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Italy's Colonial Past Reconsidered

Editorial

Daniele Comberiati & Tamara van Kessel

On the 11th of August 2012 in the Radimonte Park not far from Rome, a remarkable monument was inaugurated: a memorial shrine dedicated to Field Marshal Rodolfo Graziani.¹ The fact that Graziani was Minister of Defence in the Fascist Republic of Salò would have been in itself sufficient reason for the monument to cause indignation. However, Graziani's war crimes stretch further. As military commander in Cyrenaica (a part of today's Libya), Graziani was responsible for the ruthless killings of local inhabitants that earned him the title of the 'Butcher of Fezzan'. Similarly, it was under his orders that chemical weapons were used against the people of Ethiopia. Was the public outcry that did in fact arise upon the inauguration of this tribute to Graziani primarily due to his role in the Republic of Salò? Or was the knowledge of his brutal acts in Libya and Ethiopia an equally strong if not stronger trigger? Since the pioneering publications of Angelo del Boca, who already in 1965 began to reveal the atrocities hidden behind the tenacious image of *italiani brava gente*, of Italians having been on the whole good-natured colonizers, research into the history of Italian colonization has progressed considerably.² But as the monument in Radimonte Park rather poignantly illustrates, in the public opinion Italy's colonial past is still a raw nerve to touch. A contorted, if not incongruent, way of dealing with this past can also be seen among the formerly colonized. Colonel Gaddafi, arriving in Italy on a state visit in June 2009, wore a photo pinned to his chest of Omar al Mukhtar, the leader of the Libyan resistance to Italian colonization, while still recognizing Italy as one of his regime's most cherished business partners. These are among the many examples of how contested today's perspective on Italy's colonial legacy remains.

How is this colonial past perceived by Italian scholars? A proper historical analysis was for several decades hampered by the restricted access to the archive material kept by the 'Ministero degli affari esteri'. Simultaneously, in terms of methodology, it took a

¹ The plans for this monument were warmly endorsed by the mayor of Affile, the village adjacent to the park, and received funding from the Latium Regional Government, allegedly just for the completion of the park without mention of the shrine. A. Mariozzi, 'Affile, inaugurato sacrario per soldato di Salò tra polemiche e contestazioni' in: *Corriere della Sera* (11 August 2012); G. Panigiani, 'Village's Tribute to a Native Son Reignites a Debate About Italy's Fascist Past' in: *The New York Times* (29 August 2012).

² A. del Boca, *La guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1965.

relatively long time for postcolonial studies as developed in the Anglophone academic environment to be introduced in the Italian setting. This need not mean that if the sources had always been readily available, the critical reassessment of Italian colonialism would have come about much sooner. It appears more likely that, like Duncan suggests, in Italy the colonial memory was never erased but in a psychoanalytical sense pushed into the deeper recesses of the mind, from which it occasionally re-emerges.³ Only in the latest fifteen years, thanks to the translation of several classics of the genre (Said, Spivak and Bhabha) and to the presence of important scholars within the national borders (Chambers, Mezzadra and Curti) has there begun to be a reflection in Italy from the kind of perspectives proposed by the Anglophone cultural and postcolonial studies.⁴ Again, what is cause and what is effect is not certain.

The adoption of a postcolonial stance in Italy can also be related to the significant social and cultural changes that have marked the peninsula from the second half of the 1980s onwards. With the arrival of an ever larger number of immigrants the ethnic and social composition of the country changed, turning a nation known for its huge waves of emigration into the projected safe haven of many a migrant. Gradually the emergence of migrant writers has challenged the national literary canon and has among other things led to the discovery of authors originally from the former colonies. What is more, the 'brain drain' – the many Italian academics obliged to seek work abroad, already years before the current economic crisis – has enabled Italian researchers coming from various disciplines to work in places where postcolonial theories were well-established, thereby shaping their views. These scholarly migrations have subsequently also had effect on the academic discourse back in Italy.

In this issue of *Incontri* the Italian colonial past will be approached from different perspectives, bringing together a variety of academic disciplines. Given the prominence of postcolonial studies in the field of literary studies, three of the articles centre on publications that each in their own way express the influence of colonial relations. Lorenzo Mari presents Hisham Matar's *In the country of Men* (2006) as an example of an English-language novel that has been praised by Italian critics for its literary merits but deserves further analysis as a testimony to Libyan postcolonial history. Restricting the focus of attention to literature written in the Italian language, Dagmar Reichardt shows how conclusions can be drawn from the growing number of female migrant authors originating from former Italian colonies, who from their marginal position in Italian society seek to reposition the country with respect to its own colonial past as well as to the present-day problems of an ever increasing globalization. These authors do not only voice the symptoms of the social and historical evils they have fallen victim to but in their writing also offer a therapeutic trajectory in the search for confrontation and reconciliation. In the specific case of authors with Albanian origins, according to Daniele Comberiati the fragmentary and often disavowed memory that Italians have of Mussolini's occupation of Albania makes of this literature a rediscovery of a common past but also a renegotiation of concepts such as 'national identity'. Besides writers, Comberiati also analyses hybrid figures whose personal histories call into question the

³ J. Andall and D. Duncan (eds), *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 195-214.

⁴ For a bibliographical overview, see: C. Lombardi-Diop and C. Romeo (eds), *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

boundaries of Italian and Albanian national identity, and invite us to reconsider the emigration of the 1990s.

Literature and film can in this respect carry out similar functions, creating points of encounter between the different inheritors of the colonial burden. Furthermore, just as the academic demand for a revision of Italian colonial history grew from the 1980s onwards, in these same decades we have grown familiar with films that present easily recognizable postcolonial themes. By reconsidering Pasolini's *Appunti per un'Orestiade africana* (1970) and Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) as films that questioned Italian forms of 'Orientalism', Linde Luijnenburg points out that a critical stance towards the mentality of the colonizer was already present in these earlier films. The film set can provide a myriad of backdrops, real or imaginary, and the documentary too can narrow down the viewer's field of vision. How the colonial past manifests itself in the daily environment of a modern city is less easily attributable to a single agent that determines the perspective. With Asmara as showcase of Italy's modernist architecture and urban planning during the interwar years and thereafter, Maristella Casciato examines the architectural history of Italy's rule over Eritrea. Thereby Casciato looks into how this capital city now preserves this invaluable cultural heritage and what significance it is being given in today's Eritrean national identity.

The social sciences too seek confrontation with the lighter and darker chapters of Italy's interaction with the overseas territories she once subjugated. Domenica Ghidei Biidu, Barbara De Vivo, Elisabetta Hagos and Sabrina Marchetti have jointly worked on what can be considered an oral history source that illustrates this. It is an interview with two women belonging to the Eritrean diaspora whose life experiences give insight into the complex identification with Italian culture, that in the past was interwoven with redefinitions of the self as the country waged war with Ethiopia, but also evolved as migration brought these carriers of a collective memory to Italy and elsewhere. This bottom-up approach to the sociological dynamics of colonial heritage can be contrasted with Daniela Merolla's exploration into how from its origins European scientific research on Berber and African literature introduced a tenacious conceptual divide between Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa, based on fallacious ideas about the respective relations to the Arab civilization. This top-down scientific mapping of the African continent is in part the effect of colonial territorial divisions, which created linguistic borders such as those between French- and English-speaking areas. In addition, as can be seen in the development of Berber and African studies in Italy, more fundamental ideas about the civilization of the Orient as opposed to the African primitive lie at the heart of this perception of the continent across the Mediterranean.

The majority of these articles contain material that was presented at the conference 'Italian Colonial Heritage' (Amsterdam, 20 April 2012), organized by the Werkgroep Italië Studies (the Italian Studies Working Group of the Netherlands and Flanders).⁵ We hereby wish to thank the University of Amsterdam, the Postcolonial Studies Initiative of the University of Utrecht, the Dante Alighieri Society of Amsterdam and the Allard Pierson Museum for having helped to make this event possible, as well as the speakers Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Sandra Ponzanesi. Our gratitude also extends to those conference speakers who accepted to further elaborate their papers into contributions

⁵ The two exceptions are the articles by Luijnenburg and Mari. These were welcomed during the production of this publication as relevant additions to the discussion on the Italian colonial past.

to this issue of *Incontri*. As resulted from the conference, our understanding of the Italian colonial past gains not only from the multiplicity of sources – the testimonies of former colonizers and colonized, of past and present, of male and female and so forth – but also from the confrontation between the different academic methodologies, that have likewise evolved in a different relationship to what we commonly recognize as the age of European imperial domination.

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