

‘It is a Fascist Empire’.  
Some points of discussion on the nature of  
Italy’s colonialism during the Fascist period

“É um Império Fascista”. Alguns aspetos para  
discussão sobre a natureza do colonialismo  
italiano durante o período fascista

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“É UM IMPÉRIO FASCISTA”.  
ALGUNS ASPETOS PARA  
DISCUSSÃO SOBRE A NATU-  
REZA DO COLONIALISMO  
ITALIANO DURANTE O  
PERÍODO FASCISTA

Quando a Itália entrou em guerra com a Etiópia e a conquistou, em 1935-1936, Mussolini descreveu o novo império colonial italiano como uma conquista do fascismo e rotulou-o de império “fascista”. A conquista foi considerada o sinal mais seguro de que o fascismo tinha transformado com êxito a sociedade italiana e a tinha reestruturado à sua própria imagem. O Estado, a sociedade e a cultura italianos seguiram a narrativa prescrita por Mussolini. Levando a sério as afirmações de Mussolini, este artigo questiona o que tornou o colonialismo italiano “fascista” durante o período fascista? Terá sido a sua enorme violência, a sua intenção genocida, o seu racismo ou, de facto, o facto de ter sido conquistado por italianos, agora totalmente transformados em ávidos fascistas, que o distinguiu? Pergunta-se que outras experiências coloniais deveriam servir de comparação para avaliar a natureza fascista do colonialismo italiano dos anos 30: a Itália liberal, os impérios contemporâneos das potências liberais ou talvez o império europeu de Hitler durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial. Discutindo a historiografia recente de uma nova abordagem à história colonial que se define como “estudos coloniais de colonos”, este artigo propõe a ideia de que o que é fundamental para compreender a natureza do Império “fascista” italiano não é tanto o seu “fascismo”, mas sim o facto de ter sido previsto como local de colonização italiana em massa.

**Palavras-chave:** Colonialismo italiano; Fascismo; Colonização africana; Colonialismo comparado; Colonialismo dos colonos.

‘IT IS A FASCIST EMPIRE’.  
SOME POINTS OF DISCUS-  
SION ON THE NATURE OF  
THE ITALY’S COLONIALISM  
DURING THE FASCIST  
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When Italy went to war with and conquered Ethiopia in 1935-6 Mussolini portrayed Italy’s new colonial empire as an achievement of Fascism and labelled it a ‘fascist’ empire. The conquest was touted as the surest sign that Fascism had successfully transformed Italian society and remade it in its own image. Italy’s state, society and culture conformed to Mussolini’s prescribed narrative. Taking Mussolini’s claims seriously, this paper asks if and what made Italy’s colonialism during the Fascist period ‘fascist’? Was it its enormous violence, its genocidal intent, its racism, or even the fact that it was conquered by Italians, now fully transformed into ardent Fascists that set it apart? The question is what other colonial experiences should serve as a benchmark for gauging the fascist nature of Italian colonialism in the 1930s: that of liberal Italy, the contemporary empires of the liberal powers, or perhaps Hitler’s European empire during the Second World War. This paper discusses the recent historiography of a new approach to colonial history that defines itself as ‘settler colonial studies’, and proposes that what is crucial to understanding the nature of the Italian ‘fascist’ empire is not so much its ‘fascism’, but the fact that it was conceived as a locus for mass Italian settlement.

**Keywords:** Italian colonialism; Fascism; African colonisation; Comparative colonialism; Settler colonialism.

« UN EMPIRE FASCISTE ».  
QUELQUES ÉLÉMENTS DE  
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CISTE

Lorsque l’Italie est entrée en guerre contre l’Éthiopie et l’a conquise en 1935-1936, Mussolini a présenté le nouvel empire colonial italien comme une réalisation du fascisme et l’a qualifié d’empire « fasciste ». Cette conquête a été considérée comme le signe le plus sûr que le fascisme avait réussi à transformer la société italienne et à la remodeler à son image. L’État, la société et la culture italiens ont suivi le récit prescrit par Mussolini. Prenant au sérieux les affirmations de Mussolini, cet article pose la question de savoir si et pourquoi le colonialisme italien pendant la période fasciste était « fasciste »? Est-ce son énorme violence, son intention génocidaire, son racisme ou le fait qu’il ait été conquis par des Italiens désormais complètement transformés en fascistes avides qui l’ont distingué? L’auteur se demande quelles autres expériences coloniales devraient servir de points de comparaison pour évaluer la nature fasciste du colonialisme italien dans les années 1930 : l’Italie libérale, les empires contemporains des puissances libérales ou peut-être l’empire européen d’Hitler pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale. En discutant l’historiographie récente d’une nouvelle approche de l’histoire coloniale qui se définit comme « études coloniales de peuplement », cet article propose l’idée que ce qui est essentiel pour comprendre la nature de l’empire italien « fasciste » n’est pas tant son « fascisme » mais son caractère envisagé en tant que lieu de peuplement italien de masse

**Mots-clés :** Colonialisme italien ; Fascisme ; Colonisation africaine ; Colonialisme comparatif ; Colonia-  
lisme de peuplement

## 'Fascist' Colonialism

On May 9, 1936, in one of his most celebrated speeches delivered from the balcony of Rome's Palazzo Venezia, Mussolini announced to Italy and the world that the nation 'finally had its empire.' Italian troops had entered Addis Ababa a few days earlier; Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian king of kings, had fled into exile. The Duce's words were broadcast across the country and throngs gathered in all of Italy's piazzas where loudspeakers – sixteen had been set up in Milan's Piazza Duomo for example<sup>1</sup> – blared out Mussolini's speech in real time. In the following days newspapers and newsreels ad infinitum repeated what came to be called the declaration of the 'foundation of the empire'. Vittorio Emanuele, previously merely Italy's king, was by law now also to be referred to as 'emperor'. According to historian Renzo De Felice, the blacksmith's son and former socialist, at the height of his popularity, refused Vittorio Emanuele's offer to be made a prince, informing the monarch that the Mussolinis came from a long line of peasants, something he was proud of.<sup>2</sup> Recourse to this earthy modesty warded off a title which in reality would have located Mussolini well below the king-emperor, and its acceptance would also have suggested that his greatest accomplishment to date had merely been achieved at the service of the diminutive monarch. The wily Romagnol 'peasant' avoided Vittorio Emanuele's snare, preferring to bequeath himself the 'founder of the empire' soubriquet. That title would appear under his name from thence forward, though a mere six years later Ethiopia was taken by the British in the midst of World War II and given back to Haile Selassie.

The salient parts of the May speech ran as follows: 'All knots have been severed by our resplendent sword, and this African victory remains intact and pure in the history of our fatherland just as our fallen and our surviving legionaries dreamed and wished. Italy finally has its empire. It is a Fascist empire because it carries with it the signs of the indestructible will and power of the Roman lictor, because this is the goal to which over fourteen years the exuberant and disciplined energy of this young and vigorous generation of Italians has been directed. ... The people of Italy with its blood has created the Empire; it will be nourished with its labor and defended against anyone with its arms. Legionaries, with these supreme assurances, lift on high your standards, your steel and your hearts and salute, after fifteen centuries, the reappearance of the Empire on the fatal hills of Rome.'<sup>3</sup>

There is, as they say, much to unpack here. Mussolini's words were carefully chosen, not just boomed out in a moment of euphoria. There were many audiences he needed to address. He was speaking to the Italian people, some being principled anti-Fascists hoping failure would weaken the regime; to other Italians who were merely disappointed with Fascism's achievements after fourteen years in power; to the Fascist old guard which had seen their 'revolution' absorbed into the humdrum rule of a staid (even Catholic) and bureaucratic state; to the foreign nations which had opposed the conquest and

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<sup>1</sup> 'Esercito e popolo in Piazza del Duomo', *Corriere della Sera* (May 10, 1936), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 759.

<sup>3</sup> Duilio Susmel and Edoardo Susmel eds., *Benito Mussolini: Opera Omnia* (Florence: La Fenice, 1951-1958), Vol., XXVII, 268-9.

imposed economic sanctions on Italy; then there was the rising star in Berlin, in command of a hugely powerful nation, a new 'fascist' dictator already showing signs of rivalling his former mentor south of the Alps; Mussolini's words were meant for the monarchy too, and its representing what was left of the old liberal order, including the armed forces.

The conquest was most obviously profiled as a 'Fascist' achievement, not a jewel to be placed in the Savoyard crown. Unlike the republican Garibaldi who had handed over the south of Italy to Vittorio Emanuele's namesake and grandfather in 1861 after he had conquered it and removed its legitimate monarch – with the Hero then retreating (albeit temporarily) to the self-imposed exile of the island of Caprera – Mussolini asserted ownership of the new empire for himself and his regime. Indeed the very notion that the conquest in 1936 represented the 'foundation' of the 'Italian empire' was a curious but significant rhetorical flourish. Technically, Italy 'finally had its empire' because it had taken Ethiopia which had always been regarded as an empire in its own right. Yet it was not Italy's first or only possession in Africa. Generals Pietro Badoglio and Rodolfo Graziani's armies had moved on Addis Ababa respectively from Eritrea and Somalia. Both were Italian colonies made up of territories captured by liberal Italy as far back as the 1880s and 1890s. Libya too was another Italian possession in Africa, seized from the Ottoman Empire in 1911-12, when the young socialist Mussolini lambasted the government for indulging in the evils of capitalist imperial aggrandisement, earning him the approval of Lenin.<sup>4</sup> In the 1936 speech Mussolini chose to ignore these other Italian conquests claiming thereby that ancient Rome's empire had 're-appeared' now, not when little liberal Italy acted in Africa all on its own.<sup>5</sup>

The narrative of Fascism 'owning' the new Italian empire had already been present at the launch of the Ethiopian war in October 1935 when in another balcony speech Mussolini set out the storyline which was to be slavishly adhered to by the Italian media in the following years. 'Italy and Fascism (now) constitute a single, perfect, absolute and unalterable identity... propelled towards its goal', the Duce asserted. The speech then iterated the, to Italians, familiar narrative or what might be called the Fascist vulgate. Despite its 'supreme sacrifice' in the Great War, Italy's peace had been mutilated by the rapacious and covetous Allies who granted the nation but 'a few crumbs' from the 'rich colonial bounty' redistributed at the Paris Peace Conference. Gluttonous France and Britain took everything for themselves. At home, Bolsheviks and liberals acted in cahoots to sell out Italy to their preferred patrons. Fascism intervened, saving the nation, cleansing it of its internal enemies, and embarking on its process of remaking Italians 'under the sign of the Roman lictor'. Despite Italy's patience, in the following years 'the circle of egoism was tightened further, suffocating the nation's vitality.' However, now,

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<sup>4</sup> Benito Mussolini, "Tripoli," *La Lotta di Classe*, September 23, 1911, in *Opera Omnia Di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 4, eds. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel (Florence: La Fenice, 1952), 59; and "Lo sciopero generale di protesta contro l'impresa di Tripoli," *La Lotta di Classe*, September 30, 1911, in *Opera Omnia Di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 4, eds. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel (Florence: La Fenice, 1952), 67. See Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "The Italian Socialist Congress," *Pravda*, (July 16, 1912), in Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 18 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 169-172.

<sup>5</sup> Alessandro Pes, "An empire for a kingdom: monarchy and Fascism in the Italian colonies", in R. Aldrich and C. McCreery (Eds.), *Crowns and Colonies. European monarchies and overseas empires* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 251-252.

steeled, transformed, martialled and strengthened physically and morally by more than a decade of Fascism it was time to 'stand up', to take on the hostile world and claim the nation's rights. The speech was delivered to an Italy defined as 'proletarian and fascist, the Italy of Vittorio Veneto [the October-November 1918 battle in which Italy triumphed over Austria in the Great War] and of the revolution.'<sup>6</sup> In an interview given to a popular Paris newspaper a few days after the delivery of the above, Mussolini haughtily declared in a barbed aside aimed at Britain and France that the Italians of old, 'happy, picturesque and *simpatici*' who had provided the hospitality, catering and entertainment for tourists enamoured of the peninsula's pretty towns and villages were no more. The austere and determined warriors embarking for Africa were, the Duce stated, 'ours. Fascism can claim them as its own creation.'<sup>7</sup>

It would be superfluous to note that the general lines of this discourse – that the 'foundation' of the Empire confirmed Fascism having delivered a new Italy and achieved the making of a new Italian – in every salsa imaginable, thenceforward permeated the media. Newspapers, school text books, cinema, academic and popular books, comics, public art, architecture, illustrated magazines, music, and much, much more bloated the country with variations on Mussolini's narrative. In their creation, possessing rarefied intelligence, excellent education and exceptional writing skills were not a guarantee of dissonance or independent thinking. Paolo Orano, to take just one example, although the list could be embarrassingly long, academic at Perugia university, writer, journalist and expert toady to the Duce of the most refined sort, published his sycophantic *Mussolini, fondatore dell'impero* in 1936. 'The march on Rome', he stated in its pages and in a splendid turn of phrase, had as its ultimate goal 'the march from Rome', by which he meant expansion overseas, not the scuttling from Italy's capital which the Fascists were ignominiously to do in 1943. 'Our expansion', he continued, 'was implied by the social, military and patriotic renewal which the Fascist regime has realised by activating all the energy of our people... Expansion is the fruit of the revolution ... The Duce guides this totalitarian people which with irresistible enthusiasm almost exploding embarks on colonial expansion... We are not merely imperial at Addis Ababa, but now so too among the most powerful nations on earth. Our international victory lies in the fact that what has won is Fascism itself.'<sup>8</sup>

And so this prescribed orchestra score played out from every corner of the peninsula. The sheer amount of material produced by the Ethiopian potlach has and no doubt will keep historians busy for a long time to come, each employing the tools of discourse analysis to satisfy themselves as to if and to what extent Fascism really imbricated and transformed Italy and Italians.<sup>9</sup> Did Italians agree with Mussolini when he said that, 'the new Italian, an abyss from the stereotypes of the past, would be born on the African

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<sup>6</sup> Duilio Susmel and Edoardo Susmel eds., *Benito Mussolini: Opera Omnia* (Florence: La Fenice, 1951-1958), Vol., XXVII, 158-160.

<sup>7</sup> 'La necessità di espansione dell'Italia in Africa', in Duilio Susmel and Edoardo Susmel eds., *Benito Mussolini: Opera Omnia* (Florence: La Fenice, 1951-1958), Vol., XXVII, 160-163.

<sup>8</sup> Paolo Orano, *Mussolini, fondatore dell'impero* (Rome: Casa Editrice Pinciana, 1936), 11-12; 22.

<sup>9</sup> See the pioneering Adolfo Mignemi A. *Immagine coordinata per un impero. Etiopia 1935-1936*, (Turin, 1984); more recently Valeria Deplano *L'Africa in casa: propaganda e cultura coloniale nell'Italia fascista* (Milan: Mondadori Education, 2015); Paolo Bertella Farnetti, Cecilia Dau Novelli (eds.) *Images of Colonialism and*

frontier, the gymnasium of boldness, sacrifice and discipline?’<sup>10</sup> In constructing the machinery of conquest there is little doubt that Mussolini was extraordinarily successful. Late historian of Italian colonialism Angelo Del Boca, certainly no apologist for Fascism, admits as much: ‘in Italy the African undertaking was met with an enthusiasm that one can define as virtually total.’<sup>11</sup>

Yet, a note of caution is in order, unless we are prepared to take Mussolini, his sycophantic acolytes and the slavish Italian media at face value. As put by wise historian Richard Bosworth, ‘in 1935-6, [if] all Italians were washed over by a wave of words telling them that the conflict mattered to the utmost... after Addis Ababa fell in May 1936, it soon became apparent that fascist policymakers had not planned what was to happen next.’<sup>12</sup> A ‘wave of words’ is one thing, Bosworth points out, transforming Italians into imperialist Fascist ‘totalitarians’, and the newly conquered lands into some kind of new Roman Empire as Orano’s rhetoric had it, was altogether something else. It was easy to say that fourteen years of Fascism had been nothing more than the preparation for this moment, and that the Italian people wanted nothing more than to head to Africa as conquerors and colonisers, but was Fascism and all its accoutrements what really made that possible?

As has been pointed out, if after fifteen centuries, empire had reappeared on the fatal hills of Rome it was to be a very brief reappearance indeed. Italians hardly put up a fight at all in defending it, losing all their East African possessions at the first rather paltry shove by the British in 1941; Libya would have suffered an identical fate possibly even earlier had Germans not been set to defend it by a dictator who had by then all but eclipsed the man who everywhere in Italy had been declaimed as a new Caesar.<sup>13</sup> And in any case, was it necessary to be a ‘Fascist’ or a ‘Fascist new man’ to be enthusiastic about conquering an empire, especially when it was only poor African Ethiopia, not the European Powers, which had to be defeated for Italy to claim its place in the sun? Djibouti, or British Somaliland would have rounded off what was soon to be called *Africa Orientale Italiana*, but owned as they were respectively by France and Britain, for all the Duce’s bombast, these remained off limits, making the huge territory so proudly displayed on walls everywhere in Italy seem to have an awkward British ham shape and a French snail shape chinked out of it. Somaliland was indeed attacked and very temporarily taken by Italy in the summer of 1940, but by then France had been defeated in Europe not by the new Roman Empire but by the Third Germanic Reich. Britain looked as if it was about to succumb too.

Still, for five- or six-years Italy had its ‘Fascist Empire’ to do with it as it saw fit; and it should also be pointed out that despite Mussolini’s rhetoric, his regime had not been

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*Decolonisation in the Italian Media* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) and Luca Acquarelli, *Il fascismo e l'immagine dell'impero: Retoriche e culture visuali* (Milan: Donzelli, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *L'impero* in Isenghi Mario (ed) *I luoghi della memoria, simboli e miti dell'Italia unita*, (Rome: Laterza, 1996), 421-2.

<sup>11</sup> Del Boca Angelo *Gli italiani in Africa orientale, II. La conquista dell'Impero*, (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 334.

<sup>12</sup> War, Totalitarianism and ‘Deep Belief’ in Fascist Italy, 1935-43’, in *European History Quarterly* October 2004, vol. 34 no. 4: 480.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Bosworth, *Mussolini and the Eclipse of Italian Fascism: From Dictatorship to Populism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

inactive in the colonies it had inherited from the liberal nation which the Duce dismissed as ‘the easygoing, messy, fun, and mandolin-playing Italy of old.’<sup>14</sup> So the question poses itself: was Fascism at the heart of Italian colonialism when Mussolini was at the helm? Was there something uniquely ‘Fascist’ about Italy’s practice in the colonies during the Fascist period? Were the ‘founder of the Empire’s’ claims that his was to be a fascist rather than just another empire borne out in reality? The alternative view would posit that if one ignores the bombast, Mussolini’s fascist empire was little more than another European colonial experiment, to be sure marked by its and Italy’s idiosyncrasies, but generally speaking, its bloody conquest and its (brutal) character align with the long tradition of European expansion, whether it involved the pioneering Spanish and Portuguese, the British and French or indeed new upstarts such as Germany and Belgium. Italy did not really need fascism and Italians did not need to be fascist to do what they did in Africa when Mussolini and the king-emperor ruled.

There are a variety of ways in which these questions might be tackled. The most obvious would be to examine what Fascism aimed to do and did in Italy’s empire during its conquest and consolidation, and to compare that to liberal Italy’s experience. Another might be to examine Italy’s colonialism during the regime with an eye to the plethora of European colonialisms in Africa and beyond, which, again despite Mussolini’s rhetoric, were firmly established empires well before the one that was founded in 1936. Then there is an altogether different approach. We might have a far more viable comparator in the short lived but bloody empire of Mussolini’s fellow Axis partner. The Duce and the Fuhrer were kindred spirits and their respective regimes shared ideologies and aims. Surely Italy’s fascist empire had more to share with Germany’s vicious New Order imposed on Europe between 1939 and 1945 than the operatic little colonies liberal Italy had just about managed to cobble together in its day, or the contemporary European empires of a democratic and liberal Britain or France?

## Fascist Violence

One feature of Italy’s conquest and administration of Ethiopia (as well as the ‘pacification’ of Libya and Somalia in the years following the March on Rome) has been the idea that its unrestrained violence and murderousness, even its ‘genocidal’ nature, compared to the presumed restraint showed by what might be called other and contemporary imperial projects including liberal Italy’s, was obviously due to it being ‘Fascist’. In the last two decades scholarship has re-iterated the deeply violent nature of Italian fascism. In the face of what some have regarded as an assault coming from contemporary Italian politicians and Italian culture and historiography more broadly suggesting, to put it simplistically, that Fascism was not all that bad, certainly compared to regimes such as Nazi Germany or Stalin’s Russia.<sup>15</sup> Italianist John Foot for example has

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<sup>14</sup> Duilio Susmel and Edoardo Susmel, (eds.), *Benito Mussolini: Opera Omnia*, vol. XXIX (Florence: La Fenice, 1959), p. 117. The quotation is taken from Mussolini’s preface to Partito Nazionale Fascista, *Il Gran Consiglio del fascismo nei primi quindici anni dell’era fascista* (Bologna: Stabilimenti poligrafici editori de *Il Resto del Carlino*, 1938).

<sup>15</sup> For a recent and comprehensive discussion see Paul Corner, *Mussolini in Myth and Memory: The First Totalitarian Dictator* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

recently made recourse (perhaps tellingly) to microhistory in arguing that Fascism in Italy was predicated on massive violence and the threat of violence to a degree historians have chosen to underplay.<sup>16</sup> Foot and other scholars such as Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Giulia Albanese, Filippo Focardi and Michael Ebner,<sup>17</sup> to name a few, remind us that examining Italian fascism's record with an eye to Nazism and even the totalitarianism of Stalin's Soviet Union deflects understanding the brutal nature of the regime; the argument goes that just because Hitler and Stalin killed far more people than Mussolini did, that should not blind us to the enormous crimes perpetrated by his regime.<sup>18</sup> We should examine Fascism on its own merits, not through the whataboutery provided by Adolf Hitler. These historians passionately stand in self-appointed vigilance against what they regard as Italians' proclivity, as Ebner states, to affirm that 'Fascism wasn't that bad'.<sup>19</sup> No, they say, it really was.

Yet, while the employment of the tool of microhistory in this instance – where the stories of Fascism's individual victims are told in vivid detail – has given us many palpable instances of Fascism's terror tactics in its rise and maintenance of power, there still remains the stubborn fact that, in Italy at least, Mussolini's regime killed or indeed imprisoned but a 'few thousand' people, not even tens of thousands and certainly not hundreds of thousands. The total number of *confinati* – people sent into internal exile for political reasons in remote parts of the peninsula – over the entire life span of the regime seems to have amounted to around ten thousand.<sup>20</sup> Despite trying to interpret Fascism for what it is rather than '*what it isn't* – [i.e.] Nazism'<sup>21</sup>, the conundrum remains that a 'revolution' and regime with brutally radical aims and claims, possessing a considerable list of enemies and undesirables, appears not to have had to murder or imprison on a scale which would befit the construction of a totalitarian society. When historian Paul Corner states that 'it is often forgotten (incredibly) that the regime has direct responsibility for some 500,000 Italian dead', he doubtless means, in almost all cases, Italians who died fighting in the Second World War rather than people killed in the regime's rise or reconstruction of Italian society, though he neglects to say so.<sup>22</sup> Yet, by such a measure liberal Italy 'had direct responsibility' for three-quarters of a million Italian dead – i.e.

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<sup>16</sup> Foot, John. 2022. "A Micro-History of Fascist Violence. Squadristi, Victims and Perpetrators." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27 (4): 528-49; John Foot, *Blood and Power: The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Giulia Albanese, *La Marcia su Roma* (Rome: Laterza, 2006); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "A Lesser Evil? Italian Fascism in/and the Totalitarian Equation", in *The Lesser Evil: Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices*, edited by Helmut Dubiel and Gabriel Motzkin, (New York and London: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 137-153; Michael Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome: Laterza, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Silverio Corvisieri, *La villeggiatura di Mussolini: il confino da Bocchini a Berlusconi* (Milan: Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Ebner, 'Fascist Violence and 'Ethnic Reconstruction' of Cyrenaica (Libya), 1922-34', in Philip Dwyer, and Amanda Nettelbeck (eds.), *Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 214.

<sup>20</sup> Piero Garofalo, Elizabeth Leake, Dana Renga, *Internal Exile in Fascist Italy: History and Representations of Confino* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Foot, John. 2022. "A Micro-History of Fascist Violence. Squadristi, Victims and Perpetrators." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27 (4): 530.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Corner, *Mussolini in Myth and Memory: The First Totalitarian Dictator* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), introduction.

those who succumbed fighting in the Great War – though nobody is being soft on parliamentary democracy by (‘incredibly’) neglecting to make this fact the interpretative touchstone of that kind of regime. Be that as it may, bearing this in mind, it would seem logical therefore to presume that Fascism’s ‘totalitarianism’ was not quite what it claimed to be and that its demands were relatively slight on normal Italians who barring a small number among them, remained largely untouched by the Regime’s repressive apparatus.

However, if there really were not quite enough dead or incarcerated Italians to provoke the outrage we naturally feel before the heinous deeds of Nazi Germany or Stalin’s Russia there was one place in which Italian Fascism did massacre, murder and imprison on a scale which seems to bear comparison with the totalitarian dictatorships, and that was in Africa. The radical societal transformation envisaged and to a degree put into practice there was also akin to the attempts by the totalitarian dictators to remake the world they controlled according to the tenets of their ideologies. When Fascist Italy stands accused of having caused the premature death of a million people,<sup>23</sup> the majority of these victims were the indigenous in Italy’s colonies. Even for those not directly killed, their social order was destroyed or deeply disrupted and upon their society was foisted a regime of white supremacy where they were expected to serve in their masters’ objectives or face repression, even to the point of genocide. Gas bombing of civilians, cold-blooded murders, rape, torture, massacres, public executions, mass incarceration, deportations, the earmarking of specific social groups for at least partial destruction (aristocrats, intellectuals, priests and even travelling story-tellers in Ethiopia, for example) were practices which Fascism made its own in Mussolini’s new Roman Empire in Africa. Indeed, the regime had already used such methods in the colonies it had inherited on its assumption of power in both Libya and Somalia before 1936. The underlying intention was to populate the colonies with millions of Italian settlers and to completely transform them, essentially, into societies replicating the home country. The indigenous population, kept separate from the superior white settlers through a regime of racial apartheid, were to be allocated a permanently inferior status and, why not, would eventually become a minority, perhaps in the longer term dwindling away for good.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Bosworth, *Mussolini and the Eclipse of Italian Fascism: From Dictatorship to Populism* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2021), 10.

<sup>24</sup> The literature on Fascist violence in Italy’s colonies is now extensive; a few examples are: Giorgio Rochat, “L’attentato a Graziani e la repressione italiana in Etiopia nel 1936-37,” *Italia Contemporanea*, vol. 26, (118) (1975): 3-38; Eric Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia* (Milan: Sugarco, 1979); Angelo Del Boca, (ed.), *I gas di Mussolini* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996); Alexander De Grand, “Mussolini’s Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase 1935-1940,” *Contemporary European History*, vol. 13, (2) (2004); Antonella Randazzo, *L’Africa del Duce, I crimini fascisti in Africa* (Varese: Arterigere, 2008); Nicola Labanca, “Colonial Rule, Colonial Repression and War Crimes in the Italian Colonies,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9 (3), (2004): 300-313; John Gooch, “Re-Conquest and Suppression: Fascist Italy’s Pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922-39,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 28 (6), (2005): 1005-32; Eileen Ryan, “Violence and the Politics of Prestige: The Fascist Turn in Colonial Libya,” *Modern Italy*, 20, (2), (2015): 123-35; Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy’s National Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Michael Ebner, “Fascist Violence and ‘Ethnic Reconstruction’ of Cyrenaica (Libya), 1922-34”, in Philip Dwyer, and Amanda Nettelbeck (eds.), *Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World* (London: Palgrave, 2018); Giuseppe Finaldi, “Fascism, Violence, and Italian Colonialism,” *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, 33 (1), (2009): 22-42; Paolo Borruso, *Debre Libanos 1937* (Rome: Laterza, 2020); Alessandro Volterra, Maurizio Zinni, *Il leone, il giudice e il capestro. Storia e immagini della repressione italiana in Cirenaica (1928-1935)* (Milan: Donzelli, 2020); Ian Campbell, “Italian Atrocities in Ethiopia: An Enquiry into the Violence of Fascism’s First

But even so: is such a scenario, intention and vision in any way necessarily ‘Fascist’? One needs only to glance around the globe today and it won’t be long before we notice that any number of its territories are precisely what Fascist colonialism had in mind although Fascism was not required to found or gestate them. The place where I am writing these very words (Australia) is a clone nation of Britain; one of the prerequisites of becoming a citizen here is the ability to communicate in English, though England is more than ten thousand kilometres away; the indigenous population’s culture and people have largely been devastated, often with great violence, but it is proclaimed that they are the ‘spiritual’ custodians of the land while the Australian commonwealth with the King of England as its titular head actually owns it. Mussolini’s vision was no more than an Italian version of Australia, not a location one usually associates as having been born of totalitarian fantasies.

In the years following the Ethiopian conquest the obvious fact that Italy had not stumbled upon some *terra nullius* in Africa while at the same time proclaiming that its settlement on a vast scale by Italians was its very *raison d’être*, meant that what was to be done with its indigenous population was never far from the center of discussion. The law passed a few weeks after Mussolini’s famous balcony speech, establishing *Africa Orientale Italiana*, distinguished between Italian citizens and indigenous subjects effectively creating two separate human categories, although that was merely following what had been the case in Italy’s previously held East African colonies.<sup>25</sup> A number of the law’s articles sought to tackle the thorny problem of the status of children born to mixed parents; for the time being those with an Italian father were declared to be citizens though only the mother being white was not enough to make her children citizens. In fact, any Italian woman who married an indigenous man immediately lost her Italian citizenship, but not so if an Italian man married an indigenous woman. A little less than a year later a royal decree laid down a punishment of one to five years imprisonment for Italian citizens engaging in sexual relations with indigenous subjects, although it was a law that was never seriously enforced.<sup>26</sup>

While popular publications such as *L’Illustrazione italiana* or *Domenica del Corriere* – not to mention the ditty *Faccetta Nera* which depicted Italians liberating a ‘little black slave girl’ – envisaged the future of the Ethiopian indigenous simplistically as grateful natives bathing in the standards of civilization brought by the Italians,<sup>27</sup> at the level of policymakers and ideologues a more nuanced and realistic approach was warranted. A typical example might be philosopher and colonial expert Renzo Sertoli Salis, speaking at a 1937 conference held in Florence and Rome under the auspices of the Fascist Colonial Institute, and with the minister of colonies in attendance, like all the professors and functionaries present, opined that Fascism’s foundation of the Empire had significantly modified what he called ‘the values’ underpinning the relationship between Italians and the indigenous throughout the recently conquered territories. If up until

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Military Invasion and Occupation.” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 24 (1) (2021): 119-33; Ian Campbell, *Holy War* (London: Hurst 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Text of the law available at <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1936/06/13/036U1019/sg>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1937/06/24/145/sg/pdf>

<sup>27</sup> See for example the special issue of *L’Illustrazione italiana* entitled “La Ricostruzione dell’Impero etiopico”, October 4, 1936.

1936 the association between them had been based on the fact that Italians were in the minority, 'the creation of the Empire and its aim of large-scale settlement is instead destined to see an inversion of the numerical relationship between colonial citizens and subjects. Having transformed the old colonies into the Empire... it follows that upon the previous social-legal discriminant between the white and the coloured race, the institution of the concept of a racial hierarchy will replace the already existing legal or political hierarchy existing between the metropolitan and the indigenous.'<sup>28</sup>

### **Fascist or 'Settler' colonialism?**

The relatively recent establishment of a specific discipline interested in the history and process of colonial expansion – 'settler colonialism studies' is how it defines itself – has made the at one level not very original point that it is vital we distinguish between different kinds of colonialisms.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand we have a colonialism which sought (or seeks?) merely to exploit the resources and people of overseas territories on behalf of a metropolitan power, while on the other we have 'settler' colonialism which may well do this too but which has as its goal the replacement of the indigenous population and the absorption tout court of an overseas territory in order to make it into a kind of clone of the mother country. The settler colony, as has been the case for example with the USA, Australia or Brazil, eventually severs its ties with the old metropole to become an independent polity. Despite it now being an ex-colony, it is a polity monopolized by the settler population, the indigenous of the territory having been eliminated or entirely disempowered. 'Decolonization' in these two categories of colonies has been an entirely different process. In the first – for example Ghana or Indonesia – it consisted of returning power to the autochthonous population, while in the other it meant handing it over to the settlers. In other words one form of colonialism can be considered akin to a squatter entering a house and (before the legitimate owner can re-assert control) temporarily enjoying the benefits of that property albeit passing much of the that to a distant gang leader, whereas the other sees the squatter permanently taking up abode in the house and not only casting out or killing its legitimate owner but ceasing to pay dividends to the gang leader, declaring the house to be his.

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<sup>28</sup> Sertoli Salis' conference paper is in Centro di studi coloniali, Istituto coloniale fascista, *Atti del III congresso di studi coloniali, Roma-Firenze, 12-17 Aprile 1937 XV, Vol. II-1. sezione politica* (Florence: Istituto Coloniale Fascista, 1937), 111-112.

<sup>29</sup> Some seminal examples of this literature are: Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassel, 1999); Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8 (4) (2006): 387-409. Lorenzo Veracini, "Introducing: Settler Colonial Studies." *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1 (1) (2011): 1-12; Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, (eds.) *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Mahmood Mamdani, "Settler Colonialism: Then and Now," *Critical Inquiry*, 41, no. 3 (2015). Edward Cavanagh, and Lorenzo Veracini, (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016). For a trenchant critique of the concept see Adam Kirsch, *On Settler Colonialism. Ideology, Violence and Justice* (New York: Norton, 2024).

While nothing much is new here compared to traditional interpretations of colonial history – although the second ‘squatter’ here would once have argued that there never was a house to move into before he built it – what ‘settler colonialism’ scholars have drawn attention to is that colonialism is an ongoing ‘structure’. In ‘settler colonies’ such as Australia colonialism has not ended, just as it did not end with American independence from Britain in the eighteenth century or Brazilian independence from Portugal in the nineteenth. Unlike even anti-colonial scholars and activists of a previous era, ‘settler colonial’ studies adherents are uninterested in raw numbers. While in the past it was granted that America could not be considered as akin to say French Algeria (where the European settlers were always a minority) for the simple fact that on its territory there were so many more European settlers compared to the indigenous, ‘settler colonial’ studies holds that ‘colonialism’ is ongoing, despite the fact that the indigenous have at this stage been reduced to being only a tiny fraction of these countries’ overall population. The watchword offered is that the ‘process of colonialism’ there is being carried out by settlers now whether they be descended from the original settlers once tied to the European metropole or even if they have recently arrived as emigrants. Viewed through the ‘settler colonial’ lens, much if not almost all about the history and current reality of say Australia or Brazil, it is argued, becomes intelligible. Some examples might be the genocides or partial genocides, massacres and frontier wars of the past to the ongoing oppression through mass incarceration or social deprivation imposed on the indigenous today. Even as incongruous a phenomenon as the ‘settler colonies’ embracing cosmetic aspects of the very cultures and societies they have destroyed or are in the process of destroying – say white New Zealanders performing the Haka or Australian airline company Qantas painting its aircraft in Aboriginal livery – can be explained, in this case in terms of a new and ‘performative’ nationalism seeking to validate as anti-colonial nationalism what is in reality the illegitimate and relentless process of ongoing ‘settler colonization’. There is nothing new here, argues for example Philip Deloria, as ‘playing Indian’ as far back as the Boston Tea Party in 1773 was a necessary part of ‘conceiving an American identity’ vis-à-vis the British.<sup>30</sup>

As far as Italian empire is concerned it would be as if today, an entirely Italian speaking and white population descended from the settlers of the colonial and Fascist era – and then topped up continuously since ‘independence’ with Italian and non-Italian migrants – having eliminated all the indigenous peoples of, say Ethiopia, now declaimed its nationhood in terms of the national dish *injera* or that Coptic religious art adorns its aeroplanes. Such a scenario is fantasy of course because the colonies of the Fascist Italian Empire ended up being those of the first category. The indigenous population was not eliminated and it was the relatively few Italian settlers who were expelled, returning the territories to their previous owners. In other words, unlike Australia or the USA, the Italian colonies ended up not being ‘settler’ ones, even if it was precisely during the Fascist period that they had the potential to have become so. It is just that the Fascist Italian Empire only lasted about six years or at most a decade if one includes Libya in the equation, and all its plans and policies, though leaving a brutal and harrowing trail

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<sup>30</sup> Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 37.

of destruction in their wake as far as the indigenous were concerned, as well as some infrastructure, were never realized.

The point of this discussion is to suggest that it might not be 'Fascism' which primarily characterized the Italian Empire between 1922 (or 1935) and 1941, but that it was the plan, as envisaged for example by Sertoli Salis, to make the conquered Italian territories into 'settler colonies'. As such its point of comparison should be with other 'settler colonies' in the vein as defined by the scholarship of 'settler colonial studies'. Italians' willing participation in Africa in large scale massacres, for example, was not about them having internalized Fascist precepts as such but because in Africa they imagined themselves as 'settlers' or at least as preparing the ground for settlement. They did what 'settler colonisers' do, Fascist or otherwise. It is no coincidence also that strict anti-miscegenation racial laws and racial apartheid were imposed in Italy's colonies after 1938; that had also been the case in areas of racial intermixing in many other 'settler colonies' even if not necessarily enshrined in law. The 'White Australia Policy' or the USA's notorious obsession with racial categorizations through its history were precursors to Italy's racializing of its empire; it was not a necessary part of 'Fascism' – in fact the Regime had had no racial laws at home or in the colonies for the first fifteen years of its existence – but a necessary part of how a colony of white settlement needed construction according to the precepts of the era.

## Conclusion

It was the year 1909 when Tommaso Carletti, governor of Somalia, one night, as darkness fell on the Somali Juba River, became enraptured by his surroundings and fell into a reverie on the colony's future. Fascism was as yet not an ideology. Carletti's was a stirring vision of the kind which, when all was said and done, lay at the very heart of Italy's colonial dream from the liberal to the Fascist era (and even beyond). It was a dream that was only very partially realised, perhaps in some patches of Libya and in some very restricted areas of Somalia, and it lasted for no more than a handful of years. In 1909 it proposed an end-point and a goal to aim for which camouflaged the genocidal nature of what was being hoped for. When Carletti had his reverie there were no more than a few hundred Italians – administrators and soldiers for the most part – in Somalia, but what he imagined was a territory in which somehow the indigenous had disappeared leaving behind nothing more than the eddies of their barbaric past. Describing his reverie along the banks of the Juba, Carletti wrote: 'In the dark purple and velvety sky twinkle a myriad of stars, and vivid among them shines the beautiful and pious Southern Cross; ... the current of the river murmurs, telling who knows what tragic stories from the past, conflicts among tribe and tribe, bloody battles between slaves and their masters, Galla, Tunni or Somali invasions. ... So now I see this land ..., blessed land, land hallowed by the sun, a land of golden dawns, of copious waters; now I see it all settled by white people, which in their regular and energetic faces carry the indelible marks of our race. And to the horizon I see line upon line of cotton trees on which it seems to have recently snowed; I see the rods of hemp and the forests of flexible vines from which we extract rubber.... And all around I hear mixed together the harmoniousness or coarseness of our old Italian dialects; the tone is one of happiness and triumph in and among the white

houses and their busy gardens spread like candid lambs between the river and the sea. So, this generous land will provide for millions of men here, and up there to Italy it will send its produce in the flowering industries and commerce of the fatherland. We can continue faithfully in our mission.<sup>31</sup>

There is much to be learned from viewing Italian Fascist colonialism through a variety of lenses in order to gauge its peculiarities and to determine the uniqueness or otherwise of its practices. Was it different from liberal Italy's version of colonial empire? Was it different to other 'settler colonies' some of which, according to one academic discipline at least, are still with us today? Is a comparison with Nazi Germany's wartime European empire enlightening?

That, like Hitler's lebensraum empire in Eastern Europe, Italian East Africa (or Libya) was meant to be territory for settlement implied genocide of course; the hundreds of thousands of African dead for which Fascist Italy was responsible were part of an attempt by the regime to foreshorten the passage to the creation of successful colonies of settlement in order to provide tangible evidence that Fascism could achieve quickly what liberal Italy had spent decades failing to do. Italy also had to act fast because what were perceived as the forces of the old world order, in which Italy had been excluded from ownership of the globe's choicest colonial territories, were temporarily weakened as well as hobbled by the terror of a newly belligerent Germany. That would not permanently be the case. Everything had to be done at breakneck speed and the possibility of failure averted at all costs, because – as was to happen in 1943 – failure would in all probability have meant an automatic return to Italy's default liberal order as still embodied in 'King-Emperor' Vittorio Emanuele, who unlike the Kaiser in Germany or indeed the Tsar in Russia, was still there after the Fascist 'revolution'. Mussolini made sure to call his empire an achievement of Fascism but it was not so much that therefore it was envisaged as something altogether qualitatively new compared to the empires of the liberal powers, a totalitarian experiment on the equator as it were, but rather it ought almost overnight to have become a territory of settlement, a 'settler colony' if you will. The kind of violence witnessed in Africa was not so much that Italians had been transformed by the regime into so many 'fascist new men' – though no doubt some did see themselves in these terms – but that restraint was regarded as a sure road to failure. Before Fascism, Italians had been fully prepared to kill, massacre, rape, torture and imprison, when the 'need' arose, but that was always fitfully, and liberal Italy was always wary of how it was viewed abroad and by the free press and institutions at home which always denounced 'excesses'. The latter no longer mattered all that much and in any case they saw nothing wrong with Italy having its own 'settler colonies' seeing as everyone else had them. Rather than 'the harmoniousness or coarseness of our old Italian dialects' which Carletti blissfully imagined filling up Somalia, perhaps Mussolini would have liked to see more black shirts, lictors and much firmer control from the metropole than was the case in an Australia or Canada, but Italy's dream after Mussolini's balcony speech in 1936 was not all that different.

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<sup>31</sup> Tommaso Carletti, *Attraverso il Benadir* (Viterbo: Agnesotti, 1910), 147-148.