

Alessandro Pes

## 7 *Colonists or Migrants? The Political Debate on Returns From the Former Colonies in Post-war Italy*

**Abstract:** After World War II, the end of Italian colonialism was marked by the 1947 Peace Treaty and subsequent UN resolutions in 1949. From 1946 to 1949, post-war Italian governments sought to regain control of their lost colonies by crafting narratives emphasizing Italian colonists' efforts to establish a "right" to "return to Africa." This chapter, drawing from a range of sources including diplomatic archives and colonists' associations, examines how labor emerged as the focal point in the reconstruction of Italy's colonial history from 1946 onward. The narratives portrayed Italian colonialism as a migration of proletarians and lower-class individuals, distinguishing it from other European colonial powers' exploitative practices. Examining the evolution of these narratives, this chapter assesses their impact on how post-war Italian society perceived its colonial history and depicted Italian former colonists as migrants.

### Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to refute the belief that a hagiographic reading of the Italian colonial past, widespread in republican Italy, was a mere legacy of Fascism and to affirm that, precisely in its initial phases, the Italian Republic contributed to generating such a reading with the political objective of obtaining the administration of the former colonies. According to the theory developed in this chapter, the new democratic institutions used the figure of the "Italian refugees from Africa" (the Italian returnees from the colonies) to affirm the special, virtuous, hard-working, civilizing nature of Italian colonialism. The archival sources, in particular those relating to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with the analysis of articles on the colonial theme published by the newspaper *Il Popolo* (organ of the Christian Democrats, the main government party of the time), allow us to reconstruct how the Italian Republic tried between 1946 and 1950 to construct a reading of the colonial past centered on the work experiences of the Italian colonists. To support their right to return to the former colonies, the first democratic governments after Fascism generated a hagiographic reading of

the colonial past that significantly influenced the way in which Italian society would elaborate and conceive that past in the following decades.

Between 1946 and 1948, Italy, which was taking shape after the end of World War II and the conclusion of the Fascist period, tried to build a new social pact between the state and citizens through the work of the Constituent Assembly. Within a social and economic panorama in which the constituents found themselves thinking that the new Italy was bleak and the material and moral rubble of the war and the fascist dictatorship were present without interruption throughout the peninsula, from a political point of view, rethinking the nation was undoubtedly a challenging undertaking. In the same years in which the Constituent Assembly was trying to build a new Italy, the government was entrusted with managing the end of Italian colonialism. The relinquishment of the colonies had already been imposed on the Kingdom of Italy in the armistice clauses and then subsequently reaffirmed in the relevant clauses of the Peace Treaty of February 1947, however, these clauses left open various possibilities for a possible Italian administration in the former colonies, especially under the form of trusteeship.

In conjunction with the Assembly's term of office, the Italian government implemented a policy to take over the former colonies' administration from the victorious powers of World War II.<sup>1</sup> This policy materialized through intense diplomatic activity accompanied by propaganda work on both domestic and international fronts. The ultimate goal of the propaganda campaign was the interpretation of the Italian colonial past in a positive key; the result of this campaign was the emergence, on the institutional side, of a shared reading of what the colonial past had been and of the main characteristics by which the Italian colonists could be identified. The institutional documentation, the speeches given, and the numerous conference initiatives constituted moments through which the Italian government provided its official position on the colonial question, however, at the same time, they resulted in the essential passages through which Italian society would, from that moment, select its colonial past and choose which aspects of that history should be part of the republican identity and which would be rejected instead. The rhetoric and propaganda on the colonial issue implemented by the Italian government had a dual objective: to influence the countries that would need to vote resolutions on the administration of the former Italian colonies at the UN, and to unite internal public opinion around a specific and positive reading of the colonial past.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Gian Luigi Rossi, *L'Africa italiana verso l'indipendenza* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1980); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale. Nostalgia delle colonie* (Rome; Bari: Laterza 1984); Pietro Pastorelli, *Il ritorno dell'Italia nell'Occidente, Racconto della politica estera italiana dal 15 settembre 1947 al 21 novembre 1949* (Milan: LED, 2009).

The political and propaganda effort to construct a narrative of a “positively-colonizing” Italy certainly preceded the period under examination, beginning in the years of the colonial presence.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to highlight how, especially during the period in which the future of the former Italian colonies was being discussed at the UN, the new Italy made a fundamental contribution to how its colonial past would subsequently be narrated and partly perceived, both by other countries and by the Italians themselves.

## An Old Yet New Narrative for Italian Colonialism

The first element that characterized the Italian action plan was that of separating the colonial experience of liberal Italy from that of fascist Italy. By making this separation, the Italian government explicitly affirmed the legitimacy of the colonies conquered or acquired in the liberal period, instead distancing itself from the colonies, the Ethiopian empire which had been conquered during the fascist period. A dichotomy of this type did not question the legitimacy or otherwise of colonialism but dissociated itself from the methods of colonial conquest used during Fascism. In order not to lose its influence over the former colonies, the Italian government worked diplomatically, trying to obtain the support of France, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The same discussion on the future of the former colonies developed mainly between a few stakeholders: Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and France, with Italy playing a marginal role.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, if we exclude the investigation carried out in the former colonies by the Quadripartite Commission, Eritreans, Libyans, and Somalis did not play an essential role in decisions on the future of their territories. Like the colonial period, the whole debate on the fate of those territories took place between subjects outside the African context, relegating Africa to the object of contention. The only, (albeit very significant) element of difference concerning the past was the climate of decolonization which surrounded international discussions on the future of the former Italian colonies: a future which, as was reaffirmed in all circumstances, could not be disregarded, with the final objective being the independence of the popula-

---

2 Cfr. Emanuele Ertola, *Il colonialismo degli italiani. Storia di una ideologia* (Roma: Carocci, 2022); Andrea Ungari, “I monarchici italiani e la questione coloniale,” in *Quel che resta dell'impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani*, ed. Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes (Milan: Mimesis, 2014), 393–16.

3 Antonio Morone, *La fine del colonialismo italiano. Politica, società e memorie* (Milan: Mondadori, 2018). See also Derek Duncan and Jaqueline Andall, eds., *Italian colonialism: Legacy and Memory* (Bern; New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

tions concerned. Already at the end of World War II, according to the perspective of a New Zealand official, the trusteeship formula itself had to be understood as the antithesis of colonialism and not its continuation through a different method of administration.<sup>4</sup> However, the whole debate converged on the common belief that those populations were not capable (due to the level of civilization) of providing for themselves; based on this conviction, all the dynamics of Italian politics were based on the belief that it was necessary to trust in diplomacy, bypassing Africa in an attempt to posit the question of the former colonies within a more general rearrangement of alliances that was taking shape after the end of the world war.<sup>5</sup>

The Italian government, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) and the Ministry of Italian Africa, acting as the Undersecretariat of the MAE, prepared numerous memoranda which had the purpose both of illustrating the Italian colonial past to the delegations of the UN member countries and supporting the request for Italian administration of the former colonies. This documentation avoided any criticism of the Italian work in the colonial period, and the reconstruction of Italian colonialism was resolved through the narrative of the civilizing work carried out by the colonizer towards the local populations. In particular, the work completed by the Italians in the colonies was exalted: both the activity concerning the exploitation of territories defined as “desert” and “wild” before the arrival of the colonizer and the work of “elevation” of the colonized populations.

In the official documentation, this attitude can be considered a constant, so much so that it became the primary key to understanding how, in a republican Italy setting, pre-fascist colonialism was presented in the international forum when requesting administrative power over the former colonies.

## Colonial Politics and Propaganda in Post-war Italy

An example of such ministerial documentation is the memorandum prepared by the Cabinet Office of the Ministry of Italian Africa prepared in the summer of 1946, a memorandum on the clauses relating to Italian possessions in Africa contained in the draft peace treaty elaborated in Paris by the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Allied Powers.

---

4 William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay 1941–1945, The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 2.

5 Gian Paolo Calchi Novati, *L’Africa d’Italia: una storia coloniale e postcoloniale* (Rome: Carocci, 2011), 351–52.

The Ministry's Border Commission prepared a study to support the legality of Italian claims in the former colonies. The long memorandum ended with annexes which, in the view of the commission, were to account for the treatment that the Italians had suffered in the former colonies from the British administration and the importance of the Italian presence in those territories.

Attachment 2 refers to the text of a complaint forwarded on June 14, 1946 by the elders of the Italian population of Tripolitania to the British Command of Tripoli. The complaint underlined that the lack of a fit body to represent the Italian community made it necessary for the authors to relate directly with the British command. The Italians complained that starting from 1943, there had been a constant deterioration of the political attitude towards their community, explaining that the British authority had allowed the occurrence of facts which inevitably led to the worsening of the condition of the Italian community and clarifying that this referred:

For example to the permitted presence in the territory of elements who have already left, notoriously anti-Italian; to the consent to a violently anti-Italian campaign by the local Arab press strictly controlled by the BMA, a campaign which in the last few days has culminated in a vulgarly and provocatively offensive publication [ . . . ] we are alluding again to the offensive order of non-fraternization which is maintained in this country [ . . . ] This order of non-fraternization has undoubtedly influenced the deleterious development of the situation we are dealing with because placed by a European population (English) towards another European population (Italian) in an environment of a population of non-Western civilization, there has undoubtedly mortified and humbled in the face of the latter towards which the British authorities have been generous with friendly and cordial treatments. We are alluding again to the condition of material misery into which a policy of wages and hunger has plunged the Italian community made up almost entirely of salaried workers and workers [ . . . ] once the war is over, expect this spirit of understanding and degrading submission by a European population, which is treated as a colonial population of the lowest order; means wanting to bring it to exasperation and despair [ . . . ] we must therefore, in the name of civilization, human solidarity, the right to life and property, officially and formally ask the sole authority which here is responsible for order and therefore for our lives and our assets, to declare to us whether it can guarantee Italian men, women and children in Tripoli and outside Tripoli their life and property.<sup>6</sup>

In a secret report dated November 29, 1946, sent from Mogadishu to the Information Office of the Ministry of War, the informant pointed out how the industrious spirit of the Italians in the colony was weakened by the British authorities, who tried in every way to erase the positive effects of the Italian presence in the Red

---

<sup>6</sup> Historical Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (henceforth MAE), Political Affairs (henceforth AA.PP.) 1946–1950, Italy Colonies Section, folder 15.

Sea region. The report highlighted that the British administration's constant policy was aimed at "gradually erasing every trace of Italian domination; mainly means, that of tiring the tenacity of the Italians, by opposing all kinds of obstacles to their activity. The aim is largely achieved and, with each steamer, hundreds of settlers repatriate."<sup>7</sup> The document negatively underlined the behaviour of the British administration towards the Somalis:

Regarding the indigenous people, the administration pursues a policy of exploitation, paying low wages for the jobs – albeit insignificant – and imposing taxes. There are numerous unemployed natives, and discontent and poverty have, as a consequence, frequent cases of crimes against property. Although the various 'guy men' hired by the occupier carry out propaganda in its favour, the indigenous element misses Italy and protests against British impositions [. . .] the moral state [of Italians] is always very low, given the difficult conditions of life and uncertainty about the fate of the colony; of the Italians still, resident, estimated at around 4,000, around half want to be repatriated.<sup>8</sup>

Reports of the same nature reached various government offices in large numbers. On April 2, 1947, the Italian legation in Cairo sent a telex to the Italian embassy in London informing them that two Italians from Mogadishu had come to the legation's office; they were two Navy engineers resident in Somalia since 1939 who, during a long conversation, had provided information on the situation in Somalia. As regards the conditions of the Italians in the former colony, the two engineers had stated that 2,800 Italians still resided in the territory but that around 2,000 would shortly embark on the steamer "Vulcania" to repatriate. The economic status of the remaining 800 was considered secure, as most of them worked for the British authorities or managed their own companies.<sup>9</sup>

The story of the two Italians also focused on the living conditions of the Somalis who, it was noted, welcomed the British occupation in 1941. In the early years, according to the two engineers:

among the indigenous element, effective propaganda against Italian colonization was carried out by the British. Subsequently, the natives had the opportunity to note the economic decline of the colony and suffered the immediate consequences [. . .] today; similarly to what happens in Eritrea, many natives remember the Italian domination with nostalgia and come to freely express their sympathy for our country, expressing regret for the departure of his compatriots.<sup>10</sup>

---

7 MAE, AA.PP. 1946–1950, Italy Colonies Section, folder 15, news on the situation in Somalia.

8 MAE, AA.PP. 1946–1950, Italy Colonies Section, folder 15, news on the situation in Somalia.

9 MAE, AA.PP. 1946–1950, Italy Colonies Section, folder 15, News from Somalia.

10 MAE, AA.PP. 1946–1950, Italy Colonies Section, envelope 15, news on the situation in Somalia.

But the elaboration and crystallization of the idea of Italian colonialism as a movement of people and workers, which thus detached itself from the colonial process characterized by usurpation and power politics, find confirmation above all in the document that the Italian government presented to the Council of Foreign Ministers and which underwent numerous substantial changes during its drafting. The fulcrum of the speech concerned the political position that Italy assumed on the question of the former colonies. The central part of the speech was entirely aimed at illustrating the work that Italy had done in Africa in such a way as to support the final request for a trusteeship over all the former colonial territories. The speech referred to the rhetoric also used during the colonial expansion; Italy was represented as a “poor” and “migrant” country, and its colonialism, depicted as “special,” differed from the European and capitalist phenomenon of conquest and exploitation of overseas territories due to its “migrant” characteristic: “Italy – stated in the speech – has not sought in Libya, Eritrea and Somalia a fruitful use of capital, nor the implementation of grandiose industrial enterprises with the rational use of rich raw materials already existing on the spot [ . . . ] Italy has been to Africa, and now wants to go back, to contribute to the political, economic and civil evolution of those territories with its work.”<sup>11</sup> According to the Italian government, this peculiarity of Italian colonialism was full of consequences, the most important of which was the problem of Italian workers: “Farmers, workers and technicians, whose work has been necessary for Libya, Eritrea and Somalia and who cannot be excluded from those territories without compromising their chances of future progress.”<sup>12</sup> In the following passage of the speech, the reference to Italian work, which until then had been essentially linked to the economic and social development of the colonized populations, was also anchored to the progress of the Italian nation: “The Italian government, when it asks, as it does today, the trusteeship over those territories [ . . . ] essentially poses the problem of Italian labor which in the current situation of Italy constitutes the essential basis of the whole system of political and economic reconstruction of Italian life.”<sup>13</sup> The speech continued with the government’s interesting and significant consideration on who the “Italian workers” referred to in the last part of the document were. This part of the speech changed from the final draft; while the first draft stated that the Italian emigrants in the former colonies should be considered as one of the populations settled in those re-

---

11 MAE, AA.PP. 1946–1950, Italy Colonies Section, envelope 15, Draft of the speech to the Conference of Substitutes.

12 MAE, AA.PP. 1946–1950, Italy Colonies Section, envelope 15, Draft of the speech to the Conference of Substitutes.

13 MAE, AA.PP. 1946–1950, Italy Colonies Section, envelope 15, Draft of the speech to the Conference of Substitutes.

gions, the final version added a significant example to this paragraph, calling the Italian emigrants “Italians of Africa” and comparing this presence in the former colonies to that of Afrikaners in South Africa. After these changes, the document stated that: “they [the Italian colonists] are no longer only Italians; but in reality, they are Italians from Africa, citizens of Libya, Eritrea and Somalia, as Afrikaners are from South Africa.”<sup>14</sup>

This approach to the question also reverberated in parliamentary work, as demonstrated by the discussion that took place in the Chamber of Deputies in December 1949. The socialist deputies Giuseppe Lupis and Riccardo Lombardi signed an interpellation with the President of the Council of Ministers, interim minister of Italian Africa, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs:

To know, faced with the repetition of tragic episodes of violence against Italians in the territories of the former colonies, what international action has taken place and what guarantees it has obtained in defence of the life and property of our compatriots; and also to know – in the face of the almost definitive liquidation of our ex-colonies – what negotiations it has promoted, also for a gradual return of our compatriots to those territories, where they had now resided for decades and where their children were born.<sup>15</sup>

Lupis-Lombardi’s interpellation referred to the killings of some Italians, which took place on November 19, 1949 in Eritrea and complained of the government’s silence regarding a long list of deaths in overseas territories. Lupis accused the government of a scant consideration of the problem; this, according to the socialist deputy, derived from the fact that the government did not consider, as it should have, these problems as essential questions of the “defence of Italian life, property and work abroad.”<sup>16</sup>

Lupis debated the almost 40 Italian deaths in Eritrea between 1948 and 1949, accusing the government, but above all the Minister of Foreign Affairs Carlo Sforza, of having underestimated the incident in order not to disturb an international balance which Italy had not yet acquired. Sforza had previously described

---

<sup>14</sup> MAE, AA.PP. 1946–1950, Italy Colonies Section, envelope 15, Draft of the speech to the Conference of Substitutes.

<sup>15</sup> *Parliamentary Acts*, Chamber of Deputies, December 12, 1949, 14218. With similar interpellation also, the deputies: Guido Russo Perez (Fronte dell’Uomo qualunque), Giorgio Almirante (Mixed Group), Arturo Michelini (Mixed Group), Roberto Mieville (Mixed Group), and Giovanni Roberti (Mixed Group). The honorable Gaspare Ambrosini (Democrazia cristiana) also intervened with another interpellation on the same subject.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



the Italian deaths in Eritrea as the cause of a mourning that would leave “a deep imprint on the sentiment of the Italian people.”<sup>17</sup>

In essence, the interpellation placed a request on the government regarding the conditions of security for the Italians in Eritrea and a clear position in demanding that Great Britain guarantee protection of the Italians in Eritrea. One of the most interesting aspects of the interpellation can be found in the final question that Lupis posed to the government, in which he made clear reference to work as an explicit characteristic of the Italians in Eritrea, stating that he wanted to know if: “there is the hope that the tranquillity, security, the guarantee will return for those of our compatriots who defend the free right of Italian labor in Africa with their very presence.”<sup>18</sup> Italian labor emerged, also in Lupis’ interpellation, as the main beneficial element of the Italian presence in the colony.<sup>19</sup>

## Political Parties’ Press and the Colonial Question

One of the channels through which political parties addressed the issue of the former colonies was the party press. For the main ruling party, the Christian Democrats, the party newspaper *Il Popolo* repeatedly hosted articles on the colonial theme during the period of the Constituent Assembly. If, on the one hand, reports of the international discussions on the future of the former Italian colonies published by the newspaper fulfilled the need to inform readers of the events of the contemporary present, on the other hand, those articles contributed to constructing a historical reinterpretation of the Italian colonial past. On February 5, 1946, Guido Gonella published an article entitled “Who is self-harming?”, a response from the entire Christian Democrats to the accusations of a lack of a foreign policy line made by the journalist Italo Zingarelli. The journalist accused the DC and the Italian government of a self-harm approach for not having developed its position in foreign policy; after the party replied by stating that it had voted on a foreign policy motion which had subsequently been endorsed by the “neo-Centre of diplomatic personalities,” Zingarelli underlined that it was clear that the foreign

---

<sup>17</sup> Speech by Carlo Sforza at the National Congress of the Italian Republican Party in 1949. *Atti Parlamentari*, Chamber of Deputies, December 12, 1949, 14220.

<sup>18</sup> *Atti Parlamentari*, Chamber of Deputies, sitting of December 12, 1949, 14220.

<sup>19</sup> See Pamela Ballinger, *The world refugees made. Decolonization and the foundation of postwar Italy* (Ithaca; New York: Cornell University Press, 2020).

minister De Gasperi, “who is the chief of the Christian Democratic Party, did not take it into account.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Gonella, the most authoritative foreign policy text drafted by the Italian government was the letter sent by De Gasperi to US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. The article summarized the various points developed by the foreign minister in his letter. In summarizing and emphasizing the language used in the letter, Gonella wrote that De Gasperi had clarified that: “the original Italian colonies do not touch each other, except for strategic guarantees to England and concessions of an economic and commercial nature to Ethiopia.”<sup>21</sup> Gonella rejected the accusation of self-harm on behalf of the party, stating that De Gasperi had gone to the London meetings not to “offer up pieces of Italy” but to defend the homeland. The founder of *Il Popolo* recalled how the Christian Democrats were the first who

arose to defend the Italian spirit of Trieste, the inviolability of our ethnic borders, the irreplaceable civilizing work of Italian labor in our colonies. Naturally, we have been attacked as ‘fascists’ as if we could be shocked by appearing what we are not, as if those opponents of ours who do not distinguish the defence of Italian blood and labor rights from megalomania, continue to be infected with the fascism imperialism of yesterday and the self-defeating sadism of today.<sup>22</sup>

Already in 1946, Gonella made public through his editorial what was to become the official representation of the debate on the Italian colonies. The defense of the colonies was not to be interpreted by public opinion as the defense of a colonial system of oppression but as the defense of the essential needs of the Italian people; the defense of Italian labor in Africa to the bitter end diverted the question from the dynamics of prestige politics even though the reference to the civilizing work constituted a direct reference to the late nineteenth-century colonial logic that imposed a civilized/uncivilized dichotomy which in itself justified (in the eyes of public opinion of the colonizing countries) the oppression of one people by another.

Just two days after Gonella’s editorial, the London correspondent Vincenzo Cecchini intervened in the newspaper with an article on the meeting between the big four at Lancaster House. The journalist explained the extent to which the fate of the former Italian colonies was of interest not only to the populations directly involved but also to Egypt and Ethiopia, who looked to those territories as possi-

---

20 Guido Gonella, “Chi è autolesionista?,” *Il Popolo*, February 5, 1946, 1.

21 Guido Gonella, “Chi è autolesionista?,” *Il Popolo*, February 5, 1946, 1.

22 Guido Gonella, “Chi è autolesionista?,” *Il Popolo*, February 5, 1946, 1.

ble places for expansion. At the beginning of 1946, Cecchini posited the trusteeship formula as the solution by now accepted on an international level; according to the journalist, it was only a question of evaluating who should administer the former colonies. According to the correspondent, the crux of the matter lay in the need for continuity in the administration and thus in the administrator, who alone could guarantee the best interests of the African populations.<sup>23</sup> Cecchini closed his report by asking his readers to consider why the recent clashes between Arabs and Jews in Tripolitania had not occurred during the Italian administration; the implicit answer lay in the unequivocal skills demonstrated in the past by colonial Italy, qualities that people tried to set aside and ignore during any discussion on the future of the former Italian colonies.

From a doctrinal point of view, the Christian Democrats accepted the new position on colonial issues assumed by the pope. In his address to the new cardinals, Pius XII harshly criticized modern imperialism, contrasting the need for territorial expansion of national states with Christian imperialism founded on universalism. Guido Gonella gave an account of the pontifical clarification on the “healthy” imperialistic spirit which was to inform Christians in his article of February 21, 1946, writing that “the Church [. . .] universal society follows the opposite path to that of modern imperialism. In its excessive tendency towards expansion, this sacrifices mankind, while the Church forms Man, modelling and perfecting the divine likeness in him. Therefore, the presupposition, the procedure, and the end are different.”<sup>24</sup> The article went on to criticize the materialism of contemporary imperialism which bends the needs and freedoms of people to the will of a few countries. By speaking on the question of imperialism, the pontiff was simultaneously giving doctrinal indications to the Christian community and expressing a clear political position on the issue that Catholics had to adopt. Gonella highlighted how Pius XII’s words established a schism in the ways in which the relationship between peoples and nations had to be rethought in the post-World War II context. According to the author of the article, the pontiff’s speech placed the Catholic Church in a new role compared to the past:

In the face of the gigantic political bodies that the end of the war has made even more gigantic without adding any moral nourishment to them, in the face of the empires that are maintained solely by force and with the external constraint of material conditions and juridical expedients without any support in the intimate adhesion of peoples. The pontiff has demonstrated how vast the influence of the Church can be on the foundation of human soci-

---

<sup>23</sup> See Valeria Deplano, *La madrepatria è una terra straniera. Libici, eritrei e somali nell’Italia del dopoguerra (1945–1960)* (Milan: Mondadori-Le Monnier, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Guido Gonella, “Contro l’imperialismo moderno. Il discorso di Pio XII ai nuovi cardinali,” *Il Popolo*, February 21, 1946, 1.

ety as regards the solidity and security of her institutions, the cohesion and balance of her organisms, the equality of her members and her normal development in space and time. With its supranational nature, the Church presented itself, according to Pius XII, as a prototype of a universal society “freed from all narrowness of sects and from all exclusivity of imperialism.”<sup>25</sup>

In the first part of 1947, the future of the former Italian colonies returned to the fore with an interview that Alcide De Gasperi gave to Radio Roma and which the Christian Democrat daily newspaper reported in full. The prime minister and *ad interim* minister of Italian Africa first expressed the possibility that Italy could obtain the trusteeship of those territories. De Gasperi underlined that when referring to the former Italian territories, the word “colonies” should not be used since it was directly related to a concept that, according to the prime minister, belonged to the past. On this point, De Gasperi added that: “the idea of the domination of one people over another is repugnant to the new democratic Italy, which could be implicit in the concept of a colony.”<sup>26</sup> As can be seen, while De Gasperi rejected the use of the term “colony” due to its being potentially linked to a vision of the world which one must reject, he nevertheless left open the possibility that there exists a virtuous colonialism which can disregard the domination of one population over another. Regardless of the international decisions that would arrive, De Gasperi affirmed that Italy intended to establish a democratic government in those territories based on cooperation, with equal rights between Italians and natives. The prime minister also explained that Italy would not take hasty decisions on important issues such as the institutional structure of the former colonies before having heard the opinion of the populations “of each territory entrusted to our care.” In an extreme attempt to represent Italy as a peacemaking country, De Gasperi affirmed that the government would not in any way prosecute individuals and political groups who, during or after the war, had assumed anti-Italian attitudes. Concerning Libya, De Gasperi highlighted the significant progress made by the country in the previous 30 years, progress achieved for “Italy’s undeniable merits”; it was natural in the eyes of the Italian prime minister that “the Arab-Berber populations [ . . . ] especially in their more educated classes, today find themselves sharing the ideas and aspirations of all the other Arab peoples.” The representation of Italy as a virtuous colonizer was anchored, in De Gasperi’s discourse, to the evidence of Italian liberality which, already after World War I, had allowed Cyrenaica and Tripolitania to maintain their own parliament. This appeal

---

25 Guido Gonella, “Contro l’imperialismo moderno. Il discorso di Pio XII ai nuovi cardinali,” *Il Popolo*, February 21, 1946, 1.

26 Alcide De Gasperi, “L’Italia in Africa,” *Il Popolo*, April 9, 1947, 1.

by De Gasperi to the pre-fascist colonial policy was functional in demonstrating that the government of Rome had already given proof as a colonizing power “of the will to initiate that population into self-government concretely.” The question of Eritrea appeared more complex for De Gasperi, with this complexity related to “the variety of races that inhabit that country and the religious division of the population.” However, at the same time, Eritrea presented a more straightforward situation than that of Libya because “Italy has been able to make this country, thanks to its balanced action, an inseparable unity in which all religions and races, including the Italian element, lived for over fifty years in imperturbable harmony.” The sincere affection of the Eritreans for the Italians, affirmed by De Gasperi, was the most explicit testimony of Italy’s positive work as a colonizing power in Eritrea. As far as Somalia was concerned, De Gasperi explained that if Italy had been entrusted with the task of administering Somalia, it could only have continued its civilizing effect, returning to where:

It has transformed the driest bush into green cultivation, it has brought civilisation to where slavery existed, in days not so far [. . .] only with the Italian administration will the populations of Somalia be able to continue to evolve, starting now to participate to a large extent in the government of their country.<sup>27</sup>

De Gasperi closed the interview by stating that Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia could be certain that the era of the “old colonial system” should be considered closed, an affirmation which constitutes an essential element of the process through which post-fascist Italy looked at its colonial past. De Gasperi defined which elements of the colonial past should emerge in the national narrative and which characteristics of that experience should be traced back to the national character.

On October 21, 1947, the newspaper carried a front page account of the first day of work of the Congress of African Refugees in the Tre Venezie, where Foreign Undersecretary Brusasca spoke at the congress, representing the government. The newspaper reported that in describing the government’s action on the issue of the former colonies to the audience, Brusasca had stated that “Italy wishes [to] return to Africa only to offer work to a part of its unemployed.”<sup>28</sup> The article went on to describe the work activities that the Italians had “brought” to the African colonies, with the epic tones of the description making those workers’ efforts comparable to heroic deeds and not far from the tones of the descriptions that had accompanied the demographic colonization during fascism; in this context, the peasants became, for example, those who asked to return to cultivate

---

<sup>27</sup> Alcide De Gasperi, “L’Italia in Africa,” *Il Popolo*, April 9, 1947, 1.

<sup>28</sup> “I profughi d’Africa hanno diritto a tornare,” *Il Popolo*, October 21, 1947, 1.

“those lands reclaimed with their efforts.” According to the article, Italian work in the former African colonies was not only necessary to solve the problem of unemployment in the peninsula partially but also because it was fundamental for the elevation of the populations of those territories. Pascoli’s theme of the great proletarian was mixed in this article with the late nineteenth-century European rhetoric of the civilizing mission; the chronicle of the congress held in Padua anchored the description to nodal points which were not questioned, the representation of the populations of the former colonies as different and inferior, and the existence of a hierarchy among peoples, within which the former colonized individuals could only occupy the lowest position. The article also clarified that the work that the Italian refugees intended to pursue with their return to African territories was utterly free from any nationalist demagoguery and aimed “to ensure their own families the certainty of the future, while at the same time assuring the natives ways and means of improving their living conditions.”<sup>29</sup> The article ended with the communication that the Commission of Inquiry for the Italian colonies had been set up in London, which was supposed to plan a trip to the territories of the former colonies to consult the local population. The newspaper reported that the Italian embassy had sent a letter to the commission, stating that most of the population of the three colonies had returned home after the war and constituted an essential part of the population to be questioned.

The newspaper returned to the topic of Italian labor in the African colonies on October 25, 1947, with an article by the special envoy Vittorio Cecchini at Lancaster House. The article gave an account of the programmatic work of the commission and then presented the position of the Italian government through an analysis of the three written notes sent by the Italian government to the commission. The first note asked that Italy be heard, a request that was accepted. The second and more relevant note concerned a lengthy report of the Italian point of view on the question which, according to Cecchini, the government had sent to the commissioners to act as a guide since it was elaborated “with specific knowledge indisputably superior to theirs.”<sup>30</sup> The third note asked the commission to consider the reasons of the resident Italian population not in terms of its numerical “value” but for its economic significance: the reasons driving the refugees who, according to the embassy’s calculations, represented 66 % of the permanent population in the colony in 1939. Providing a reading of the question from his own London perspective, Cecchini concluded that it seemed necessary to separate the generic theme of

---

29 “I profughi d’Africa hanno diritto a tornare,” *Il Popolo*, October 21, 1947, 1.

30 Cecchini, “Il ritorno dei lavoratori italiani in Africa e la nostra amministrazione fiduciaria,” *Il Popolo*, October 25, 1947, 1.

Italian labor in Africa from that of the return of Italians as trustees of the UN; the journalist maintained that at that juncture “the problem of Italian labour must not interfere with that of the Italian administration, nor compromise it.”<sup>31</sup> On November 20, 1947, an article in the newspaper announced and emphasized the Italian government’s official request for a mandate over all former colonies. The report concerned the presentation on November 19, 1947 of the Italian point of view on the question by Ambassador Gallarati Scotti who, assisted by the former governor of Scioa and Harrar Enrico Cerulli, had read a government declaration to the Trusteeship Council. The declaration, read by the ambassador, highlighted the characteristics of the Italian colonial presence in Africa, essentially emphasizing the problem of Italian labor. The declaration read by Gallarati Scotti justified the assignment of the trusteeships based on the consideration that “the Italians of Africa, who coexist with the other Libyan, Eritrean and Somali populations in those territories, are by now linked to them by the sole common interest of driving Libya, Eritrea and Somalia to a rapid civil and economic evolution,”<sup>32</sup> an objective which, in the article as in the declaration, was described as natural and achievable only by Italy.

In the period in which the issue of the administration of the former colonies was still being debated in the international forum, the newspaper gave ample space to the news of incidents arriving from those territories, often putting them in direct relation with current arguments in the discussion on their administration by the colonies themselves. On December 2, the newspaper reported on serious incidents that had taken place in Teramni in Eritrea where, on the occasion of the visit of the quadripartite commission carrying out the fact-finding investigation into the Italian colonies, around 3,000 supporters of the movement for union with Ethiopia had demonstrated in the streets to support their political line. According to the report, the protesters had clashed with supporters of the Muslim League and the Liberal Party; the newspaper reported that the attack was the work of the unionists, who had “attacked with stones and sticks a procession of Muslims who opposed the request for the union of Eritrea with Abyssinia.”<sup>33</sup> The reconstruction of the incidents, functional to the Italian cause and to the attempt to positively represent the Italians and those who supported a future Italian administration in Eritrea, was strengthened at the end of the article by a reference to police statements, according to which the incidents had been premeditated by the unionists, who had moved en

---

31 Cecchini, “Il ritorno dei lavoratori italiani in Africa e la nostra amministrazione fiduciaria,” *Il Popolo*, October 25, 1947, 1.

32 “Manifestazioni e violenze in Eritrea da parte dei sostenitori dell’unione con l’Etiopia,” *Il Popolo*, November 20, 1947, 1.

33 “Manifestazioni e violenze in Eritrea da parte dei sostenitori dell’unione con l’Etiopia,” *Il Popolo*, December 2, 1947, 1.

masse from Asmara to impress the quadripartite commission. On December 5, the newspaper presented readers with a description of Eritrea's political and social situation in the days when the commission of substitutes was present, charged with carrying out the investigation into the former Italian colonies. The article presented a front in favor of independence or a ten-year British trusteeship, a line espoused by two parties, the Muslim League and the Liberal Party. According to the article, a party in favor of the Italian administration had recently been formed, the New Eritrea Pro Italia party, made up mostly of former employees of the previous Italian administration, which was much more compact than the pro-independence party. The article contained a clear comparison of the virtuosity of the two blocs; the independence camp became, in the words of the editor, the bloc of pro-Ethiopian Eritreans, who "continue to make clamorous demonstrations in order to highlight their numerical importance,"<sup>34</sup> while "the Italians are content to wave their tri-color flags on the balconies and roofs of their houses."<sup>35</sup> Reports from Asmara on the work of the commission of inquiry continued on December 10, with an exotic account of events. The newspaper reported how each "village and fraction of tribe appointed its representatives and sent them to confer with the Commission"<sup>36</sup> and, according to the journalistic reconstruction during the hearings, the commissioners sat in the shade of the trees and,

all around the representatives of the district's political movements, numbering four or five hundred. Each representation has a placard bearing the name of the village or tribe [ . . . ] The hearings last six to seven hours [ . . . ] the unionists have predominated, who is also the most colourful. Priests and notables can be seen in rich attire, umbrellas in polychrome wedges, innumerable red-yellow-green flags and flags, and billboards with all kinds of writing, including those against Italy. The 'negarit' rhymes with 'fantasies'.<sup>37</sup>

The article also focused on the disparities between the different political forces; the unionists were described as better organized and, above all, with unlimited financial resources since the Ethiopian government financed them. Furthermore, the numerical consistency of the unionist movement was questioned, emphasizing that: "one recognises among the unionists faces met at previous rallies. Rumour has it that they are being moved from one place to another in trucks." The exotic representation of the party to be discredited continued with a note on the

---

34 "Come procede il sopralluogo della Commissione in Eritrea," *Il Popolo*, December 5, 1947, 1.

35 "Come procede il sopralluogo della Commissione in Eritrea." *Il Popolo*, December 5, 1947, 1.

36 "La Commissione interroga e ascolta sotto gli alberi del 'negarit'," *Il Popolo*, December 10, 1947, 1.

37 "La Commissione interroga e ascolta sotto gli alberi del 'negarit'," *Il Popolo*, December 10, 1947, 1.



high presence of women and children among the ranks of the unionists, detailing how the women “emit their characteristic high-pitched trill during the demonstrations.” On the other hand, the representation of the movement in favor of the Italian administration portrayed a more sober group close to the civilization of the colonizer; “the members of Pro Italia and the Muslim League are more serious and disciplined with their tri-color and red-green flags.” On January 6, 1948, the newspaper highlighted news of an attack on the printing press of the weekly *Il Popolo* in Mogadishu, which took place on January 5, a few days before the members of the commission of inquiry arrived in the Somali city. Its article explained that the attack was anti-Italian since the newspaper was conducting a campaign in favor of the Italian administration in Somalia and that the British military authorities had agreed to protect the printing house subject to the cessation of publications in favor of the Italian administration. The article also highlighted that, unlike the British administration, “the Somali population is almost unanimous in asking for Italian administration.” In the margin of the article, an insert in italics explained to readers that “our friends in Somalia, near and far” defended the interests of Italy and of all Italians.

## Conclusions

The period of action of the Constituent Assembly coincided with a particularly significant moment in the history of Italian colonialism, and the relationship between Italian institutions and society and their colonial past. Compared to the fascist period, some deep schisms are evident concerning the background in which the Italian colonial discourse developed. In the Italy of the Constituent Assembly, the governmental discourse could not disregard the consideration that the populations of the former colonies had to achieve independence and self-government; in this sense, it was certainly not possible to build or seek a line of continuity with the colonial discourses that accompanied the expansion in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. The moral question linked to colonialism as a process of usurpation of one people over another was partly resolved by the Christian Democrats and the Italian government with the repudiation of the fascist expansion policy, which alone embodied all the problematic issues related to that process. Based on that perspective, the pre-fascist colonies had to be reclaimed because they derived from the “positive and fruitful Italian civilizing activity.”<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Paolo Acanfora, *Miti e ideologia nella politica estera Dc. Nazione, Europa, Comunità atlantica (1943–1954)* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2013), 33.

In this period, the theme of “Italian work” seems to emerge in all its preponderance as a common trait in the colonial discourse between the colonial and republican periods. Before being colonizers, Italians in Africa had to be considered workers;<sup>39</sup> this aspect was reaffirmed in all venues, from the diplomatic settings to the rooms in which the numerous conferences organized to support the Italian requests for a return to the former colonies were held. What was done can be considered a real proletarianization of the Italian colonial experience. By superimposing the role of workers on that of colonizers, Italian colonialism appeared neutralized of the negative charge that accompanied the evaluations of the colonial process in the era of decolonization; what emerges from that representation is not the usurpation of someone else’s territory and the deprivation of freedom of self-determination towards other populations, but the need for work for a proletarian people.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, it appears simple and banal, but also inevitable, to build a link between Pascoli’s rhetoric which accompanied the Libyan war and the representations made of Italians in Africa towards the end of the 1940s.

“Labor” appears to be a self-absolute mantra that accompanied the Italian colonial conquest from the liberal period onwards. The “proletarian Italy” that conquered in order to export labor and the unemployed in the liberal era became an “empire of work” during fascism and then took on the guise, during decolonization, of a generous country that fertilized the territory of others with its work.

## Bibliography

- Acanfora, Paolo. *Miti e ideologia nella politica estera Dc. Nazione, Europa, Comunità atlantica (1943–1954)*. Bologna: il Mulino, 2013.
- Andall, Jaqueline, and Derek Duncan, eds. *Italian colonialism: Legacy and Memory*. Bern-New York: Peter Lang, 2005.
- Andall, Jaqueline, and Derek Duncan, eds. *National Belongings. Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*. Bern; New York: 2010.
- Ballinger, Pamela. *The world refugees made. Decolonization and the foundation of postwar Italy* Ithaca; New York: Cornell University Press, 2020. .
- Calchi Novati, Gian Paolo. *L’Africa d’Italia: una storia coloniale e postcoloniale*. Rome: Carocci, 2011.
- Del Boca, Angelo. *Gli italiani in Africa orientale. Nostalgia delle colonie*. Rome; Bari: Laterza, 1984.

---

<sup>39</sup> For an analysis of how, in the Christian Democrat ideology, work becomes a characterising element of the new national character in the Republican era, see: Agostino Giovagnoli, *La cultura democristiana* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1991).

<sup>40</sup> On the implications relating to the “proletarianization” of Italian colonial expansion in the elaboration of national identity, see Jaqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, eds., *National Belongings. Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (Bern-New York: 2010), 9–28.

- Deplano, Valeria. *La madrepatria è una terra straniera. Libici, eritrei e somali nell'Italia del dopoguerra (1945–1960)*. Milan: Mondadori-Le Monnier, 2017.
- Ertola, Emanuele. *Il colonialismo degli italiani. Storia di una ideologia*. Roma: Carocci, 2022.
- Giovagnoli, Agostino. *La cultura democristiana*. Rome; Bari: Laterza, 1991.
- Louis, William Roger. *Imperialism at Bay 1941–1945, The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
- Morone, Antonio, ed. *La fine del colonialismo italiano. Politica, società e memorie*. Milan: Mondadori – Le Monnier, 2018.
- Pastorelli, Pietro. *Il ritorno dell'Italia nell'Occidente, Racconto della politica estera italiana dal 15 settembre 1947 al 21 novembre 1949*. Milan: LED, 2009.
- Rossi, Gian Luigi. *L'Africa italiana verso l'indipendenza*. Milan: Giuffrè, 1980.
- Ungari, Andrea. “I monarchici italiani e la questione coloniale.” In *Quel che resta dell'impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani*, edited by Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes, 393–416. Milan: Mimesis, 2014.

