right complained that the problem concerned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and not the Ministry of Defense, and the leader of Lega Lombarda even wished that, were the barges to come from Albania or the Southern Mediterranean, the Navy would open fire (only to dissuade them, he clarified).

Since immigration does not end at landfall, in the framework of new relations with Libya the idea emerged that immigration needs to be stopped before the ships set sail. Without initiating new policies that support development or pardon the debts of the poorest African nations (with structured measures for long-term migration containment), the politicians of the center-right sought repressive solutions that might yield immediate results. They created combined Italo-Libyan units to patrol central Mediterranean waters. (Once the embargo was lifted, combined military maneuvers also took place, unthinkable during the Cold War or during Ronald Reagan's war against the "evil empire".) Italians conceived of a plan to "help" the Libyan regime by collaborating on the construction of detainment camps *on Libyan soil* for the control of migratory waves.

In fact, on the Italian Peninsula these concentration camps for migrants, officially named Temporary Stay Centers (CPT), were already under attack from various sectors of Italian public opinion and international observers:

Amnesty International is extremely concerned by the connection that links the perception of migration as dangerous and the violation of the most elementary rights of refugees, seekers of political asylum, and immigrants caught up in an endless cycle of new definitions and rules of behavior.

The histories behind the arrivals and forced departures from Lampedusa and Libya, where the fundamental human rights of migrants and those seeking asylum are denied, are actually a good point of departure for describing the state of the rights of foreigners in Italy and in Europe, using concrete data [. . .].

Gatti (*L'espresso*) condemned not only the unbearable hygienic conditions of the overcrowded center, but also foreigners' mistreatment in ways such as verbal abuse, physical violence (in the form of group beatings), and psychological violence such as forcing people of Islamic faith to see pornographic images.²³

Thus the government conceived of the plan to utilize, or rather, contribute to perfecting, the Libyan detainment centers. It must be added that to demonstrate severity in repressing the phenomenon, the government planned to organize complex, expensive flights for the immediate repatriation of migrants landing in Italy from Libya and other parts of the Mediterranean. Such flights could take off without awaiting the long and complex bureaucratic process of verifying the status of the migrants or the legitimacy of their sometimes very advanced requests for residence permits. The hasty Italian behavior raised strong and severe criticism within Italy, from the international community, and from human rights organizations.

These more recent events in the news would not have a place in our conversation if the image of Africans marching across the Libyan Desert to invade Italy did not evoke more distant, profound, and dormant images from the past. For whoever knows a little about the history of Italians in Libya, the Italian plan for intervention in the detention camps for migrants instituted by the Libyan regime is uncanny. Set up in new places and with goals very different from those of the camps in operation seventy years ago, the postcolonial camps of Gadhafi in Libya could appear to be merely the effect of a very perverse game of chance in history, but many observers, starting with historians, find this unsettling coincidence to be worrisome. It is all the more uncanny when accompanied by an ignorance of these newly conceived camps' resemblance to the camps of the past and by the failure to distinguish between them.

7.

Contemporary Italy seems to alternate between forgetting its colonial past and nostalgia for the days of empire. And yet, the past still has an influence on Italian relations in the Mediterranean, particularly with the peoples of its southern shore. A journalist sent to Gaza to cover the election in Palestine observed that the principle street of the city is still named after Omar al-Mukhtar, the leader of the Libyan anti-colonial resistance whom the Italians hanged in 1931. His figure and consequently his death are obviously remembered in the Arab nations more than Italians realize.

But Al-Mukhtar's name returned yet again to the Italian press. In February 2006, civil unrest stirred in Libya, particularly in Benghazi, perhaps motivated by local reasons, or perhaps supporting (or hiding behind) the protests spreading throughout the Arab world due to the *Jyllands Posten* Mohammed cartoon controversy. In Benghazi, it would seem that the

²³ Amnesty International, *Lampedusa: ingresso vietato. Le deportazioni degli stranieri dall'Italia alla Libia* (Turin: Ega, 2005), 14, 45.

inconsiderate and bold broadcasting on live television of the cartoons printed on a T-shirt (by a minister of the Republic) added to the trouble. The mausoleum of Omar al-Mukhtar lies not far from the Italian Consulate in Benghazi that was destroyed by the riots . . . But who noticed?

If it is true that literature collects and sublimates the dreams of a population, the near silence of the Italian writers on these pages of national history is not very promising. Those who could have seized an uncanny thought and translated it, sublimated it, and helped to overcome it, continue to ignore it or at most barely touch upon it.

When writers do approach the subject, exoticism is always part of their technique:

They were waiting for the *Ghibli*, which seemed to want to spare them that year, but without the *Ghibli* the dates would not have ripened and without dates many would have gone hungry [. . .].

He was soaked with sweat, his head spun, his mouth was dry; he needed to drink. He sought water with his eyes, there was no one there anymore; the windows were always open and through them entered a river of scorching air as if all the jinns of the earth had begun to blow together, breathing fire. The sky was yellow [. . .].

The *Ghibli* had arrived, the dusty wind of the Libyan desert highlands. That sweeps, that crushes, that carries away. That cloaks the city with golden sand, with incandescent purple dust on the white of the houses [. . .]. The wind of Libya. It blew for three or four days; then it disappeared with the same speed with which it had risen [. . .]. It blew, without forgiveness. It traveled at one hundred kilometers per hour from the desert to the sea and only there it subsided, at the endless point where the sky reaches the waves.²⁴

Exoticism understandably abounds in the texts of returnees, or the forced expatriates of 1970:

They often ask me if the *mal d'Africa* exists and if I am affected by it: well, I long for the beautiful, blazing hot sunsets, the hot *Ghibli* that blows ripening the dates at the end of summer, the sea, the palm groves, the endless expanse of the deserts, the silence of the oases, the starry sky.²⁵

It should be said, however, that even in better literary texts only a confused memory of Libya, particularly of Cyrenaica, remains, sometimes infused with surrealism, or even irony. But irony is only a means to circumvent uncanny feelings and attempt to control them.

There was a cinema: even this was a ruse, as I already mentioned. They would change the posters outside and make the title a little obscure, but it was always the same film, entitled *Cyrenaica*, shown in the afternoon, and you could even see it two or three times. After the film, you would understand true desperation, and you would feel the desire to leave for any destination, just to leave.

The film was a ruse because it was incomprehensible; there were scenes streaked from use that always had to be mended, with long pauses because the light would go out; so

²⁴ Luciana Capretti, *Ghibli* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2004), 126, 187, 188.

²⁵ Nicola Rizzi, *Hammdulillà. Ricordi e profumi della Libia dal diario di un medico italiano* (Ripalimosani: 1998) and related to 1951, cited in Francesco Prestopino, *Sabbia, sudore, sogni: la Libia negli scritti degli italiani di Libia, 1943-1999*, with an introduction by Salvatore Bono (Milan: La vita felice, 2001), 115.

you had to wait, and these were certainly not the worst moments of the experience. At a certain point, well into the events of the film, the title *Cyrenaica* would appear with noisy music – I think they raised the volume – and this, as others have also said, was the moment in the film that was the most limpid, or lyrical in a way, and you thought, “I want to get away,” not from the cinema, but from the whole vile world; and disappear from that city that weighed on your spirit like a river rock. The rest of the film is not easy to summarize there was an individual that continuously appeared wearing light flannel; in one sequence he would get a handful of sand and let it fall like the sand of an hourglass, then the enormous title *Cyrenaica* would appear with that music that filled the whole room, and it would last a long time as the slightly Arabic-looking letters of the title faded away. That was the greatest emotion of the film; the rest was incomprehensible. And the ruse consisted in the fact that I kept going back to try to understand the meaning of the man in flannel and what he was saying that was so important to a woman sitting on a sofa who would then get up and look out of a window at treacherous Bedouins sitting under a palm tree.

One day I am going to leave this place, I thought [. . .].

The film *Cyrenaica* was a ruse, but to me its scenes are unforgettable.²⁶

Writers no longer seem able to find new inspiration in the Libyan colonial past, and with no new images, it is not surprising that old images continue to circulate. By not re-elaborating, re-thinking, or re-memembering in this contemporary moment, writers contribute to making news and images of Libya and its deserts more troubling and uncanny for Italians, and they make the Italian past in Libya less comprehensible. Yet it is necessary to understand the mistakes of the past. And for Italy, the Mediterranean “bridge” between Europe and Africa, understanding the mistakes of its colonial past – although brief, fruitless, and by now distant – is not only useful, but at times, like today with Libya, indispensable; it is essential. Repeatedly, at irregular intervals, demands continue to arrive from Libya for a *resolution* to the colonial past, for *recognition* of wrongs inflicted, and for *compensation*.

In a postcolonial age, remembering can be difficult for a country subjected to contrasting pressures; on one hand, returnees do not want their past dreams or present residual interests to be discussed; on the other hand, now more than ever, current economic interests (remember that Italy has one of the highest import quotas of petroleum, gas, and general hydrocarbons in Europe) do not want their business affairs disturbed or even touched by the memory of past colonial exploitation.

But trying to find one’s way instinctively while forgetting the past makes repeating the same mistakes inevitable, starting with orientalist and exoticist emotions. It becomes even more inevitable when these pressures and instincts are joined with the demands of ex-colonial subjects and ex-“natives” that are now part of an independent state mindful of grief suffered and proud of its martyrs. Recent controversies remind every ex-colonial power of their past crimes (from France coming to grips with Algerian torture, to Germany torn apart by the rediscovery of Namibia and the slaughter of the Herero, to the United Kingdom, which is reviewing its harshest counterinsurgency actions in its ex-colonies) and make it clear that decolonization is never finished, especially on the cultural level.

Regarding Italy and Libya, however, it seems that decolonization of culture and memory have yet to begin because of the specific ways in which Rome lost control of the fourth shore. The

²⁶ Ermanno Cavazzoni, *Cirenaica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), 10.

question is too important to be deferred or to be broached unconsciously or distractedly without historians taking an active role. The words with which a critic addressed colonial expansion in Libya in 1911 are still applicable to the current postcolonial moment:

For a whole year, all of our press coverage has praised the Libyan undertaking “the prowess of the number, the reason for the offense, the *ius sanguinis*, and the glory of having no mercy! And our aesthetes, commemorators of Mazzini and Garibaldi, did not protest. Can you imagine Garibaldi, instead of Caneva, ordering the “cleansing of the oases” and raising gallows in *Piazza del pane*?

This war in Tripoli has been more fatal for us – morally – than a barbarian invasion. A barbarian wind has devastated and continues to devastate all kinds of minds; it blew unnoticed through the reports of all the large newspapers, no longer distinguishable from each other, all pervaded by the same folly. The infiltration continued surreptitiously, and the infection of this folly spread secretly because the anxiety of families trembling for their faraway sons, and patriotic desire for victory, shared by all who believed that the future of the country lies with the army, rendered the minds of the readers sensitive and ready to absorb that insidious poison. Every elementary desire for justice and integrity was overturned; every abuse and excess was praised and justified in the name of “historical fate”; and anyone from Tripoli who intended to tell the truth was forced into silence and threatened with exile. The Italy of the Tripolists lost every sense of morality. The sons of the Pope’s slaves, of the Garibaldians, of those persecuted during the Risorgimento, cynically began to indulge in turning these horrors into polite little genre paintings and frivolous artistic games

Unfortunately every offense to the principles of justice and morality must be paid for!

This wretched war will bear fruits of ash and poison. It has already begun to bear them. The frenzy of the massacres, the debasement of human life, the exaltation of savagery, the reinstatement of the gallows (the war has even provided us with this macabre resurrection of our painful past!) will have their repercussions in the homeland.²⁷

Now more than ever, these are not questions to be placed in an appendix to the national history of Italy: these facts are an integral part of it. And they should be remembered and studied not only by and for today’s Libyans, but also by and for today’s Italians. It is too early to say whether the August 30, 2008 friendship and cooperation agreement will finally allow this embarrassing past to be consigned to the archive of history.

The news that Italy (an Italy currently governed by a center-right cabinet!) had asked Gadhafi’s nationalist government for forgiveness for its colonial past and has pledged \$200 million over the next 25 years in infrastructure investments, spread quickly throughout the world, alarming and embarrassing a number of European diplomats in North Africa and the Middle East. In London, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, and elsewhere, foreign ministries were quick to disassociate themselves from this act, implying that if Italy was asking to be pardoned, this was no reason for the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Germany, and others to do the same.

If we read the public declarations by Prime Minister Berlusconi during his one-day trip to Libya, it becomes clear that his “public apology” was extremely vague, without any direct acknowledgement of the gravity of specific historical acts, such as the creation of the concentration camps in Cyrenaica. Berlusconi, a few days later, declined to comment on the

²⁷ Arcangelo Ghisleri, cited in Bono 2005 p.84.

polemical public discussion regarding the revival of the fascism/antifascism quandary. He answered his TV interviewer, Bruno Vespa simply by saying that he was “too busy working” to deal with issues that he implicitly judged to be inconsequential. Berlusconi’s evasiveness is not fortuitous, for in actuality it legitimates many myths about the past. Libya, and Italy’s colonial past in Libya, remain to this day – one way or another – an embarrassment for contemporary Italy.

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