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## Settler Colonial Society in Italy's African Domains through the Eyes of Italian Settlers

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# **Settler Colonial Society in Italy's African Domains through the Eyes of Italian Settlers**

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in  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The settling or, in fascist words, *demographic* policies Italy executed between 1935 and 1940 resulted in significant migratory flows to both Libya and East African domains: tens of thousands of farmers and manual labourers disembarked on colonial soil and got involved in one of the many plans the regime had devised to accommodate national low classes: farmsteads have been erected along Libya's coastal region, construction sites have been opened in East Africa, where the regime promoted the building of roads connecting the main colonial centres. These projects were meant to be performed by national workforce and led to the formation of Italian settler communities some of which even managed to survive – at least for some years – the fall of the Italian empire. This paper aims at providing new insights on such societies and does so by means of a micro-historical examination of private accounts left by some of those settlers.

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# CHAPTER 1

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## INTRODUCING ITALIAN SETTLER COLONIALISM

Italy has built its colonial empire over a forty-five years' time span: Eritrea, its first colony, was founded in 1890 and Somalia followed after roughly two decades. In the first half of the 1910s Italy waged war on the Ottoman Empire as well and managed to annex Libya to its domains overseas (even though it would not have complete control over the region until the 1930s. Eventually, the Fascist incorporated Ethiopia to their East African Dominions in 1936, after having overthrown Haile Selassie, the last Ethiopian emperor.<sup>1</sup>

As Italy's expansion in African went on, metropolitan governments developed settler colonial policies in order to relocate national citizens there: the very first settler colonial experiment took place in Eritrea in the last years of the nineteenth century, when Leopoldo Franchetti was appointed to devise a plan for the accommodation of Italian populace in the Eritrean highlands. His project did not succeed and attracted nothing but a negligible number of settlers; besides, such development came to an abrupt end in 1896, when the locals rose against the government's land expropriation policies, an unstable situation made even worse by Italy's defeat in Adwa by Ethiopian forces.<sup>2</sup>

In the following years, Italy managed to keep the colony, but had to momentarily give up both Abyssinian lands and, most importantly, its settler colonial projects.<sup>3</sup> Only in the 1930s Italy resumed them in terms similar to those Franchetti had planned for Eritrea. By that time, Italy's political order had changed radically: the fascists had been ruling the country for more than a decade, and the colonial possessions under their authority had been consistently enlarged, comprising Somalia, Libya, and Ethiopia itself. The said programmes, which begun being drafted, approved and implemented roughly around the second half of the 1930s, included the relocation of Italian citizens in the said regions, as well as the construction of roads, rural villages, and urban buildings, all of which would have been built by national workforce. Such design took the name of *Empire of Labour* and was supposed to accommodate Italian unemployed workers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Somalia, Repubblica Democratica di," Enciclopedia on line, Treccani, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/repubblica-democratica-di-somalia>; "Libia," Enciclopedia on line, Treccani, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/libia>; "Italia," Enciclopedia on line, Treccani, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/italia>.

<sup>2</sup> Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: Policies, Praxis and Impact* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1987), 33-37.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Grange, "Émigration et Colonies: un Grand Débat de l'Italie Libérale," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, 30, no.3 (Juillet-septembre 1983) : 349-353, doi : <https://doi.org/10.3406/rhmc.1983.1242>.

<sup>4</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, "Italian Colonialism through a Settler Colonial Studies Lens," *Journal of Colonialism & Colonial History* 19, no. 3 (Winter 2018): 3, doi:10.1353/cch.2018.0023.

Fascist ambitions proved short-lived and Italy would lose its colonial empire before the end of the Second World War; nonetheless, the impact of its plans has been profound not only on settlers and their relatives residing in Italy, but for the colonized as well: on a theoretical and pragmatic level, Italian settler colonialism entailed the displacement and replacement of a significant number of people, the institution of colonial hierarchies, and different degrees of violence exerted on local communities. These practices have been extensively and quickly deployed in the Italian colonial world, which, consequently, has been deeply transformed.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, in both national and international eyes, Italy's dominions in the 1930s must have looked very different from the previous decades: by then, the presence of Italian villages in Libya created what Federico Cresti termed *Oases of Italianness* (*Oasi di Italianità*), an expression that alludes to the artificial creation of Italian enclaves on North African soil.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the military penetration of Ethiopia went along with massive immigration of Italian nationals eager to find remunerative career opportunities there (as well as in Eritrea and Somalia). In roughly six years of colonial rule in Ethiopia (1935-1941), hundreds of thousands of Italians landed in East Africa with both conquest and settling purposes.<sup>7</sup>

To put it simply, the settler colonial policies the fascist regime supported and funded in the 1930s led to the foundation of an ephemeral and yet relevant Italian community in Africa whose sociological study has still to be made. The main obstacle appears to be the lack of comprehensive studies employing a settler colonial perspective for the analysis of the Italian residing either in Libya or the Horn of Africa.<sup>8</sup> Up until now, colonial settlements have been object of a very low number of publications and, consequently, the body of knowledge available is incomplete and fragmented. This paper attempts to bridge these gaps and opens a window on the Italian settler society as it unfolded in the second half of the 1930s.

The reason why research remains to such an early stage are to be found in the second half of the 1970s and the first of the following decade: precisely, the period comprised between 1976 and 1986 saw the releasing of both *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale* and *Gli Italiani in Libia* by Angelo Del Boca, two paramount series (six volumes in total) that heavily influenced all the following

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 15.

<sup>6</sup> I borrow the expression from the title of his volume on the fascist settler colonial policies in Libya. See: Federico Cresti, *Oasi d'Italianità: la Libia della Colonizzazione Agraria tra Fascismo, Guerra e Indipendenza (1935-1956)* (Torino: Società editrice internazionale, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Veracini, "Italian Colonialism," 13.

<sup>8</sup> The "Horn of Africa" is the easternmost region of Africa, encompassing today's Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti. The latter and Northern Somaliland have never been under Italian control, the first being seized by the French and the latter by the British.



literature on the topic.<sup>9</sup> The lens through which Del Boca observed Colonialism and Italy's expansion in Northern and East Africa was that of *politico-diplomatic-military* history, an approach which has had such a profound impact on the academia that the majority of the subsequent researches favoured the very same perspective.<sup>10</sup> Inevitably, as Nicola Labanca observed, the quasi-omnipresence of this perspective led to a partial stalemate in Italian colonial studies that has not been fully reversed yet.<sup>11</sup>

Some – although hesitant – efforts towards a renovation of Italian colonial studies (precisely, the ones concerning the colonial society which rose on African soil) have been made by Irma Taddia, whose 1988's *La Memoria dell'Impero* and 1996's *Autobiografie Africane* addressed the general stagnation of African studies and sought to propose new strategies and fresh perspectives for delving into the multifaced Italian colonial world.<sup>12</sup> In particular, both the titles are anthological endeavours displaying private testimonies, but, while the former collects accounts of those Italians who had moved to the Horn of Africa, the latter presented African (mainly Eritrean) oral sources she had recorded during her study journeys. As if each compendium complemented the other, Taddia argued that the scrutiny of private sources could contribute to a deeper comprehension of Italian colonial history. For not only do they show how colonial society was perceived by the settler communities, they can also help the researcher to get a better grip on how the locals reacted to Italian colonial domination (as the latter book attempted to demonstrate).<sup>13</sup> True, the author did not seem to have understood Italian groups in colony as members of a settler colonial society, yet her recognition of private testimonies' usefulness cannot be underestimated.

Despite the benefits Italian researchers could have accrued from such new angle, Taddia's call for rethinking the study methodologies the Academia had been employing for so long went almost unheeded and the number of investigations that featured examinations of private accounts has been modest. Moreover, given the anthological nature of her publications, it seemed that the editor herself was not interested in presenting any actual historical narrative on colonial society based on those records: Taddia did not bother to draw any conclusion from the testimonies she had gathered, providing nothing but general observations around trends identifiable among settlers and the colonized.<sup>14</sup> On the whole, the politico-military lens kept being the preeminent one among scholars,

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<sup>9</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale* (Bari: Laterza, 1976, 1979, 1982, 1984); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia* (Bari: Laterza, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Angelo Del Boca (eds.), *Le Guerre Coloniali del Fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 1991); Angelo Del Boca (eds.), *Adua, le Ragioni di una Sconfitta* (Bari: Laterza, 1997); Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, Brava Gente? Un Mito Duro a Morire* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Nicola Labanca, "Italiani d'Africa," in *Adua: Le Ragioni di una Sconfitta*, ed. Angelo Del Boca (Bari: Laterza, 1997), 193-194.

<sup>12</sup> Irma Taddia, *La Memoria dell'Impero: Autobiografie d'Africa Orientale* (Manduria: P. Licaita Editore, 1988); Irma Taddia, *Autobiografie Africane, il Colonialismo nelle Memorie Orali* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1996), 27-28.

<sup>13</sup> Taddia, *Autobiografie*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 38.

who in turn failed to incorporate a micro-historical approach based on private records in their narratives.

For this reason, when the first works on Italian settlements were released in the 1990s, their focus was still centred around official archival material rather than on diaries and memoirs. Overall, the main subject researchers were concerned with was the size of the Italian groups living in Libya and East Africa, a task that has been fulfilled by employing the very same primary sources previous academics had used for their political investigations on colonial history. In this respect, the two most renowned pioneers are Annunziata Nobile and Nicola Labanca, whose demographic surveys on the Italian in colony proved to be significant and enlightening for our understanding of Italian settler colonialism.<sup>15</sup>

By and large, Annunziata's *La Colonizzazione Demografica della Libia* (published in 1990) had a double objective: the first one – as the title itself suggests – was to render a quantitative assessment of the Italian communities that formed on the so-called “Fourth Shore” (as if Libya's coastal region were the northern one Italy lacked). The second aim of her analysis was surveying the body of legislation Italian authorities had devised to allocate plot of lands and residential buildings. Her article provided comprehensive data on migrations to Libya over the 1930s in general and between 1938 and 1940 in particular: with regards to the latter period, the author investigated what fascist propaganda labelled *twenty thousands' expeditions* (Spedizioni dei ventimila), that is, the yearly input of twenty thousand Italian nationals who were expected to settle in rural villages the regime had built in the northern sector of Libya. For the most part farmers, Nobile convincingly reconstruct to whole process that led to their selection and, most importantly, illustrates how the whole state machine took control of Libyan soil, parcelled it out, built on it and, eventually, distributed it to national settlers.<sup>16</sup>

As briefly noted above, despite still drawing most of the information from official state documents, Nobile's contribution had convincingly introduced a new dimension to Italian colonial studies, showing new ways through which, the subject could be tackled. Interestingly though, demographic studies on colonies would not resume until the very end of the decade, when, in 1997, Nicola Labanca took up her legacy in his contribution to Del Boca's *Adua, le Ragioni di una Sconfitta*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Nicola Labanca, “Italiani d’Africa,” in *Adua, Le Ragioni di una Sconfitta*, ed. Angelo Del Boca (Bari: Laterza, 1997); Annunziata Nobile, “La Colonizzazione Demografica della Libia, Progetti e Realizzazioni,” *Bollettino di Demografia Storica* 13 (1990).

<sup>16</sup> Nobile, “La Colonizzazione” 176-186.

<sup>17</sup> Nicola Labanca, “Italiani d’Africa,” in *Adua: Le Ragioni di una Sconfitta*, ed. Angelo Del Boca (Bari: Laterza, 1997).

In a way, as in Nobile's article case, Labanca's *Italiani d'Africa* attempted to shed light on multiple aspects of Italian migratory flows to the African Continent, some of which filled the gaps left by her research. Precisely, he investigated how many emigrants moved from the peninsula to Italian colonies before the 1930s.<sup>18</sup> However, as can be inferred by the low – if not negligible – number of pages he devoted to this quantitative assessment, it is clear that his essay aimed at a different objective. In this regard, the most valuable figures he provided were mainly concerned with the multifaceted social stratification of settler communities, the social classes settlements were made of, the Italian regions from which settlers came from, and even which gender was the most present in the colonial world and to which extent.<sup>19</sup> In a few words, his inquiry was oriented to a sociological study of the Italian residing in colony, which convincingly provided a more nuanced picture of Italian settler colonialism and deeply contributed to our understanding of the same; but, most importantly, he successfully drew a connection between settler-demographic colonial studies and sociology.<sup>20</sup>

In light of these considerations, Labanca's essay can be regarded as the first endeavour that observed Italy's colonial settlements through the lens of social studies. True, his findings still relied on official statistics and, additionally, Taddia's quasi-simultaneous collections of oral testimonies could have prompted approaches different from the one he actually followed; nevertheless, one cannot neglect the degree to which Italian studies progressed due to such fresh angle on the subject.

In addition to this, the beforementioned work created a perfect breeding ground for further researches on the topic. At the beginning of the 2000s, it was Labanca again who gave new impetus to this field of studies: his volumes *Memorie d'Oltremare* (co-edited with Annalisa Marchi) and *Posti al Sole*, two anthological books presenting a wide collection of both oral and written accounts of Italian soldiers, settlers and workers who moved to either Libya or A.O.I. (Italian East Africa), paved the way for further developments in the said field of study.<sup>21</sup> With particular regards to the second title, the author acutely pointed out that private records are a fundamental corpus of data yet to be investigated for a better grasp of settlements' social phenomena. For «if Italian Imperialism had to be understood as a *demographic* [demografico] one, how can we study it without taking into account *settlers* [coloni], *emigrants* [emigrati], and *colonial labourers* [lavoratori in colonia]?».<sup>22</sup>

In other words, Labanca finally acknowledged that settler colonialism provided a suitable theoretical framework for an analysis based on those who lived in colony and whose experiences

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<sup>18</sup> Labanca, "Italiani d'Africa," 201-203.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 203, 206, 211-214.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>21</sup> Nicola Labanca, *Posti al Sole. Diari e Memorie di Vita e di Lavoro dalle Colonie d'Africa* (Rovereto: Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, 2001); Nicola Labanca, Annalisa Marchi, *Memorie d'Oltremare: Prato, Italia, Africa* (Firenze: Giunti, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, XVII.

could contribute to a better illustration of how Italian settler society worked. Unfortunately, once, more, no actual macro-narrative has been made on it, as Labanca did not venture in such endeavour. As in Taddia's case, his observations were limited to general colonial trajectories and left the material he gathered still to be examined.

The point where such scholars stopped is the starting one for the present research, which will engage with both primary and secondary sources available in order to shed more light on Italy's colonial past. Specifically, the pages below will focus on major aspects of Italian settler colonialism in Africa and the society that formed there: what experiences did Italian settlers report in their writings? What were settlers aiming at when they relocated therein? How did they manage their relationships with the native communities? Did their expectations harmonize with the regime ones? I will answer these questions by means of a micro-historical study of private autobiographical documents (including letters, diaries and memoirs), which, in turn, will be connected to secondary literature on Italy's dominions overseas. In so doing, it will be possible to show that settlers' experiences have a macro-historical potential and that they can disclose major aspects of the bigger settler colonial society formed in Africa.

Albeit the Italian government attempted to promote colonial settlements even before the establishment of the Mussolini's dictatorship, my research will be based upon personal records written in the regime late years, namely between 1935 and 1940. At present, it seems that the majority of the primary sources available date back to this span of time (though it should also be kept into mind that archival research is far from being concluded and new documents may – and certainly will – be discovered in the next years). Whatever may be the cause, it turns out to be a rather fortunate coincidence, as the most substantial movement of Italian settlers to Libya and East Africa took place in that period. The reasons lying behind this phenomenon are numerous and cannot be listed all at once in this chapter; at the moment, may it suffice to note that the 1930s witnessed the most considerable flow of Italian emigrants to colonial soil because Italy's African wars (especially the Ethiopian one) pushed many workers and small merchants to follow the Italian army in quality of providers of commodities and services; in the Libyan case, as has been briefly mentioned above, the said period saw the arrival of the so-called Twenty Thousands, arguably the most significant movement of people to Italian Libya since its "pacification".<sup>23</sup>

I will mostly draw information from Taddia's and Labanca's aforementioned anthological works, whose analysis will be also integrated by monographic volumes displaying the life of single

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<sup>23</sup> Nobile, "La Colonizzazione," 180-186; Carl Ipsen, *Demografia Totalitaria. Il Problema della Popolazione nell'Italia Fascista*, trans. Giuliana Cuberli (Bologna: Il Mulino 1997), 176; Emanuele Ertola, "The Italian Fascist Settler Empire in Ethiopia, 1936-1941," in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, ed. Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini (London and New York: Routledge 2017), 264.

individuals who lived and worked in Italy's dominions in the period considered.<sup>24</sup> The present research will not delve into neither a specific region nor a specific colony; rather, the angle through which the study will be carried out will be fairly ample, wide-ranging, and will include Italy's African territories in their integrity. In this way, it may be easier to unveil inter-colonial tendencies or, at least, sketch them out. Thus, this paper should not be perceived as an extensive investigation on Italian colonial society; rather, as an attempt to demonstrate that private accounts can be profitably employed in the analysis of colonial and settler colonial phenomena that took place in Italy's dominions.

The *corpus* I will make use of is rather heterogeneous and its hybrid nature compels the researcher to understand some of the logics behind it and to engage with the relationship between recorded events and the degree of re-elaboration that affects their reporting: time plays a crucial role on the psychological perception of past events and, consequently, on the writing process itself. To put it simply, the more time has passed, the more peoples' memories will be reinterpreted according to their following life experiences. The documents I will use reflect different level of facts' re-interpretation, so it is essential to carefully separate what belongs to the colonial period and what may appear as an *a posteriori* interpolation. Such task becomes even more important when dealing with indirect testimonies, that is, narrators who have heard those stories from their parents, relatives, or any acquaintance of theirs. This is well reflected in Giovanni Larese's and Paola Salomon's work, which will inform the current research.<sup>25</sup>

As far as the present thesis is concerned, it will display information from both written sources (such as diaries, memoirs and letters) and oral ones, each one having a different relationship with the facts they recount: specifically, diaries and letters have an immediate<sup>26</sup> relationship with the past and do not usually show a deep re-examination of the narrator's life; on the other hand, memoirs may include it, as they can be composed after many years (even decades) after a given event. Thus, while the former crystallises thoughts and feelings that are perceived immediately after something has taken place (and peoples' psyche had not much time to act upon their profound meaning), the latter may originate from the writers' need to get a clearer view of their earlier life, so they have to delve into many layers of memory and reach the one they want to put into writing: inevitably, the deeper it is, the more the superior strata transform those below. For this reason, it is very important to discern

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<sup>24</sup> The first one is a private memoir written by Cason Giacomo, an Italian farmer who moved to Libya in 1939. The other ones are both collections of letters: the first one contains the epistolary exchange between Edoardo Costantini and his family while he was working in Somalia; the second reports the transcripts of Nicola Gattari's correspondence with his wife Ida during his working period in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

<sup>25</sup> Giovanni Larese, Paola Salomon, "Percorsi Migratori dei Pontalpini in Africa," in *Un Bellunese in Somalia: Lettere di Edoardo Costantini alla Famiglia, 1934-1936* (Belluno: ISBREC, 2001), 83-106.

<sup>26</sup> I am employing the Latin meaning of the term, which is composed by *in* (without) and *-mediatus*, which loosely corresponds to "interpolation" or "addiction".

what is a genuine view on the events recounted and what appears like a retrospective examination of someone's deeds after a long period of time.<sup>27</sup>

In summary, my thesis attempts to examine Italian settler society as it unfolded in both the North Shore and AOI between 1935 and 1940. It does so by looking into writings and interviews left by those who took part in Italy's settler colonial policies. Before starting the actual analysis, it is of great importance to delineate what settler colonialism is on a theoretical level and to which extent Italian dominions fit within its frame, a purpose to which the next chapter will be devoted. As I aim to show, a comparative analysis of theoretical model and Italian actual practice reveals that the former fails to grasp all the peculiarities of Italy's settler colonial policies. Consequently, the rest of the chapter seeks to give new form to settler colonialism in accordance with Italy's 1935-1940 designs.

The third chapter focuses on settler colonialism as well, but it focuses further on its historical development and how Italy practiced it in both Libya and AOI. The topic will be observed in accordance with the aforementioned research questions, meaning that it will provide a quantitative assessment of metropolitan citizens residing in Italy's dominions, the settling programmes implemented on colonial soil and the measures the regime took in order to manage interactions between national and colonial citizens. Special attention will be drawn on the so-called *Empire of Labour* (Impero del Lavoro), what it meant for the metropolitan authorities and how it got performed in overseas domains. Furthermore, this section will also survey Italy's settler colonial trajectory over the long period: by looking into the pre-fascist era, it will be possible to shed light on the liberal precedents that inspired the regime to promote its settling policies in African possessions. In so doing, I will show some similarities between the ways both the fascist and liberal governments discussed and promoted settler colonial designs in their colonial possessions. This will be the last section before the primary sources' investigation, and its objective is to better contextualize the life of the actors we will observe in the pages ensuing.

Finally, the fourth chapter will look into the Italian settler society through the eyes of those who were part of it. In particular, this section will attempt to show that settler colonialism political implications (as they are explained in the previous chapters: namely, displacement of native communities, segregationist policies, the creation of a job market for metropolitan citizens) results in a set of social consequences that deeply affect the settler society (as we will see: poverty and secret interaction between different ethnic groups to name but a few). These will be examined through a micro-historical lens, which will be employed for the study of private accounts: it consists in a survey

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<sup>27</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, XXXVII; Taddia, *Autobiografie Africane*, 22-23.

of single individuals' writings and, with the help of secondary literature, the subsequent reconstruction of common trajectories followed by Italian settlers.





## CHAPTER 2

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### DEBATE ON SETTLER COLONIALISM: WHAT IS IT AND HOW DOES IT APPLY TO THE ITALIAN CASE?

As stated above, the main object of study of the present section is settler colonialism and, more precisely, how its theoretical structure can be fruitfully employed in the sociological study of Italian communities residing both in Libya and *Africa Orientale Italiana*. For this purpose, the pages that follow will engage with two notions of settler colonialism: the first model will be the one proposed by Labanca himself, whose characteristics will be deduced from the few mentions he made throughout his oeuvre. Once his thought will have been portrayed, it will be benchmarked against Lorenzo Veracini's *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, a publication consisting in the assessment of all the distinctive features of successful settler colonial endeavours.<sup>28</sup> Such analysis will mainly evaluate the ones that clearly contrast with Italy's settler reality, and will point out how a speculative and abstract definition is ill-suited for an exhaustive comprehension of Italian peculiarities.

Both *Italiani d'Africa* and *Posti al Sole* prove to be an apt starting point for a survey of Labanca's considerations on settler colonialism. After so many years since their appearance, what really catches the today's reader's eye are the tentative steps the author was taking on the edge between the field of politico-military history and that of demographic colonialism: in essence, he was trying to move beyond the limits of the former in search for fresh angles from which the subject could be tackled. On this point, the author described the scope and reach of Italian academic studies on colonialism as *narrow*, a condition that compelled him to ask different research questions and look at different set of data for their answer.<sup>29</sup> Settler colonialism slowly emerged as a suitable frame supporting various historical narratives of the Italian living in colony: hence the social study he conducted in *Italiani d'Africa* based on official records and the one he just sketched out in *Posti al Sole* with the help of private ones, respectively.

Valuable findings notwithstanding, Labanca does not seem to discuss at length the traits of what he labelled as demographic colonialism. A possible reason behind his lack of insight might be – as Labanca himself admits – the want of settler colonial terminology the Italian historiographical academia has suffered until present day (on this point, even Veracini made a similar remark): to put it simply, there seems not to be a proper Italian translation for the English *settler*, which partially

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<sup>28</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: a Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Labanca, "Italiani d'Africa," 195.

hampered any in depth research on the subject.<sup>30</sup> The few details he hinted at can be found in the passage quoted in the chapter above, where the various classes that partook such enterprise were enumerated.<sup>31</sup> Thus, *settlers*, *migrants*, and *colonial labourers* are the notions to elaborate on in order to get a better grip on how he conceived Italian settlements.

To begin with, in accordance with Veracini's frame, migration stands out clearly as one of the most prominent characteristic of settler colonial phenomena occurred in Italy's dominions.<sup>32</sup> However, it would be more correct to say migrations, as not only there have been multiple emigrants' flows to Libya and East Africa; but, most importantly, each migrant conceived their stay on colonial soil in a different way. To put it simply, it is not just a matter of *degree*, because migrations were also different in *kind*. On this regard, the Florentine historian appropriately notes that the society in Italian settlements was divided into «those who [actually] *settled* in colony...and those who knew that they would never let their *longing for Africa* [maldafrica] prevail». <sup>33</sup> In other words, it was as if Italian dominions were run by a social fault line where on one side there were Italians who moved there in order to permanently reside in the African continent; while the second group, in Labanca's words, was just *passing through* it without the intention of establishing their new home there.<sup>34</sup>

On the whole, the incorporation of so many different groups is rather telling, as it unveils Labanca's far-reaching understanding of how Italian settler colonialism should be seen. According to his definition, Italian colonial settlements consisted of a multifaceted society incorporating a wide range of classes, where proper settlers coexisted with a substantial group of colonial workers and "immigrants". He viewed Italian settlements as a heterogeneous society including both actual settlers and other types of temporary migrants, an approach that might seem bewildering, for the literature on the subject has presented a different configuration for settler colonial communities. On this point, Lorenzo Veracini has provided one of the most exhaustive analyses on phenomena of this nature; his *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* is an all-encompassing study of the manifold distinctive characteristics that define settler colonial endeavours and will provide the terms for comparison with the Italian one.

First of all, it is paramount to understand what Veracini visualizes with the expression "settler colonialism", a term that originates from the intersection of two axes: it denotes a *permanent movement* (that is to say, a migration) of people from their birthplace to a new locale in which they

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<sup>30</sup> Nicola Labanca, "Nelle Colonie," in *Storia dell'Emigrazione Italiana, II. Arrivi*, ed. Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, Emilio Franzina (Roma: Donzelli, 2009), 196; Veracini, "Italian Colonialism," 3.

<sup>31</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, XVII.

<sup>32</sup> Labanca, "Italiani d'Africa," 193; Labanca, "Nelle Colonie," 193-194; Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: a Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, XXII.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, XXIII.

*settle* (that is, they build their new home).<sup>35</sup> Once they have founded a new community, the colonial component originates from the uneven power relationship emerging between them and the local population which, in a successful settler colonial scenario, is destined to be displaced and replaced by the newcomers. To put it simply, settler colonialism is a particular *mode of domination* consisting in a polity ruled by an allochthonous group which not only subjugates the autochthonous one, but tries to take the latter's place as well.<sup>36</sup> In addition to this, as the very same model Veracini employed for his research demonstrates, settlers' power is not exerted only to the locals' expense: a true settler colonial society is such only when its members and its organs start eroding the metropole influence and finally manage to sever their ties with it. On this point, sovereignty represents one of the fundamental features of settler colonial societies, which perceive themselves as a community capable of both drafting bodies of law and «implementing actual jurisdiction» in a process that bypasses any metropolitan interference.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, settlers constitute a *sui generis* group of migrants which, in Veracini's words, «are part of a collective and sovereign displacement that moves to stay, that moves to establish a permanent homeland by way of displacement».<sup>38</sup> "Permanence" is a key word for understanding settler phenomena – and, as it will be shown, for detecting differences with Italian settling projects –, for it describes the ultimate end settlers aspire to, namely the foundation of a new society where they can conclude their wandering.

As it has been shown, settlers' special trajectory is not *circular*, their interaction with new lands is not temporary, and will not end with their coming back to their birthplace: their journey does not finish where it started.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly though, there are multiple levels on which this theoretical structure appear to be ill-suited for the analysis of Italian settling efforts: firstly, some of the colonial actors Labanca mentions in his essay are clearly incompatible with the settler colonial formations sketched out so far. Precisely, on a theoretical point of view, immigrants and part of colonial labourers (that is, those who migrated to Italy's African dominions for seasonal work) cannot be understood as a collective constitutive of Italian settlements, as they just went through colonial domains searching for remunerative career opportunities. In addition to this, Labanca also adds that for these migrants the African venture was nothing but a possible «destination among many ones», which further corroborates the assumption that they were not considering to establish their new home in the Italian

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<sup>35</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, "Introduction. Settler Colonialism as a Distinct Mode of Domination," in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, ed. Edward Cavanagh, Lorenzo Veracini (London - New York: Routledge 2017), 1-4.

<sup>37</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 53, 61-63.

<sup>38</sup> Veracini, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>39</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 96.

empire.<sup>40</sup> In a few words, these classes conceived their migration to African colonies as an economic strategy for make a fortune before repatriating. Given the non-settler character of these groups, Veracini would define them as *sojourners*, that is, people who are not willing to permanently reside in the newly-occupied lands: they were migrants indeed, but, on a conceptual level, not settlers, for they resided in colony as long as they earned enough money to return to the Peninsula.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, Veracini's definition reveals another crucial dissimilarity between his settler colonial model and the Italian one. As it has been outlined above, sovereignty is an essential characteristic of settlers, and, when successfully exerted, it enabled them to overtake both the locals and the metropole.<sup>42</sup> However, in Italian colonies, settling plans have always been heavily influenced, directed, and funded by Rome, meaning that the metropole's supervision represented a strong obstacle to the emergence of any autonomist or independentist claim. As many researchers have underlined, the metropole superintended a significant part of the settling program: Roberta Pergher and Emanuele Ertola revealed that not only did the state sought to control the flows of Italian migrants from the Peninsula to its dominions, it also attempted (with particular regards to Libya) to supervise settlers' movements *within* the colony. Ultimately, any possible implementation of autonomist measure would be in vain, as the North African territory got officially annexed to the Kingdom's as the "nineteenth region" in 1939.<sup>43</sup> For these reasons, Pergher added an extra level of complexity, arguing that what Italy was actually looking for was not an outlet for its unemployed workforce on the Fourth Shore; rather, Italian settlers were meant to create a significant *national* presence on "recently-pacified" lands so that it would be possible to legitimately claim control over the region. In her view, the *Empire of labour* was nothing but a propagandistic tool the regime took advantage of when in fact was conducting a national expansion overseas. Additionally, she also suggests that also East African dominions (which took their ultimate shape in 1936, after Ethiopia's conquest by Italian forces) have been the object of an intense imaginative activity that resulted in them being described as either an «extension of Italy itself» or, once again, a New Italy. This situation entails that the settling operations and the metropolitan manpower called to perform them were meant to state *Italianness* and sovereignty in those areas.<sup>44</sup>

True, the Second World War meant the loss of the Empire (as well as the fall of the regime), leading to the irreversible interruption of Italy's colonial – or alleged settler colonial – ambitions; this might explain its unsuccessful attempts to colonize African lands. Yet, all things considered, this

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<sup>40</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, XXIII.

<sup>41</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 53-74.

<sup>43</sup> Roberta Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire. Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy's Borderlands, 1922-1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 94, 118, 122-123, 127; Ertola, "The Italian Fascist," 264-266.

<sup>44</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 244-246.

seems to be only a partial answer because Italy's colonial enterprise showed only few of the features listed by Veracini in the first place. Then, how can Labanca's resolution to employ a demographic (or settler) lens for the study of Italian colonial society be justified? Furthermore, why did he include seasonal migrants in his study of settlements? These questions are not a matter of little significance, as the primary sources I have selected include both temporary workers' and actual settlers' records, meaning that my analysis would be compromised if the latter were excluded.

His insistent remarks on the settler colonial nature of the Italian colonial enterprise can be explained by looking at his contribution to *Storia dell'Emigrazione Italiana* (a bulky multidisciplinary effort in two volumes that addresses Italian emigration from the Late Middle Ages to present day), where he clarified and further developed his thought.<sup>45</sup> In essence, his claims on the demographic character of Italian colonialism are predicated on the *labour-intensive* elements that characterised it. To put it simply, Italy's ultimate goal was the creation of an Empire where its citizens could move for career opportunities.<sup>46</sup>

In 2018, after nine years since the appearance of his theoretical essay, also Veracini turned his attention to this subject, searching for a point of view that would allow a settler colonial interpretation of Italy's African Empire: in so doing, not only did he confirm Labanca's approach; most importantly, he associated it with the one he had expressed in his theoretical analysis. In this regard, it is crucial to note that the *Empire of Labour* (this is the name Italian authorities gave to their imperial design) was postulated on the creation of a job market that would attract national workforce and exclude the indigenous one.<sup>47</sup> Such understanding of Italian imperial policies is perfectly compatible with a settler colonial scenario, in the sense that Italian inclination to employ Italian manpower in its colonies was in fact a form of locals' replacement (which, as we will see, had been performed alongside a physical one both in Libya and East Africa).

In other words, the substitution of local labour with Italian one (whether it was temporary or permanent) is a clear element suggesting the Italian colonial enterprise was in fact a settler colonial one, for the regime sought to create a system where work had to be performed by Italians rather than locals. In this light, it is also possible to critically engage with Pergher's beforementioned positions, according to which the regime was attempting to lay national claims on African land by means of settling policies. Precisely, even if we concede her point, it should be bore into mind that, despite its national objectives, the Italian landing on Libyan soil belonged to the working class and, additionally, Italy was not populating empty lands: as a matter of fact, both Tripolitania and Cyrenaica presented

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<sup>45</sup> *Storia dell'Emigrazione Italiana, II. Arrivi*, ed. Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, Emilio Franzina (Roma: Donzelli, 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Labanca, "Nelle Colonie," 194.

<sup>47</sup> Veracini, "Italian Colonialism," 2.

indigenous communities that – as will be shown in the ensuing chapter – got deeply affected by uneven colonial hierarchies, which are a distinctive characteristic of settler colonialism. Similarly, a significant share of the hundreds of thousands Italian nationals who entered Italian East Africa after 1936 belonged to the working class and were involved in the construction of roads, facilities and infrastructures in general. In conclusion, as in Libya's case, the colonial government enforced policies aiming at restricting local population freedom and confine it to peripheral urban neighbourhoods.

Italian deeds in its African territories represented an interesting case where settler colonial forms served both national and colonial ends. This of course does not imply that Settler Colonialism (with capital letters) is not a fruitful lens through which phenomena occurred in Italian Africa can be observed. Rather, this presentation stresses the elusive nature of Italian settler colonialism and the imperfect ways through which it was performed. Italy's relocation of its citizens in Africa was indeed settler colonial in the sense that settlers would have performed manual labour themselves rather than exploiting native labour and that the relationships they constructed with the indigenous were clearly based on colonizer-colonized patterns. At the same time, the fact that the Italian living there were not granted autonomous action and were restrained by the regime's totalitarian approach highlights that settler colonialism was at service of Italy's national interests.

These conclusive observations lay the foundations for the next chapter, which will further elaborate on settler colonialism as the fascist practiced it between 1935 and 1940, how it took shape, how it has been realized, and how many people were involved in such plans. As touched upon earlier in the text, the section below does not draw the attention just on such period of time; it also seeks to understand the origins of Italy's rush for African colonies and how it resolved to relocate metropolitan population there. As will be shown, it is not possible to understand fascist settler colonial debates and practices without talking about the demographic issues that had been affecting the national population since the second half of the nineteenth century. By looking into Italy's migratory flows (and the debates and actual policies they generated in the liberal period) it is possible to better contextualise fascist settler colonialism in the 1930s.

## CHAPTER 3

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### THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ITALIAN SETTLER COLONIALISM

As I have sought to show in the second chapter, settler colonialism unfolded in Italy's domains overseas quite differently from Veracini's speculative model. This chapter attempts to elaborate further on its peculiarities and observe them through an historical angle: the objective is to complement the theoretical discussions presented above with an analysis of the development of settler colonial policies in Italy's African possessions. At the same time, this section also attempts to pave the way for the following one, as it provides the historical context in which Italian settlers (particularly those whose records will be object of study in the pages below) lived. In accordance with the research questions informing this study, it will engage with one of the preeminent arguments in favour of which many Italian intellectuals and politicians were when dealing with colonial involvement in Africa: the *Empire of Labour*. This inquiry will unveil the concept's key characteristics, after which will move forward a quantitative analysis of the classes the Italian settler society consisted of. Ultimately, the last subject that will be examined will be the strategies employed by the colonial government to displace and replace local population with metropolitan ones.

As has been briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, the *Empire of Labour* should be understood as the fascist attempt to create a job market in colony Italian labourers could take advantage of instead of emigrating outside national borders.<sup>48</sup> Such programmatic idea was not new within the Italian debate: quite the opposite, it had been already discussed at length in the previous decades and had even animated some military and settler colonial projects in Libya and Eritrea. When it entered the political arena in the last years of the nineteenth century, it was viewed as a possible solution to the same set of problems the regime would have faced years later, namely high rates of unemployment and the subsequent emigration of hundreds of thousand Italian citizens out of the peninsula. On this regard, Daniel Grange notes that the curve of migrants leaving Italy started increasing significantly from the 1890s onwards, a trend that remained unaltered after the turn of the century as well.<sup>49</sup> Such notable demographic transformations pushed politicians and intellectuals to devise new strategies to reverse what they deemed as a loss for the nation and claim people-willing-

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<sup>48</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 49; Ertola, "The Italian Fascist," 264.

<sup>49</sup> The author reports that in the last decade of the nineteenth century no less than 300,000 people emigrated each year. Data also show that the number of migrants almost reached half a million in 1901 and surpassed that figure in the following years (up to 1914). See: Grange, "Émigration," 346; "Emigrazione Italiana," *Dizionario di Storia* (2010), Treccani, accessed July 8, 2021, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/emigrazione-italiana\\_%28Dizionario-di-Storia%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/emigrazione-italiana_%28Dizionario-di-Storia%29/).

to-depart back to the motherland. For this purpose, they started viewing colonial conquest as an answer to internal demographic problems: for instance, in 1890, Antonio Labriola saw West Libya as a region suitable for Italian settling programs, stating that the Kingdom «should not let its *demographic energies* disperse throughout the World», rather, it should direct them to a «new Italy» in Tripolitania.<sup>50</sup>

When he referred to Italian “demographic energies”, he was addressing neither Italian upper class nor the educated one; rather, he was alluding to landless farmers and unskilled labourers in general (especially from the South). In his view, these people had to be prevented from emigrating abroad and rerouted to the colonies, which would provide the job opportunities it was impossible to find on national soil. The Empire of labour had not been founded yet (nor the name had been coined), but it is very clear that the germ of such formula can be seen in Labriola’s words.<sup>51</sup>

As has been shown in the opening chapter, the first attempt to redirect the Italian in colony dates back to the first half of the 1890s, when Leopoldo Franchetti was appointed as superintendent for the rural colonization of Eritrea. His project had a strong public character: in his view, the state had to take charge of the rural facilities that would host Italian peasants, who had to be supported throughout the settling process. The project, however, never attracted many settlers: scholars observed that few Italian families took part in what looked like a preliminary experiment, but no further developments followed it. The meagre results achieved got also hampered by the first Italo-Ethiopian war, as Italy suffered heavy losses, leading to a halt of settler policies on Eritrean soil. Eventually, Governor Baratieri opened colonization only to farmers with enough capital to afford settling works. (Basically, he promoted colonization with private capital).<sup>52</sup>

A method similar to that Baratieri introduced in Eritrea informed also the Libyan colonization in the first fifteen or twenty years since its conquest. The government granted to «few entrepreneurs, speculators, and farmers» some fiscal support and other form of services without subsidizing any of the rural works, which had to be performed (and paid) by those who applied for land.<sup>53</sup> When the fascist seized power in 1922, they kept the same policy unaltered, meaning that there have not been major discontinuities between the liberal period and the early fascist one: the regime maintained the liberal legislation in force throughout the first half of the 1920s, when signs of a new approach towards demographic colonization started emerging.<sup>54</sup> In spring 1926, Mussolini’s visit to Libya and

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<sup>50</sup> Grange, “Émigration,” 345, 359-360.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 359-360.

<sup>52</sup> Negash, *Italian Colonialism*, 33-35.

<sup>53</sup> According to Labanca’s estimates, there must have been roughly 17,500 Italians living in Libya by the end on the 1910s, but I suspect that the majority was residing in urban environments. See: Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell’Espansione Coloniale Italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), 320-321, 373.

<sup>54</sup> Federico Cresti, *Non Desiderare la Terra d’Altri: La Colonizzazione Italiana in Libia* (Roma: Carocci, 2011), 74.



his calls for a quicker rural colonization ignited new debates on the possibility of directing national peasants to the North Shore. Quite interestingly, a rhetoric very similar to that expressed by Labriola almost three decades earlier arose again: Carl Ipsen notes that Giovanni Gentile, an important member of the Senate, «wondered for how long Italy would keep giving such a “magnificent wealth” [i.e. Italian emigrants] to other nations».<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the Italian politician thought that a *large population* such the Italian one «felt the need to expand outside its borders and colonize new land».<sup>56</sup> In essence, these passages reveal that the fascist inherited a conceptual frame already devised during the *Liberal* period. Moreover, Franchetti’s precedent shows that they could also rely on previous settling practices.

As it did in the Eritrean case three decades earlier, the Italian government supplanted private colonization with public one, but in this case the scale of works to be done was much larger. After an antiguerrilla campaign that violently displaced almost 100,000 Eastern-Libyans and killed at least two fifths of them, the regime had vast “pacified” land that could be employed for settling programmes.<sup>57</sup> For this purpose, it delegated both the Institute for the Colonization of Cyrenaica and the National Fascist Institute for Social Security, two state-funded organizations, to design and carry out the construction of rural villages for Italian peasants.<sup>58</sup> On this point, the post-1926 demographic colonization of Libya did not follow only Franchetti’s principles, it was also shaped after colonizing experiments Italy conducted on its own soil (precisely in the Pontine Marshes, not far from Rome, and in Sardinia). There, public institutions had been charged to reclaim swampy areas and build rural villages whose land had to be allotted to poor farmers, who in turn had to cultivate it and return the sum paid for the construction of their farmstead.<sup>59</sup>

The first villages were built in 1932-1933 but the results achieved in the following five years (in term of people relocated there) had been, *modest*, failing to create significant rural communities.<sup>60</sup> However, the 1938’s «intensive demographic colonization» promoted by governor Italo Balbo (that is, the *twenty thousand expeditions*) gave new impetus to Italy’s settling efforts and led to the arrival

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55 Ipsen, *Demografia Totalitaria*, 81.

56 *Ibid.*

57 Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, Brava Gente? Un Mito Duro a Morire* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005), 177-180; Pergher, *Mussolini’s Nation-Empire*, 45-46.

58 The respective Italian names are *Ente per la Colonizzazione della Cirenaica* (ECC) and *Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale* (INFPS). After some years, the former would start working in Tripolitania, changing its name in *Ente per la Colonizzazione della Tripolitania e Cirenaica*. See: Ipsen, *Demografia Totalitaria*, 171; Cresti, *Oasi d’Italianità*, 3-4; Cresti, *Non Desiderare*, 137; Pergher, *Mussolini’s Nation-Empire*, 87.

59 In this respect, Carl Ipsen also notes that the *EFC*, the organization that superintended the settling efforts in Fertilia (Sardinia) had the same ECC’s structure, which was founded sixteen months earlier. See: Ipsen, *Demografia Totalitaria*, 152-154, 169; Veracini, “Italian Colonialism,” 12, 16-21.

60 Ipsen, *Demografia Totalitaria*, 172.

of roughly 26,000 metropolitan peasants between 1938 and 1940.<sup>61</sup> Such endeavour was described as a way to accommodate Italian farmers' request for land they were not able to own on peninsular soil, and was expected to bring at least 100,000 Italian peasants on Libyan soil within five years. Both institutes would cover building costs and, in turn, settler families would work and "valorise" the land while paying back the money spent for their new homes.<sup>62</sup>

The regime made use of a highly centralized apparatus in order to oversee and carry out its settler colonial plans: public institutions were created and instructed to build villages, facilities, and farmsteads. Fascist authorities also selected those who were deemed fit for settler life in colony: applicants and their families had to meet certain requirements, which included clean criminal record, loyalty to the regime, and a large family fit for agricultural works.<sup>63</sup> State's surveillance would not end even on the Fourth Shore, where newly-relocated peasants had to abide by norms that restricted their liberties just as on the Peninsula: they had to perform agricultural works according to the colonial authorities' schedule, which meant that they could not cultivate the new land they had been granted as they pleased; moreover, they were forbidden from leaving their farmstead without a permit and could not interact with the local population in any way. Indeed, such forms of segregation were intended to bolster the results achieved by the army when it deported Eastern-Libyan communities and cleared the land for Mussolini's settler colonial dreams.<sup>64</sup>

With regards to the latter aspect, segregationist measures did not just pertain rural regions: according to Labanca's figures, in 1940 there were at least 120,000 Italians residing in the North Shore, entailing that the 26,000 farmers who arrived in 1938-1940 were just a fraction of the whole settlers' populace.<sup>65</sup> The rest of the national communities lived in cities such as Bengasi and Tripoli, which together hosted almost 40,000 nationals (14,000 and 26,000, respectively).<sup>66</sup> The high concentration of national citizens in urban areas led fascist urbanists to revise Libyan cities so that separation between the native and Italian communities could be attained. Interestingly though, Mia Fuller observed that the segregation had been achieved with mixed results and its implementation varied widely according to the region considered: the author avers that Tripoli's post-1935 urban plans seem to have included separation along ethnic lines, but its urban complexities did not allow

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<sup>61</sup> In 1938-39 and 1939-40 two twenty thousand expeditions were scheduled to take place, but, as the total number shows, none of them managed to relocate 20,000 nationals in Libya, the first one brought roughly 15,000 settlers on Libyan soil, the second one 11,000. See: Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 83, 95.

<sup>62</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 49, 83, 88; Cresti, *Non Desiderare*, 160.

<sup>63</sup> One of the most important included the regime's preference for large family units. Moreover, each member had to have a clean criminal record and have a party membership (even though Pergher noted that there was some room for exceptions). See: Cresti, *Non Sesiderare*, 179-181; Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 122-124, 127.

<sup>64</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 127.

<sup>65</sup> If one considers also peasant who were already living in Libya when the two expeditions took place, the rural population should not have represented more than a third of the total. See: Labanca, "Nelle Colonie," 199.

<sup>66</sup> Labanca, *Oltremare*, 377.

any major addition to be implemented. On the other hand, when talking about Cyrenaica, the author quotes a source suggesting that the regime managed to handle cities' local populace more effectively: the said document revealed that Bengasi's white neighbours bore no sign of Arabic-Libyan presence. Indeed, this can be explained by looking at Italy's military campaigns in East Libya, which got hit more heavily than Tripolitania; yet, as will be shown below, settlers' texts highlight that reality was far more nuanced than the one depicted in official records.<sup>67</sup>

The demographic colonization of Libya (at least the public one) almost coincided with the foundation of the Empire, following Italy's annexation of Ethiopia to its East African domains. In the wake of Ethiopia's defeat, fascist authorities fantasized about directing between «two [to] six million» Italians there: they would have formed the first national communities living on overseas territories.<sup>68</sup> Despite the fact that such ends have never been accomplished, data show that fascist authorities achieved significant results in a very short period of time: as Carl Ipsen observed, the first wave of national workers migrating to AOI were concurrent with the Italo-Ethiopian war itself, as they followed the army through newly conquered lands. Official sources highlight an *intense movement* from October 1935 which kept increasing until 1937, when at least 124,000 labourers were living and working throughout AOI.<sup>69</sup> Data also show that if one considers the whole 1935-1940 period, the total figure slightly exceeded 200,000.<sup>70</sup>

Settler colonialism in AOI, however, developed quite differently from the Libyan one: while the latter had been mainly rural (at least in the second half of the 1930s), the former's agricultural element was rather marginal: the majority of settlers living and working in the Horn of Africa resided in cities.<sup>71</sup> In this respect, Asmara's demographic growth during the imperial period may give an idea of the predominant urban character of Italy's settler colonialism in AOI: according to Tekeste Negash's estimates, in 1931 there were roughly 4,000 Italians residing in the whole Eritrean colony; after only eight years, there were almost 75,000 throughout the region, 50,000 of whom resided in the colony's capital only. Asmara, however, was not the only city experiencing such a steep demographic surge: the strong urbanism that characterised settler colonialism in AOI is also reflected by Addis Ababa, whose metropolitan populace grew from 1,500 in 1937 to almost 40,000 in 1940.<sup>72</sup>

For this reason, colonial officials managed the East African population differently from the Libyan one: the pronounced presence of Italian citizens in AOI cities led party officials to act differently to control the natives and get their separation from Italian quarters: one way to keep

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<sup>67</sup> Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 160-162.

<sup>68</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 245.

<sup>69</sup> Ipsen, *Demografia Totalitaria*, 176.

<sup>70</sup> Ertola, "White Slaves," 553.

<sup>71</sup> Veracini, "Italian Colonialism," 15.

<sup>72</sup> Negash, *Italian Colonialism*, 53; Ertola, "The Italian Fascist," 265, 273.

communities separate was segregation along racial lines. On this point, major information is provided by urban historians who noted that, despite having completed hardly any project, Italian authorities were creating segregated neighbourhoods for metropolitan communities: for example, we know that in Addis Abeba at least 10.000 local dwellers were removed from their homes in 1937 in order to make space for Italian houses, and they would become 20,000 after two years. Further evictions occurred after the 1937's attack on Rodolfo Graziani, the then AOI's viceroy; the massacres that followed led to the killing of hundreds of local inhabitants, whose properties got requisitioned by the colonial state.<sup>73</sup> In a similar fashion, Gondar (Northern Ethiopia) underwent a deep re-designing process (including the drafting of at least five urban plans in just three years), culminating in the 1938's urban project, consisting in *broad greenbelts* for the creation of separated quarters for local African inhabitants and Italians. In essence, projects envisaged a "city racially separated" that would accommodate at least 20,000 national citizens, construction works started in late 1938 and although it is not clear whether the whole plan has been completed or not, Italian works were meant to create a separate quarters in accordance with 1937's fascist racial laws.<sup>74</sup>

The social implications of these aspects of Italian settler colonialism (that is, segregationist practices and labour market for national citizens) will be the object of study of the ensuing chapter. With regards to the intensive rural colonization of Libya, this study will draw from Giacomo Cason's memoir: he was one of the *Ventimila* (the twenty thousand) who applied for land in Libya, moved there, and stayed – quite fascinatingly – until the end of the 50s. His work will be supported by the analysis of additional private records collected in Labanca's anthology *Posti al Sole* and some passages from Infantolino's work on the North Shore. On the other hand, Italian East Africa will be observed from the point of view of a lorry driver who resided both in Ethiopia and Eritrea from the whole duration of the colonial rule (1936-1941); while Somalia will be analysed through the eyes of Edoardo Costantini, a skilled employee who worked in the water management sector from 1934 to 1936.

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<sup>73</sup> Shimelis Bonsa Gulema, "Urbanism: History, Legacy, and Memory of the Italian Occupation in Addis Ababa (1936-1941)," in *The Horn of Africa and Italy: Colonial, Postcolonial and Transnational Cultural Encounters*, ed. Simone Brioni, Shimelis Bonsa Gulema (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 121-123.

<sup>74</sup> David Rifkind, "Gondar: Architecture and Urbanism for Italy's Fascist Empire," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70, no. 4 (December 2011): 502-508.

## CHAPTER 4

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### SETTLER COLONIAL SOCIETY THROUGH THE EYES OF ITALIAN SETTLERS

This chapter will be devoted to the analysis of primary source material and will attempt to present, so to speak, a cross-section of the Italian society in the Horn of Africa and Libya. The following survey rests on private documents left by those Italian workers who migrated there and reflects on some aspects of their colonial experiences, namely the reasons leading them to relocate in colony (and how the regime encouraged them to do so) as well as the interactions they had with the locals. For this purpose, it will be divided in two sections, each one dealing with a specific Italian dominion. The first paragraph will focus on Italian East Africa and will be informed by two collections of letters: one displays a selection of missives Nicola Gattari, a lorry driver who worked both in Eritrea and Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941, sent to his wife Ida; the other contains the epistolary exchange between Edoardo Costantini (who worked in Somalia) and his relatives between 1934 and 1936. Besides, this *corpus* will be complemented by additional sources clarifying aspects that have been neglected or just briefly mentioned in the main ones. Conversely, the section on Libya will be based on a plurality of voices: those Domenico Infantolino collected in his *Patria di Parole*, the diary of Giacomo Cason, a settler who took part in the *Twenty thousand Expedition*, managing to keep his farmstead until the end of the 1950s, and those included in Labanca's *Posti al Sole*.<sup>75</sup>

#### 4.1. Italian Settlements and communities in Italian East Africa

As we have seen, the so-called “Second Italo-Ethiopian War” broke in the end of 1935, it lasted few months (even though guerrilla episodes kept threatening Italian control for the years to come) and culminated in the foundation of the short-lived Italian Empire, emphatically proclaimed by Mussolini on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1936. Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian sovereign, had any choice but flee the country and the administration of his land transitioned to the Italian, who incorporated it to the two possessions they had been ruling in the bordering regions: Somalia and Eritrea. The macro-dominion that resulted took the name of *Africa Orientale Italiana* (viz., Italian East Africa).<sup>76</sup>

The Ethiopian venture was preceded (and, to be fair, followed) by and intense propagandistic activity aiming at popularizing the colonial campaigns and introducing the Italian to the benefits the

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<sup>75</sup> All the documents employed are part of edited collections, meaning that they have been selected from a wider *corpus* and furnished with introductory chapters treating analytical difficulties, study methodologies, the historical context in which the writers (or tellers) lived, and sometimes analyses of the major trends that can be found in the documentation.

<sup>76</sup> “Italia,” Enciclopedia on line, Treccani, accessed July 26, 2021; “Ḥāyḷa Sellāsīyē I Negus d’Etiopia,” Enciclopedia on line, Treccani, accessed July 26, 2021; Labanca, *Oltremare*, 384-385.

Nation could accrue from the conquest of new African land. Such endeavour involved many national agencies and even Mussolini himself had a central role in it: speeches broadcast on radio, newsreels, journals, illustrations, music and films gave mass appeal to the East African colonial enterprise which, conversely, strongly entered in Italians' everyday life.<sup>77</sup>

As has been shown above, the regime attempted to present the strive for colonies as a national strategy to prevent people to migrate abroad, an issue that haunted Italian governments in previous periods as well. For this purpose, Italy had to adopt its own way to colonialism: the regime described the territories overseas as part of demographic project involving large number of national citizens; in fascist officials' view, the Italian needed their *place in the sun*, that is, lands where they could direct to in search for work. As Labanca noted, this message begun to strongly resonate with peninsular nationals in the months preceding the war and it certainly grew louder after thousands of people (including soldiers) embarked on such endeavour.<sup>78</sup>

As a result, a significant number of families had their offspring fighting against Ethiopian forces, many others had a relative working in one of the many construction sites in East Africa (on this point, it is very important to note that although the war affected only Ethiopia, the demographic project concerned all the possessions in East Africa, including Eritrea and Somalia). They kept in contact with the ones in colony through letters, contributing to the circulation of news, stories and experiences of those far from home among their fellow countrymen. Indeed, that is the case of both Nicola Gattari and Edoardo Costantini, who went to Ethiopia-Eritrea and Somalia respectively in the years comprised between 1934 and 1941.

The letters both of them wrote to their families in Italy enable us to reconstruct their lives and some of the reasons that caused them to migrate in AOI; in particular, it is interesting to note that a careful scrutiny of their writings unveils many valuable details on the lives the two men had spent in Italy before their venture on colonial soil. On this regard, it is the abundance of information on the economic situation each of them endured which strikes the researcher's eye: data of this kind can be helpful in the assessment of the extent to which the regime's propaganda appealed to Italian families.

As their records show, both Costantini and Gattari belonged to lower classes and each one of them lived in regions with an underdeveloped secondary sector and a limited job market: the former was born and raised in Ponte nelle Alpi, at that time a small rural village in the north of Veneto which suffered high poverty and unemployment rates. In this respect, it is very useful to note what Leonilde, Edoardo's older sister, repeatedly said on the local state of affairs throughout the period of his sojourn in Somalia:

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<sup>77</sup> Labanca, *Oltremare*, 248-250.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 372-373.

The situation here is always the same, everyone [is] unemployed and [everyone is] waiting for an improvement.<sup>79</sup>

Other people who lived there echoed her statement: Rina Pison, whose father relocated in Libya in 1939, recounted that everyone always owed money to some creditor and run into new debts every time they paid the old ones back.<sup>80</sup> Although the Costantinis did not seem to have suffered conditions as hard as those of their neighbours, they still felt compelled to sort out some strategies to improve their position: emigrating and looking for profitable positions outside their small village seemed to them the most suitable way to increase their incomes. Thus, Edoardo moved for some time in Turin and even attempted to access the United States in the mid-1920s.<sup>81</sup> Although he failed to get his application accepted, his brief migrating history shows that he was familiar with working far from home and that, as Gattari's records will prove further, migration was a traditional way the Italian resorted to whenever they needed to deal with economic issues.<sup>82</sup>

Despite not having been able to enter the US border, he managed to find a job in the surroundings of his birthplace nevertheless: the SADE, a local private power company, hired him as a technician. In the mid-30s, the said firm was commissioned by the Somali colonial government to do some hydro-topographical researches on the *Uebi Scebeli*, a river not far from some Italian agricultural concessions, and he was offered a position as the assistant of Eng. De Marco, a topographer he had already been in contact with in Belluno, a city close to Ponte nelle Alpi. As Giovanni Dore observes, the high remuneration (1.300 liras per month) he was offered led him to accept the role and reach De Marco in Merca, South of Mogadishu.<sup>83</sup>

Although Nicola Gattari's personal history was not much different from Edoardo's, some of its aspects are even more illustrative of the connection between Italy's scramble for African colonies and the migratory issues that affected the national population. Born in Tolentino (Marche) in 1900, Gattari had already migrated for work purposes twice when he resolved to venture in AOI: first he moved to Argentina in the 1920s (where he also met his future wife Ida, who, incidentally, came from Piedmont, the region where he moved to after his sojourn in South America); secondly, at the beginning of the following decade he spent some months in France, where he worked as a manual

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<sup>79</sup> Dore, Larese, Salomon, *Un Bellunese*, 139.

<sup>80</sup> Larese, Salomon, "Percorsi Migratori," 98-99.

<sup>81</sup> Giovanni Dore, "«Vi dirò qualcosa di questa gente nera», un bellunese in Somalia (1934-1936)," in *Un Bellunese in Somalia: Lettere di Edoardo Costantini alla Famiglia (1934-1936)*, ed. Giovanni Larese, Giovanni Dore, Paola Salomon (Vicenza: ISBREC, 2001), 7-8.

<sup>82</sup> Paola Corti, "L'Emigrazione Temporanea in Europa, in Africa e nel Levante, in *Storia dell'Emigrazione Italiana, I. Partenze*, ed. Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, Emilio Franzina (Roma: Donzelli, 2009), 213-236.

<sup>83</sup> Dore, "Vi Dirò", 7-8.

labourer.<sup>84</sup> Orta, the Piedmontese town her wife came from, appears to have had an underdeveloped economy just as the one in Ponte nelle Alpi; for this reason, he decided to join the *Milizia Volontaria* and left for AOI.<sup>85</sup> He did so because he planned to get a leave permit after having concluded the national service and find a civil position there:

I departed from Orta because there was not much work...my savings were bound to end [soon]...I [went] to Africa for working in the attempt to recover what I have lost.<sup>86</sup>

In this passage, Gattari was referring to a grocery store he run in Orta and had to sell off because it was not as remunerative as expected; if we add that Orta's authorities were pressing his wife to pay some back taxes, it becomes clear that Gattari resorted to migration as a strategy he had previous experience with, hoping to make that fortune the regime and others were talking about.<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, neither Gattari nor Costantini were exceptional cases. Whether compelled by economic difficulties or by the desire of climbing the social ladder, many Italian migrants chose to relocate in the recently founded empire hoping to make a better life for themselves and their families at home. As can be seen in some of the letters they sent home (and, in Costantini's case, also the ones written by his relatives), both Gattari and the Costantinis frequently provided some brief macroscopic analyses regarding the environment in which they were living as well as the people who joined them in the African venture. On this regard, only few weeks after his landing on colonial soil, Gattari wrote a letter to his wife resolutely stating that:

Here, we all march towards the same end, because most of us are married.<sup>88</sup>

From his standpoint, the fact that the majority of the people joining the *milizia volontaria* had a wife meant that their families were reliant on the money they, the "husbands", earned and remitted at home. In a similar fashion, the interviews Irma Taddia collected in her *La Memoria dell'Impero*

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<sup>84</sup> Sergio Luzzatto, *La Strada per Addis Abeba: Lettere di un Camionista dall'Impero* (Torino: Paravia Scriptorium, 2000), 9-10.

<sup>85</sup> The so-called *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (Voluntary Militia for National security), was a fascist paramilitary organ with tasks spanning from policing to military ones. See: "Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale," *Dizionario di Storia* (2010), Treccani, accessed August 8, 2021, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/milizia-volontaria-per-la-sicurezza-nazionale\\_%28Dizionario-di-Storia%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/milizia-volontaria-per-la-sicurezza-nazionale_%28Dizionario-di-Storia%29/).

<sup>86</sup> Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 36.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10, 14, 62.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.



appear to substantiate the said point of view.<sup>89</sup> When questioned on his work period in AOI, E.P. recounted that «we had to save money for families at home, otherwise what was working in East Africa meant for? ».<sup>90</sup> Based on the latter's rhetorical question, it is clear that in his opinion East Africa was specifically created for people who wanted to work there, implying that any other purpose was secondary.

Overall, Italian migrant labourers seems to have espoused the regime's narrative on both the need for a *place in the sun* and an *empire of labour* and responded accordingly. The relationship between migration and imperialism has been quite effectively summarized by Costantini himself:

America is now in Somalia, there are many private citizens working and trading, they are going to be lords [*signori*] soon.<sup>91</sup>

The American continent had always been the place Italians headed to for work, but now they could move to Italy's dominions instead, as economic conditions in colony were as advantageous as those in the Americas. Such views must have been rather popular in Ponte nelle Alpi and the whole Belluno province as well: in June 1935, few months before the Italo-Ethiopian war outbreak, Edoardo's mother wrote him that almost four hundred workers left the province and moved to Eritrea, a situation which seems to further intensify following Ethiopia's annexation to Italy's East African dominions.<sup>92</sup> As Leonilde wrote to her brother:

Here everyone talks about going to Africa: even the most indifferent, the most fearful, the most suspicious, those who have always been afraid of everything and inclined to criticise everything now change their mind and want to enjoy the fruits others have fought for.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> The work contains the oral testimonies of people who were born and lived in East Emilia-Romagna in general and the Ravenna province in particular. It is important to keep in mind that no full name is provided by Taddia, she display first letters only.

<sup>90</sup> Irma Taddia, *Memorie dell'Impero: Autobiografie d'Africa Orientale* (Manduria: Piero Lacaita Editore, 1988), 82.

<sup>91</sup> Dore, Larese, Salomon, *Un Bellunese*, 202.

<sup>92</sup> To be fair, this was not the only information about workers departing for colonies Edoardo received from his relatives: the letters the latter sent him abound with information about group of people or single countrymen who ventured in Italy's colonies overseas in search for work. See: Dore, Larese, Salomon, *Un Bellunese*, 186.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

In her view, the Duce finally managed to give that «place in the sun we need[ed] to live», both reiterating the regime mottos and observing that they resonated with an increasing number of people.<sup>94</sup>

In summary, economic interests were among the most common reasons that lead Italian nationals to try their luck in AOI. They usually sought to recover some forms of economic loss as well as to ameliorate their life in general. Indeed, some of them did manage to achieve their objectives, including Costantini himself: even though SADE did not always pay on time and Edoardo had to wait some months before getting his salary, eventually the firm met its obligations and gave him the whole due sum. As his family wrote him, they managed to get rid of some debts and pay some additional taxes with the money he forwarded home, and many more were still left for him when he would return.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, many others managed to save remarkable amount of money and went back home with a higher status: R.G. brought back such a sum that his parents built a new house with slightly less than a half of the total. In a few words, among those who went in AOI in search for a rewarding job, some have been really successful and, once repatriated, recovered almost completely from their previous poor conditions.<sup>96</sup>

However, if it is true that the Italian colonial world proved to be highly remunerative for some of those who relocated there; at the same time, a fair number of workers had a far less positive experience in AOI and suffered poverty and unemployment just as they did in the peninsula, leading to the creation of a sizeable class of poor whites that concerned both the colonial and metropolitan authorities, including Mussolini himself.<sup>97</sup>

In this respect, Gattari's five-year experience can be taken as a good case exemplifying the harsh conditions Italian workers had to face. As we have seen, he landed in East Africa as a member of the *Milizia Volontaria*, but this was just the first stage of a broader plan he designed to amass what he termed a «small pile», a recurring theme throughout his letters.<sup>98</sup> As his correspondence shows, his last objective was to complete the six-month mandatory service and start wearing civilian clothes in colony, which would have meant the eligibility for an occupation in one of the many private companies operating there. At the beginning, Gattari succeeded: in June 1937, after roughly seven months since his arrival, not only did he manage to get demobilised; he also found a job as a lorry driver for a firm working in the transports sector. In a few weeks, he was already in service on the

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>95</sup> Dore, Larese, Salomon, *Un Bellunese*, 210, 235.

<sup>96</sup> Irma Taddia, *Memorie*, 110.

<sup>97</sup> Barbara Sòrgoni, *Parole e Corpi: Antropologia, Discorso Giuridico e Politiche Sessuali Interrazziali nella Colonia Eritrea (1890-1941)* (Napoli: Liguori, 1998), 186.

<sup>98</sup> Most of Gattari's missives are centred around the tropes of money and the incapability to earn them, they also convey a general sense of despair as his ultimate aim was to give a better life to his family and an education for his three children but he just could not find a good offer. See: Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 66, 124.

road connecting Asmara and Gondar (Eritrea and Ethiopia, respectively), where he carried the raw materials needed for its construction.<sup>99</sup> Despite the fact that the colonial government had stepped in the colonial labour market and decreased drivers' salary by almost a third, he was still confident that would have made a fortune and, according to his prospects, the total figure of his monthly wage was still incredibly high.<sup>100</sup>

High hopes notwithstanding, Gattari soon had to deal with a very different truth: his initial expectations of getting «3,000, 3,500 [liras] per month...in the imperial capital even 5,000...100,000 in one year» got wrecked after few weeks following his hiring.<sup>101</sup> In the last days of July, Gattari wrote to her wife that the company was not paying any of its employees and that it owed him at least 12,000 liras (seemingly, some of his colleagues were waiting for even more). For this reason, he had to give up the position without getting any of the arrears and begun looking for a new one somewhere else.<sup>102</sup> From that moment on, none of the works he changed proved permanent or well-paid and he started living in poverty, with low incomes – if any at all – and at times even unemployed. In response to such a discouraging situation, Gattari started performing daily – and cheap – assignments, resulting in the gradual decline of his economic resources. Quite interestingly, he never hid his poor condition to his wife, to whom he told that sometimes he could not procure even basic commodities such as a decent apparel or complete meals:

I have not changed clothes for more than a month...I do not have any [clothes] to change.<sup>103</sup>

To which he also added that:

if you will ever ask somebody how much [money] one needs...in Addis Ababa, you would hear that at least 20 to 25 liras a day are required. I spend 10 or, at worst, 12 ...I can walk for kilometres [in search] for a cheap place and I do not care whether it is opulent or not, has the radio or not, [I do not feel embarrassed] if there is a waiter instead of a waitress, the only food I need is the one that enables me to stand on foot.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> It is worth mentioning that the lorry he drove was not a company's property, he personally purchased it with the money he borrowed from home and from the network he had in Africa. Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 57, 79-83.

<sup>100</sup> Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 10, 83.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-89.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

To sum up, despite a promising start, Gattari's stay in colony did not prove lucrative. The remittances he sent home have never been significant as the ones he had anticipated, because not only was his salary very low, he also needed part of it to get by in colony. (In this respect, it is worth noting that his wife had to buy food supplies on credit and also felt the need to find a job as housekeeper in order to take care of their three children).<sup>105</sup>

Far from depicting an isolated case, the information Gattari provided in his letters unveils crucial aspects of the *Empire of Labour* and helps the researcher to connect single personal stories with macro-narratives on its functioning in the second half of the 1930s: precisely, Gattari's reports verify academics' analyses on the partially-defective character of the colonial job market the fascist sought to open in the Horn of Africa. Italian workers did not always receive a salary for their services and, at worst, had been unable to find an occupation in the first place. As a result of such flawed policies, they might incur in low standards of living and beggary: Emanuele Ertola mentions a British source (written in 1939) that reveals the presence of 2,000 or 3,000 *Italians without work* in Addis Ababa, some of whom were *begging in the streets* (according to Luzzatto, the figure was two-fold higher).<sup>106</sup> In this respect, both Gattari and, to a much lesser extent, Costantini confirm the beforementioned researchers' findings: the former depicts 1937's Asmara in a very grim tone, highlighting the economic stagnation that affected the city and its Italian population:

It is a disaster; in Asmara there are more than 10,000 people unemployed, all works are on hold; when I came here the first time, I had found a job, now [there is] none.<sup>107</sup>

True, the city's unemployment rates are still very difficult to assess and it is not clear whether Gattari over-estimated or minimized the actual figures; nonetheless, the information is still very valuable because it reveals the presence of a large – and visible – group of poor whites living there.

In Gattari's view, the said lack of opportunities was further exacerbated by the rainy season that hampered urban and suburban works (including the transports' sector) in that year:

we only hear about unemployment; this firm does not pay; neither does that; so many parked lorries, everything [is] paralysed...[there are] very few commodities' transports, not to mention road constructions'.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 89, 146-147.

<sup>106</sup> Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 25. Ertola, "White Slaves," 560.

<sup>107</sup> Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 94.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

However, it would be inaccurate to state that weather was the only reason behind poor whites' economic insecurity, because – as Gattari himself would have realized in the following years – unemployment was a generalized phenomenon whose causes were structural: there is reason to believe that Costantini may have realized it, even though he did not elaborate on it at length:

[Here, in Somalia] workforce exceeds the demand...in Mogadishu there are more than two hundred skilled workers waiting for a position.<sup>109</sup>

The colonial job market incapability to accommodate a mounting number of Italian migrants can be explained by looking at national companies' behaviour towards their Italian employees: theoretically, they had to grant higher salaries than those they had to pay in Italy. Yet, not only did they frequently ignore such norm; they also neglected national workers' welfare in general, letting the latter living in poverty: Ertola notes that a fair share of metropolitan workers was discontent «with low wages, mistreatment, and exploitation».<sup>110</sup> This – combined with bad food and poor lodgings – resulted in the growth of jobless Italians “wandering” in the cities in search of even the most miserable job and living in close contact with the native population. On this point, what S.G. recounts on his sojourn in Somalia is rather enlightening: after having worked as a “militarized labourer” in what seems to be a sort of garage, he spent:

some months without job. In the meantime, the police summoned me, as Italians were not allowed to be unemployed...[it was] a matter of national pride.<sup>111</sup>

S.G. also stated that, from the authorities' standpoint, the Italian had to play a *role model* for the colonized population, suggesting that Italian settlers had to instil a sense of deference and obedience into the colonial subjects and they had to do so by looking superior, an objective that could not be attained if they lived in poverty or, even worse, as beggars.<sup>112</sup>

As can be seen, S.G. testimony is extremely useful as it highlights another layer of the Italian society the regime attempted to establish in AOI: namely, the relationship between the nationals and the natives. In the previous chapter it has been noted that the regime viewed its East African possessions as land to be populated by national-metropolitan citizens, an endeavour that implied the

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<sup>109</sup> Dore, Larese, Salomon, *Un Bellunese*, 290.

<sup>110</sup> Ertola, “White Slaves,” 556-557; Labanca, *Oltremare*, 410.

<sup>111</sup> Taddia, *Memorie*, 89.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

exclusion of both the locals and mixed-race people from the white-society-to-be.<sup>113</sup> For this purpose, the foundation of the Empire coincided with the drafting of stricter laws regulating interactions between the two groups. They were prohibited from sitting close to each other on public transport, living in quarters that were meant for the other community and, more broadly, to minimize any form of interaction; the final objective was to stress the higher status of the Italian and emphasize their superiority in the Africans' eyes.<sup>114</sup>

However, the passages above present a very different situation. The colonial authorities struggled to keep track of all the national citizens residing in AOI, and an increasing number of poor whites begun crowding urban streets. Their presence was particularly worrying for the administration because, as Barbara Sòrgoni observes, destitute Italians tended to get in contact with the natives more easily and give a negative image of the white settler.<sup>115</sup> This trajectory was made even clearer in suburban environments such as construction sites where, at least hypothetically, only Italian workforce should have been hired, but in fact was flanked by the African one as well.<sup>116</sup> There, we know that Italian labourers shared the very same conditions with the colonized, sleeping on the ground in tents or wooden shuts, suffering for bad food and poor hygiene: on this point, Antonio Grassi described his working life as a *punishment* (condanna) and many others echoed his views.<sup>117</sup>

We lived really badly...not only the black, but us as well. We were frequently ill...because we ate dirty food.<sup>118</sup>

As a consequence, the line between settler-colonizers and colonized blurred to such an extent that rumours of “white slavery” reached both the metropolitan and colonial officials. To put it simply, the East African sometimes were unable to see the difference between their condition and that of the white newcomers.<sup>119</sup>

Although it is not completely possible to assess the degree to which the two groups mingled and interacted with each other, it is true indeed that some nationals who worked on colonial infrastructures reported that they had some form of communication with their African counterpart:

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<sup>113</sup> Sòrgoni, *Parole e Corpi*, 209-210.

<sup>114</sup> Labanca, *Oltremare*, 355; Sòrgoni, *Parole e Corpi*, 153-154.

<sup>115</sup> Sòrgoni, *Parole e Corpi*, 153-155, 186.

<sup>116</sup> Ertola reveals that in summer 1937 the Africans working on road were the 40,5% of the total workforce. See: Ertola, “White Slaves,” 554.

<sup>117</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, 191; Taddia, *Memoria*, 82.

<sup>118</sup> Taddia, *Memoria*, 122.

<sup>119</sup> Ertola, “White Slaves,” 551.

Even though they were paid less than us, the “indigenous” labourers were treated well by the Italians...Italian workers sympathised with them, or at least did not mistreated them...We worked in close contact with them until [the war].<sup>120</sup>

Similar remarks were also made by A.P. who worked on the road connecting Asmara and its airport:

we worked all together, we did not have a bad relationship with the African. They were very kind, good people.<sup>121</sup>

It is not clear if the two narrators wanted to downplay the violence inflicted to Africans (which has been frequent) and defend themselves before Taddia, nonetheless, it is clear from their testimonies that they did spent time close to the Eastern African people.<sup>122</sup>

Besides copresence of Italians and Africans in colony, another problem the regime authorities sought to manage was that of co-habitation of the two, whose outcomes, from the government standpoint, could be even more dangerous: Italian East Africa was a predominantly male territory and, as one might expect, the strong unbalance between the two sexes could have hampered the demographic project, whose outcomes depended on the reproduction of the white Italian society in the Horn of Africa.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, a side effect of a lopsided Italian women-men ratio led to different forms of interracial unions involving chiefly the Italian male component and the local women as well as the birth of an increasing number of mixed-raced children.<sup>124</sup>

As a consequence, from the 1936 on, the fascist government intervened pervasively on the subject, not allowing the metropolitan citizen to recognise their mixed-raced offspring, proscribing interracial marriage as well as what has been termed *madamato*, that is, concubinage between a metropolitan and native citizen.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Taddia, *Memoria*, 111.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>122</sup> A.P. even recounted that a group of Italians was present at a black man's funeral. See note 120.

<sup>123</sup> Indeed, as Labanca himself noted, Italian East Africa hosted a fair number of women, probably more than other European colonies in Africa (this is clearly due to its Demographic purposes); yet, their share was still low if compared to men's: in 1920s, in Eritrea it was the 30% and in Somalia it dropped to 10%. See: Labanca, “Italiani d’Africa,” 206.

<sup>124</sup> This is not to say that the opposite did not occur. Barbara Sòrgoni holds that there had been episodes of promiscuity between Italian women and African males, but the sources I gathered do not include much information on the topic. To be fair, at the present stage of research, much of the documentation has been written or told by Italian men. See: Sòrgoni, *Parole e Corpi*, 215.

<sup>125</sup> With regards to children of mixed-raced ancestry, they would be considered colonial subject and inherited the status of their native parent. See: Sòrgoni, *Parole e Corpi*, 156, 233-238; “Madamato,” Vocabolario on line, Treccani, accessed July 29, 2021, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/madamato>.

Given the totalitarian character of the regime, legislation was complemented by a mounting surveillance apparatus which, apparently, was not effective enough in hampering such phenomena, which kept being very common throughout the imperial period.<sup>126</sup> As S.G.'s testimony reveals, the Italian frequently managed to elude police controls:

In Mogadishu, most of the Italians had not a wife and had a so-called “madama”, a native woman...cohabiting [with them]. I had one for the whole time I have spent there without any trouble, because she passed for a housekeeper and no one could check.<sup>127</sup>

Most interestingly, the interviewee recounts that he even had a daughter from a Somali woman, who, as the colonial law prescribed, could not be recognized. It is not clear what has become of her, as S.G.'s reconstruction is piecemeal and fragmentary: it seems that he failed to recognise her until 1940, when he left her in a convent school before repatriating.<sup>128</sup>

As can be seen, segregationist policies, which were expected to facilitate the establishment of Italian settlements, failed to fully separate metropolitan citizens and the native population and their partial enforcement (as well as the poor condition of some national settlers) resulted in secret promiscuity of the two communities. Thus, the creation of an Italian settler society in AOI got constantly hampered because, in Prince Amedeo's words: «considering the actual building situation, it is *utopian* to obtain a real separation between Italians and indigenous people».<sup>129</sup>

Compresence and unions between the two groups, however, should not mislead the researcher: the Italian were not race-blind, as racial – and racist – thinking was a constant part of everyday life in both Italy and colony.<sup>130</sup> Neither interracial unions meant that there was no uneven power exertion within the couple: as a thirteen-years-old *madama*'s case shows, the Italian felt entitled to perform forms of violence even on young women and girls.<sup>131</sup> Labanca suggests in his introduction to *Posti al Sole* that encounters between poor Italians and the native population took place because the former

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<sup>126</sup> Sòrgoni, *Parole e Corpi*, 184, 237.

<sup>127</sup> The way the Italian tense was framed does not allow to understand whether the majority of them were bachelors or they were married but their wife did not follow them in AOI. In any case, there is reason to believe that both the options were possible, and the first one does not necessarily exclude the latter. Taddia, *Memoria*, 90.

<sup>128</sup> Testimonies on concubinage were made by V.B. as well and substantiate S.G.'s assumption on its frequency between Italian settlers and natives (the former told that he lived with a thirteen-years-old Ethiopian girl). See: Taddia, *Memoria*, 90-91, 98.

<sup>129</sup> Sòrgoni, *Parole*, 186.

<sup>130</sup> Gianluca Gabrielli, “Cataloghi Visivi della Pedagogia dell'Alterità: le Tavole delle “Razze” nella Scuola Italiana tra Otto e Novecento,” in *Quel che Resta dell'Impero: la Cultura Coloniale degli Italiani*, ed. Valeria Deplano e Alessandro Pes (Milano – Udine: Mimesis, 2014), 81-105.

<sup>131</sup> See note 127.



could sympathise with the harsh working conditions the latter shared with them.<sup>132</sup> Yet I do not think that his position is convincingly substantiated by the documents displayed in his anthology. His assumption, however, might be corroborated by some information contained in Costantini's letters: while recounting some of the works he was performing, he started describing Somali workers in a rather derogatory tone and as bad workers who could only understand beatings and shouts, while looking at their master with *eyes begging for pardon*.<sup>133</sup> In his view, they were unfit for those labours because they were physically and mentally inferior to him (and his white colleagues).<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Unno Bellagamba, who fought in the Italo-Ethiopian war and then found a job as «employee» in AOI, wrote about his encounters with Somali people and noted that they had submissive nature and performed every task they were told to do, even though they were frequently unable to carry out manual works, because they were used to live in the forest and did not know any work other than animal farming.<sup>135</sup>

In this light, it is possible to conclude that Costantini and Bellagamba managed to behave in that way because they were skilled workers clearly distinguishable from their African subordinates. To put it simply, their cases might confirm Labanca's – and Ertola's – assumptions according to which poor whites had contacts with the local because they shared with them the same low social status. Thus, racist thought may have not been enough to prevent the poorest classes from having different degrees of bond with the people they were supposed to overrule. This was due to the fact that the Empire of Labour failed to be remunerative for some of them and was characterized by a relevant unemployment rate, as companies working in AOI could not accommodate the needs of all their metropolitan employees.

Colonial legislation provided for punishments and repatriation in case of infractions, but there were also some positive stimuli for the creation of Italian family units in Africa: fascist officials thought about introducing Italian women or at least those whose husbands were working there.<sup>136</sup> Such plan seems to have had a certain appeal and, according to a letter Gattari sent to his wife in January 1939, some familial reunions did take place:

Almost all the married men have been reached by their wives and children; could it be the same for me? ... we will seriously talk about that later. What about Noemi?

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<sup>132</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, XXX.

<sup>133</sup> Dore, Larese, Salomon, *Un Bellunese*, 159.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-159, 191-192.

<sup>135</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, 115.

<sup>136</sup> Sörgoni, *Parole e Corpi*, 229-230; Labanca, *Oltremare*, 400.

What would Noemi say about coming as well?...I would advise her to come; 600 or 700 liras a month would be good for her.<sup>137</sup>

Gattari's words are really interesting, as he kept having faith in the Empire despite all the suffering he had felt for his miserable life there: his letters are imbued with bitter feelings for the lack of work, the want of money, the never-fulfilled hope of earning a "pile", and yet he never appears to doubt the remunerability of Italy's East African dominions. In his words, «I firmly believe that if our children will ever want...a good position...this will be the place for them... and whoever hopes to get a good job». <sup>138</sup> After only three weeks, Gattari returned on the subject:

Why are you so attached to Orta and Borgomanero? [is it] Noemi [?] If so, I will do everything I can not to separate you two...As far as I am concerned, nothing bounds me to Italy.<sup>139</sup>

Gattari did not made a precise assessment of the number of wives (and women in general) reaching the Horn of Africa; neither did he explain whether families reunited in accordance with fascist policies or in pursue of personal interests. If we take his experience as a representative example of Italian settlers' life in AOI, we might conclude that their choices were not completely informed by fascist precepts and hoped that his family would come in Africa because it offered more opportunities than Italy.<sup>140</sup> Interestingly though, despite the absence of compliance with fascist ideals (which, we have seen, focused on the need to create a white society by introducing Italian women), settlers' were still supporting fascist plans, even though with different ends in mind.

However, Gattari would never see his family again: Ida never resolved to relocate in AOI and he never returned home from his African venture. He died in Ethiopia during the war years, presumably, falling victim of a British raid while working for the Italian Army. On the other hand, Costantini did not wait the war outbreak to repatriate and, after two years of work on the Uebi Scebeli, he decided to return to Veneto and his family.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Noemi was Ida's sister. See: Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 129.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>140</sup> His letters reveal that he believed that his three children could study in seminaries and Italian schools there and that Ida, Noemi, and he himself could find a job there because, again, *everything has to be done yet*. Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 130-131.

<sup>141</sup> Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 24; Larese, Dore, Salomon, *Un Bellunese*, 290.

#### 4.2. Italian Settlements and communities in Libya

As has been briefly mentioned in the third chapter, colonial Libya underwent many demographic policies which had mixed results on the actual relocation of metropolitan citizens on its soil. As far as the sole fascist era is concerned, the first attempts to populate the Fourth Shore were in line with the ones made during the liberal era: in other words, the state granted to private investors lands, facilities and financial benefits so that they could start their enterprise on the Fourth Shore. The outcomes did not meet the authorities' expectations *in toto*, as Italian businessmen and the working class did not respond extensively to such endeavour. As a result, Libya got populated only gradually and the peak was reached only in 1940, when at least 120,000 metropolitan citizens lived there. Moreover, the graduality of the process contrasted starkly with the quick and tidal flow of Italians who landed in East Africa in the five years following the conquest of Ethiopia.

The foundation of the Empire, however, marked a dramatic change of fascist demographic policies in Libya as well. Public capitals replaced private ones and the state funded the construction of at least twenty villages to accommodate Italian peasants.<sup>142</sup> In the second half of the 1930s, demographic colonialism in Libya meant the creation of a wide society of landowners who enjoyed property rights on the land the colonial government had allotted them. Other demographic policies included planning for separated urban environments to be destined to the different ethnic groups inhabiting Libyan cities, even though they seem to have been implemented very partially.

Given the role the state played in such endeavour, it is no surprise that the Imperial period coincided with the highest figures of Italians migrating to the North-African colony. The years comprised between 1938 and 1940 witnessed the arrival of almost 26,000 metropolitan farmers who were directed to one of the many villages the regime had built *ad hoc*. There, they would find a furnished house, with all the necessary tools for agricultural works. On this point, it is worth-noting what Carlo Ghirlando reported when asked on the nature of this state-led effort:

It was a new form of socialism. The regime built villages, houses, schools, the post office, the church, the mosque, and everyone had to work with the view to becoming a small landowner. Farmsteads...were an example of advanced rural management.<sup>143</sup>

Even though his thoughts are probably an *a posteriori* interpretation of what the regime was trying to achieve in Libya, nevertheless they effectively summarize the mentality that informed fascist

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<sup>142</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 88.

<sup>143</sup> Domenico Infantolino, *Patria di Parole: Autobiografie degli Italiani di Libia* (Padova: Cleup, 2020), 45.

authorities on the Fourth Shore and, to some extent, it also suggests which were the categories to be addressed for such effort: destitute landowners and poor farmers in general. As a consequence, the colonization of Libya did not differ much from the East African one, as the regime sought to target mainly the poor classes in order to relieve the pressure on the Italian countryside.<sup>144</sup>

This is well reflected in the very first pages of Giacomo Cason's memoirs: as he explained, the reason that led him to apply for a lot in Libya was the wide-spread poverty affecting Vicenza (Veneto) and its countryside. In his words, in 1938 crisis was hitting the region and there were «very few works to be employed in».<sup>145</sup> His incomes had to be rather low because all family members had to perform some sort of work in order to get extra paying:

Luckily, I was working...on the construction of a water tank...[my son] Toni was conscripted, [my son] Anselmo was working in Lupiola...for a low salary...Bruno and [my wife] worked on some fields in Vegre. Thus, we lived on the verge of [poverty], even though we had no debts.<sup>146</sup>

As can be seen, Cason's life resembled the one Costantini had in Ponte nelle Alpi and, as a consequence, compelled him to find the best way to maximise revenues. A chance of life amelioration came in the very same year, when the municipality he lived in and newspapers announced that the government was looking for people willing to colonise Libyan land and that applicants would be granted a plot to be cultivated.<sup>147</sup> It is really interesting to note which reasons are behind his choice to submit an application for a farmstead:

...Toni Piola, my cousin,...said that his friend Palazzetto...had some sharecroppers at his service [in a farm] not far from Tripoli.<sup>148</sup>

The message is very clear: those who managed to get a farm on the Fourth Shore could have the same life of those they were working for in the peninsula; they would become landowners and have a staff to oversee.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ipsen, *Demografia Totalitaria*, 164.

<sup>145</sup> Francesco Prestopino, *Uno dei Ventimila: Diario del Colono Giacomo Cason, Libia 1938-1959* (Bologna: Barghigiani Editore, 1995), 39.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 125.

Cason's family got selected and was sent to the North African colony along with roughly 120 families coming from Vicenza and many more from the whole region, a clear sign of the poor conditions suffered by North-eastern Italians in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>150</sup> However, Veneto should not be seen as the only region affected by poor economic conditions leading its inhabitants to try their luck abroad. The very same tropes found in Cason's writings were also reiterated by Ester Morselli when she described Rovereto Sulla Secchia (Modena, Emilia Romagna).<sup>151</sup> Her memoirs are, so to speak, a carbon copy of Leonilde's portrayal of Ponte nelle Alpi: a general dearth of work aggravated by such low incomes that it was nearly impossible to look after the whole family (she was the second youngest of seven children). Moreover, the Morsellis were frequently indebted as they were unable to pay for food supplies on time. Her father even migrated to Aoi twice in hope for a good salary before resolving to try his luck in Libya, where he could move together with his family.<sup>152</sup>

Once they reached Beda Littoria and Oliveti, the Libyan villages they had been assigned to respectively, both the Morsellis and the Casons must have been very impressed by the richness of their new homes (when compared with the one they had left in Italy). Both Ester and Giacomo wrote a detailed catalogue of all the furniture, tools and articles they found inside, which can be considered as a further proof of the poverty they endured in Italy and the hopes for a better lifestyle in colony.<sup>153</sup>

Once settled, farmers were expected to take care of the land they were granted and had to start ploughing it. Interestingly though, not only had they to cultivate it by their own hands (contrary to their expectations), they also had to work the land in conformity with authorities' plans.<sup>154</sup> Based on what Cason wrote in December 1938, when the planting season approached, an expert superintended some of the works in his farmstead and – presumably – in the whole village:

Here...there is an agricultural inspector guiding everything...when we arrived, there was Eng. Giacomo Bacovic, from Trieste.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Cason's farmstead was in a village called *Ivo Oliveti*, not far from Tripoli. See: Prestopino, *Uno dei Ventimila*, 39, 41-42.

<sup>151</sup> Her memories are centred around her childhood in Libya (she was born in 1930, so she was seven or eight years old when her family partook the first "twenty thousand's expedition in 1938). See: "Ester Morselli," *I Diari Raccontano*, Archivio Diaristico Nazionale, accessed August 28, 2021, <https://www.idiariaraccontano.org/autore/morselli-ester/>.

<sup>152</sup> Her memoirs do not resemble only Leonilde's description of poverty in the countryside, they also present quite a number of consonances with Cason's. In particular, Ester provided information about occupations each family member had in the years preceding their departure: the two oldest siblings were apprentices, and for this reason earned few money (apprenticeship was not paid, or at best, foodstuffs were given in exchange). Those in the middle worked either in paddy fields or in neighbouring farms (in the latter case in exchange for firewood and some bunch of grapes). See: Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, 158-159.

<sup>153</sup> Prestopino, *Uno dei Ventimila*, 52-61; Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, 159-161.

<sup>154</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 127.

<sup>155</sup> Prestopino, *Uno dei Ventimila*, 58.

In the following month, Cason returned on this point and stated that:

[Works] had to be performed as the manager (*capo azienda*) had instructed. Thus, there had to be twenty meters between each olive tree...[and] we had to dig a ditch [between] the rows [and it had to be] 80cm. large, 60cm. deep, and 200m. long.<sup>156</sup>

Although Cason's memoirs do not present any negative thought on Giacomo Bacovic's work, it is clear that settling projects on Libyan soil were publicized in a very different light in the Peninsula: as noted above, Cason's cousin encouraged him to ask for a farmstead in Libya because a friend of his managed to become a landowner there and even hired some workers. From settlers' standpoint, relocation in one of the villages built by the regime was seen as a way to climb the social ladder and have farmland at their disposal. However, the reality they had to confront contrasted with the narrative they used to hear in Italy, leading Roberta Pergher to conclude that they «dreamed of a life as owners, but they would soon discover that they remained in the same condition of dependency, as the state simply replaced their previous overlord».<sup>157</sup>

As noted above, the regime always sought to exert a strict control over its North African possessions and such inclination was strongly asserted in 1939, when it decreed Northern Libya's annexation to national soil; however, private sources show that fascism did not seek to control only macro-political aspects concerning the North Shore; it also tried to regulate each family unit as well. As far as the newly-transplanted rural community is concerned, the regime wanted to organise the daily work of its members and margins of what settlers could grow on their land were significantly curbed by the authorities, which attempted to have the last word on what products were to be cultivated.

Furthermore, as Pergher reveals, settlers were even prohibited from move outside their farmstead without permission of the village authority. On this regard, however, some information provided by Cason suggest that when the village (and more generally public) interest was involved, settlers could be extensively employed in works far from their homes:

this month [May] I went to work as a mason...and repaired houses' roofs... The following ones I worked for *Ditta Zerbino* in Sorman, [where] we built hangars for

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<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>157</sup> Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 125.

the Airforce...Then, I plastered tanks for a Neapolitan company, after which I worked for a Milanese company repairing engines in water wells.<sup>158</sup>

In other words, although settlers had to abide by laws restricting their mobility rights, settling and colonial necessities granted moderate freedom of movement (and, consequently, the possibility to look for jobs outside one's farmstead).

An additional aspect the colonial government wanted to control was the relationship between national citizens and the locals. As noted above, before the two "expeditions", Italy was engaged in a fierce battle with the local population (especially the one living in Cyrenaica) in order to both get the upper hand on the anti-Italian resistance and, most importantly, to clear the land for its settling ends. The campaign resulted in mass deportation and the massacre of hundreds of thousands native civilians, but some communities managed to survive such brutality and, as settlers recalled in their memoirs, kept living very close to Italian villages. In her memoir, Nella Stramazzo wrote that when her family arrived to the *Fabio Filzi* village:

[we] found [ourselves] among the Arabs, our village was 100km far from Bengasi.<sup>159</sup>

Stramazzo's testimony is very important, as it unveils some crucial demographic information on the native communities that were still living in East Libya, the region that Italian anti-guerrilla hit the most. In such a short sentence, she observed that, not far from one of the most Italian-densely-populated cities of the North Shore, there were native groups still living in the settlement's surroundings. Mass deportation and extermination did not completely wipe out East Libyan people, which might explain why the regime drafted further regulation in matter of settler-native interactions. As noted above, rural settling projects were premised on the exclusion of the native as well as the employment of Italian labour; for this reason, settlers were forbidden from having any contact with the locals, including hiring them for agricultural work. The accounts of some of those who took part in one of the two *Expeditions*, however, display some of the limits of such segregationist policies: for instance, Cason recounts that he was helped by two locals in his everyday routine on fields.<sup>160</sup> Also Ester Morselli observes that her family had some interactions with them despite the bans:

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<sup>158</sup> Prestopino, *Uno dei Ventimila*, 61.

<sup>159</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, 223.

<sup>160</sup> Prestopino, *Uno dei Ventimila*, 67.

We were forbidden from giving water to the Arabs, but my father could not just deny them.<sup>161</sup>

She also reports that when her father went hunting, he used to take a break in tents with Arabs, who in turn offered him tea, a story similar to the one recollected in Agatina Ajello's memoir:

we used to have a rest in Arab tents, and my father knew [the locals] and spoke Arabic quite well. We used to drink Arab tea...and eat couscous.<sup>162</sup>

These accounts do not tell us anything about the power relationship unfolding from such interactions: on the one hand, it is impossible to assess whether the natives acted so because of subservience or because they genuinely bonded with the Italian; on the other, it is also very hard to understand if Italians were taking advantage of a situation they clearly understood as favourable. Whatever the answer may be, these testimonies show that settlers' actions sometimes were hard to control and that in fact there was ample room for exceptions or overt infringement.

Contact and cohabitation also occurred in Libyan cities, where urban management proved more difficult and gave mixed results. Filippina Mincio, who followed her husband in Barce (Cyrenaica) in the pre-1935 period, noted that they lived in a residential neighbourhood close to – but distinct from – the Arab one, while «Negroes lived in distant zones and were considered inferiors».<sup>163</sup> Apparently, her experience seems to substantiate Mia Fuller's remarks on Bengasi and Eastern Libya, where segregationist policies had been successfully enforced as a result of massive deportation. However, she continued her memoir by remarking that «only Arab and Negroes were to be found in the streets», suggesting that probably the regime could not interdict their access to certain urban sectors *in toto*.<sup>164</sup> Contrary to Fuller's findings, it is likely that Bengasi itself presented patterns in line with other Libyan cities: Agatina Ajello recalls that her father had frequent contacts with the locals because:

[he] was able to successfully integrate with Arab people, [as] he sympathized with their poverty and their culture.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, 162.

<sup>162</sup> It should be kept in mind that the facts Ajello recounted took place when she was eleven, which means that they date back to 1935. See: "Agatina Ajello," I Diari Raccontano, Archivio Diaristico Nazionale, accessed August 16, 2021, <https://www.idiariaraccontano.org/autore/ajello-agatina/>; Labanca *Posti al Sole*, 127, 162.

<sup>163</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, 113.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.



This passage is particularly relevant, for not only does it unveil a network Ajello's father had created with native people; it also shows that he may have got in touch with them because he belonged to a social class similar to theirs. Indeed, when describing him, Ajello wrote that he was an *empty-pocket-man* who even attempted to find a job in AOI before coming back to Libya.<sup>166</sup> To put it simply, his case seems to conform closely to those occurred in AOI, where poor metropolitan citizens made contact with native people because barriers separating the twos blurred due to the formers' poverty. Thus, wherever the Empire of labour failed to accommodate national workforce and Fascist surveillance did not prevent settlers from acting against segregationist norms, Italian poor whites managed to build relationships with the people they were supposed to keep away from.

Once more, proximity of the two groups does not imply that metropolitan citizens did not internalized racist discourses on the colonized people: interestingly though, the sources I have inspected are rather silent on the topic. Only few passages hint at some forms of racial thought characterizing Italian presence in Libya: Giuseppe Ghione, a soldier, described the Twenty Thousand as those who would «redeem [Libya] after so many centuries of neglect», suggesting that Libyan Arabs were either unable or unwilling to take care of the land they inhabited.<sup>167</sup> Ghione did not think that the local were exploiting their lands' full potential and thus justified Italy's seizure of the North Shore. Similarly, Ester Morselli wrote that her family's farm was located in a fertile region where local shepherds used to feed their herds; despite the fact that they could not exploit those pastures anymore, she asserted her family property rights by minimizing the loss they suffered:

they plant just a little bit of barley to make bread, but they are people who do not eat much, because they do not work a lot and therefore need not much energies.<sup>168</sup>

To put it simply, both the authors reiterated commonly-held tropes they were taught in schools and employed them to interpret the Libyan reality: in particular, the alleged laziness of the Arab population was the reason through which Ajello explained why her family rightfully owned lands the locals were excluded from.<sup>169</sup> In few cases, the material at my disposal showed – although obliquely – some form of overt racism: specifically, while recounting his childhood in Tripolitania, Aldo Zelli

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<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>169</sup> Gabrielli, “Cataloghi,” 81-105.

recalls that his parents did not want him to hang out with Arab kids, implying that they considered the local population inferior or that he should not lower himself by playing with them.<sup>170</sup>

In summary, private records reveal that there is a deep connection between migrations to Africa and Italy's economic situation: to be precise, a significant portion of those who spent some time in colony did so because their hometowns' rural and extra-urban economies did not allow them to make a decent living: some of them were indebted, other did not earn enough money for paying food supplies in due time, some even lost their assets after having paid medical bills for their beloved ones.<sup>171</sup> Whatever the reason might have been, when they heard about the possibility of making a "small pile" or becoming landowners, some positively responded to the regime's call and applied for a post in either Libya or AOI. What really attracted settlers was the promise of becoming either landowners (Libya) or earning high wages (AOI), meaning that they understood their migration in colony as a feasible way to get what they had always strived for in the Peninsula: a better social condition and better salaries.

Indeed, despite its short life, the empire meant a socio-economic improvement for some of them: farmers in Libya finally owned a farmstead and some AOI labourers managed to make a real fortune there. But, on the other hand, it also proved unable to accommodate the needs of all metropolitan citizens: even though national firms with branches in East Africa were expected to pay higher salaries than those they had to provide in the peninsula, they oftentimes eluded their obligations, causing some employees to suffer poverty and harsh living conditions. Such scenario took place in the North Shore as well, where rural communities, despite enjoying property rights on their farmstead, never managed to become lords (and thus get a higher status), as they had to plough the land with their own hands (and in compliance with regime's schedule).

In other words, many settlers failed to climb the social ladder and remained relatively poor, a situation that generated some social phenomena the regime was particularly worried about: low salaries – if any at all – originated a sizeable group of poor whites in AOI and Libya. Their presence in cities and construction sites was particularly problematic because they put in jeopardy the racial separation on which colonial authorities were working. From the regime's standpoint, settler colonial plans were predicated to a clear distinction between the two groups and could not be attained if settlers behaved and looked as if they belonged to poor social classes: it was a matter of prestige, they had to be unmistakably recognizable as superiors. As records show, settlers' poverty (combined with a partial implementation of segregationist urban designs) resulted in frequent – and increasing –

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<sup>170</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, 221.

<sup>171</sup> Irma Taddia interviewed two men who talked about the need to earn money as fast as possible in order to pay back medical bills. See: Taddia, *La Memoria*, 92-94, 99-101.

proximity between them and the locals. Such situation further intensified when carnal promiscuity (and mixed-race children's birth) started becoming common as well. Despite the strengthening of anti-*madamato* policing, the regime seems to have been unable to keep track of all settlers, and interracial intercourses kept occurring throughout the imperial period.

Neither were Libyan rural settlements exempted from these events: as noted above, settlers did not enjoy any social promotion and kept working as farmers just as they did in Italy, the only difference was that now it was the colonial authority who superintended their job. It was the missed advancement (as well as presence of some Arab communities around settlements) that probably drew metropolitan citizens and colonial ones closer than the regime hoped. On the whole, settler policies were constantly hampered by mismanagement of both the settler community and the native one.



## CHAPTER 5

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### CONCLUSIONS

From the beginning, this work had been informed by a question Nicola Labanca quite rhetorically asked in his introductory chapter to *Posti al Sole*: if Italian demographic colonialism, he says, was based on the massive input of metropolitan citizens in Libya and AOI, then why records written by people partaking these projects have never been object of thorough studies? With such a stimulating question in mind, I have attempted to engage with the material he displayed in his anthology and find an answer that could shed light on the subject through the angle he proposed. Specifically, I wanted to understand if private records could be fruitfully employed for the study of Italy's settler colonial programmes and if their content accorded with the regime's settling aspirations. Some scholars have already noted that written and oral ego-documents are a valuable source because they can present events in a fashion different from the one official material report them, and add nuance to our understanding of historical phenomena.<sup>172</sup> Yet, one gets the feeling that they (in particular those who dealt with the said documentation and published edited-collections of it) have hardly ever sought to write a coherent historical narrative using the contents presented in that material.

My modest objective has been to show that diaries, memoirs, oral testimonies are a valuable source for the study of the social implications of settler colonialism in Italy's domains overseas between 1935 and 1940. To be precise, I wanted to demonstrate that private sources have a macro-historical potential that unfolds when they are treated as a net's junctures, which are intertwined with each other. This is not to say that those who wrote (or tell) their stories knew each other; rather, it means that settler colonial experiences can present common themes or tropes that the researcher can connect in a consistent narrative. Micro- and macro-history are not two distinct and mutually incompatible approaches to past events; rather they are two faces of the same coin: as I have attempted to demonstrate throughout my research, private records, be they oral or written, are not to be understood as isolated documents whose contents have no common points with others. They capture given events from a perspective that other people shared, they show common social patterns others went through; it is because of these characteristics that they can shed light on broader aspects of a given historical phenomenon. This was the ultimate end of my study, namely to show that a macro-historical analysis of settler-colonialism could stem from the survey of texts written by single individuals.

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<sup>172</sup> Labanca, *Posti al Sole*, XXVI; Taddia, *Autobiografie Africane*, 9; 29; Luzzatto, *La Strada*, 11.

As far as my sources and my research questions are concerned, the relation between the two proved rather fruitful, in the sense that private records have been a useful analytical tool for the study of Italian settler colonial society: not only their contents help to get a deeper understanding on Italian settler colonial phenomena; most importantly, they can also be employed in a comparative perspective to verify what has already been written on the subject. On this point, they confirm that the main reasons that guided Italian migrants to try their luck in colony overseas were economy-related: in both Libyan and AOI cases, a significant share of settlers belonged to the lower class who failed to find a stable and remunerative occupation in the Peninsula. The fact that the regime was creating an Empire of Labour and the promise of land (and higher wages) encouraged hundreds of thousands to resettle in land overseas.

Economic interests played such a major role in settlers' migratory strategies that they seem to have overcome ideological ones: allegiance to fascism is not a recurrent theme in the writings considered, and settlers did not seem to be much interested in its tenets. This does not imply that some (or even the majority) of them did not support the regime: Sergio Luzzatto noted that Gattari had faith in Mussolini. Yet, his letters show that it was the "small pile" that guided him through the whole period he spent in Ethiopia-Eritrea.<sup>173</sup> Similarly, Edoardo Costantini's older sister was a fervent advocate of the regime and her ideas might have influenced his political beliefs as well; however, he never made clear statements on his political beliefs in his letters, which, in turn, focused primarily on work and the places where it had to be performed.<sup>174</sup>

Despite settlers' high expectations, the Empire of Labour failed to meet all their needs, causing many to live in dire economic conditions: unemployment and poverty (combined with defective segregationist measures) led to various exchanges between settlers and African people in the East African construction sites and in Libya rural villages. In the former, many nationals observed that they had worked in close contact with locals and promiscuity was frequent outside the workplace as well: concubinage (or *madamoto*) between metropolitan men and local women (and vice versa) was quite common and resulted in the increasing presence of children with mixed ancestry. Indeed, the regime failed to keep track of settlers' movements and its segregationist legislation could not avoid interracial intercourses. Something very similar occurred in Libya, where Italy's mass deportation and killings did not wipe out the entire native community, which sometimes was clearly visible to settlers' eyes in both rural and urban environments. To put it simply, Italian settler colonialism in

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<sup>173</sup> Luzzatto, *La strada*, 16.

<sup>174</sup> Giovanni Larese, "Una Famiglia, Due Storie," in *Un Bellunese in Somalia: Lettere di Edoardo Costantini a Polpet (1934-1936)*, ed. Giovanni Larese, Giovanni Dore, Paola Salomon (Belluno: ISBREC, 2001), 52.

both regions did not succeed in effectively handling local populace and excluding it from the settlers' living sphere.

Overall, settlers' testimonies show that the five-years-long Empire of Labour did not prove as successful as the regime had hoped (and, to be fair, as settlers themselves had too). The main reasons behind its failure are to be found in the selection of the wrong settler category, which probably was driven more by money than by ideology; the fallacious enforcement of segregationist measures, allowing interracial contacts to take place; and the misconduct of some of the firms working on colonial soil, as they did not meet their obligations in matter of salaries, leaving many Italian workers in poverty.





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