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8 “The End of the World as we Know it”. Framing Settlers’ Return to Italy Within the Current International Debate

Abstract: The relationship between migratory flows and decolonization has only recently received specific attention. Scholars, particularly Andrea Smith, have thoroughly analyzed the “return migration” of former settlers, questioning concepts such as “reflux” and “return,” which, however, have proven inadequate.

This chapter deals with the Italian case, starting from two fundamental assumptions. I base my arguments on Pamela Ballinger’s hypothesis that decolonization of the former Italian colonies was a 30-year long process. I also draw on Lorenzo Veracini’s theory of the impossible cessation of settler colonialism until the settlers had completely departed.

These two complementary premises will allow me to suggest how this process manifested itself for the Italian settlers in a long and unsuccessful attempt to adapt to post-colonial circumstances without losing their previous status. A necessary renegotiation between former colonizers and the former colonized did not actually occur; instead, we see attempts to maintain roles and privileges, followed by (forced or voluntary) departure.

I will discuss the act of leaving as a key premise in the end of the settlers’ colonial world, particularly in the Italian case, and how we cannot treat this departure detachedly when deconstructing and analyzing it.

Introduction

The migration of former Italian settlers from Africa to Italy must be considered within the context of two interconnected and partially overlapping historical phenomena. These two phenomena involve the flow of people following World War II, when millions of refugees and displaced persons of all kinds crossed Europe, and the flow caused by decolonization, when the former colonies’ independence caused the departure of British, Dutch, Belgian, and, above all, French and Portuguese settlers who moved en masse to Europe, along with some former colonial subjects. As both Italy and Japan lost their colonial empires after World War II, these two phases overlapped. In some cases, this was a dispersed and mostly peaceful migration to the metropole or other countries. However, in most cases,

significant portions of the settler population were forced to flee the decolonizing countries under traumatic circumstances.¹

This movement has been depicted as a “reflux” or “settler return” from former colonies to the homeland.² Some recent studies, however, have reconsidered the notion of “return,” examining individual national cases within a broader framework: how the end of empires in the twentieth century, including colonial empires, caused forced migrations,³ and how these migrations reshaped Europe.⁴ A comparative approach has also enabled us to highlight the similarities, but more importantly the differences, between the two concepts while cautioning against generalizations.⁵

In most cases, comparison can shed significant new light on a migratory flow that has had a massive social, economic, and political impact. The one million Europeans who immigrated to France from Algeria in the summer of 1962,⁶ or the 500,000 Portuguese who left Angola and Mozambique between 1974 and 1976 and who contributed to a 7 % rise in Portugal’s population,⁷ are two particularly pertinent examples. However, not every departure of settlers had a profound social

1 Ron Eyerman and Giuseppe Sciortino, eds., *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization: Colonial Returnees in the National Imagination* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2019).

2 Ceri Peach, “Postwar Migration to Europe: Reflux, Influx, Refuge,” *Social Science Quarterly* 78 (1997): 269–83.

3 Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee, *Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

4 Manuel Borutta and J.C. Jansen, eds., *Vertriebene and Pieds-Noirs in Postwar Germany and France: Comparative Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Dietmar Rothermund, *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Éric Morier-Genoud and Michel Cahen, eds., *Imperial Migrations. Colonial Communities and Diaspora in the Portuguese World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

5 Lionel Babicz, “Japan–Korea, France–Algeria: Colonialism and Post-Colonialism,” *Japanese studies* 33 (2013): 201–11; Andrea Smith, “Coerced or free? Considering post-colonial returns,” *Removing Peoples: Forced removal in the modern world* 395 (2009): 395–14.

6 Sung-Eu Choi, *Decolonization and the French of Algeria: Bringing the Settler Colony Home* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). See also Pierre Baillet, “L’intégration des rapatriés d’Algérie en France,” *Population (French edition)* 30 (1975): 303–14.

7 Elsa Peralta, ed., *The Retornados From the Portuguese Colonies in Africa Memory, Narrative, and History* (New York: Routledge, 2021). See also Stephen C. Lubkemann, “The moral economy of Portuguese postcolonial return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 11 (2002): 189–13; Stephen C. Lubkemann, “Unsettling the Metropole: Race and settler reincorporation in postcolonial Portugal,” in *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

impact. The 560,000 Britons who left the British empire did not constitute a single "mass" return,⁸ and only a part of these has received historical attention.⁹

How does the Italian case fit into this picture? In terms of proportions, it was not far behind the others; from 1942 to 1949, approximately 200,000 people moved from former colonies to Italy.¹⁰ Nonetheless, this case study has never been thoroughly examined. Since the colonies were lost early, and not as a result of a push for independence but as a result of defeat by other Europeans, it was widely denied until recently that Italy had undergone a process of decolonization. The Italian case is simply not – or only partially – addressed in the major international histories of decolonization.¹¹ Even among scholars of the Italian case, "decolonization from above" has been the prevailing interpretation for a long time,¹² an "atypical case of early decolonization"¹³ that was less painful and traumatic than in other colonial contexts,¹⁴ an interpretation which also claimed that the

8 Elizabeth Buettner, "We Don't Grow Coffee and Bananas in Clapham Junction You Know!: Imperial Britons Back Home," in *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons Over the Seas: Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series*, ed. R. Bickers (Oxford: Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series, 2010): 302–328.

9 Alexandra Carter, "Le Long Retour du colonisateur: les Britanniques et le choc de la Seconde Guerre mondiale en Malaisie (1941-1948)," *Relations internationales* 2 (2008): 19-35; Pamela Shurmer-Smith, "Once the dust of Africa is in your blood: tracking Northern Rhodesia's white diaspora," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 10 (2011): 82–94; Rory Pilosof, *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: White Farming Voices from Zimbabwe* (Harare: Weaver Press; Claremont: UCT Press, 2012); David Lucas, Barbara Edgar, and Gwilym Lucas, "Overseas Destinations for Elite Southern and Northern Rhodesians and Zimbabweans" (paper presented at the 39th African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) Annual Conference, The University of Western Australia, December 5–7, 2016).

10 Pamela Ballinger, "Borders of the nation, borders of citizenship: Italian repatriation and the redefinition of national identity after World War II," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49 (2007): 713–41.

11 See Raymond F. Betts, *Decolonization* (London: Routledge, 2004); Bernard Droz, *Histoire de la décolonisation au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006); Dietmar Rothermund, *The Routledge Companion to Decolonization* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

12 Giampaolo Calchi Novati, "Mediterraneo e questione araba nella politica estera italiana," in *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana*, ed. F. Barbagallo (Torino: Einaudi, 1995): 205.

13 Colette Dubois, "L'Italie, cas atypique d'une puissance européenne en Afrique: une colonisation tardive, une décolonisation précoce," *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 32 (1993): 10–14.

14 Christopher Seton-Watson, "Italy's Imperial Hangover," *Journal of contemporary history* 15 (1980): 177.

Italian case was a cultural non-event.¹⁵ In recent years, these rejections of classification of the Italian case as decolonization have undergone significant revision. First, Nicola Labanca asserted that “the end of Italian colonialism did not come at the same time for all its subjects”¹⁶; then Antonio Morone denied the existence of a “clear historical caesura,” instead speaking of “the long end of Italian colonialism”¹⁷; and finally there were the arguments by Pamela Ballinger who, since 2007, has dedicated a series of insightful studies to the subject, demonstrating the historiographical groundlessness of the “pervasive belief in Italy and abroad that Italian decolonization proved quick and relatively unproblematic.”¹⁸

In response to this literature, I begin my analysis by assuming that decolonization is not a self-contained event but rather a lengthy and theoretically endless process.¹⁹ This “extended history” goes beyond the mere institutional transfer of power, and includes both the former colonies and the former metropolises.²⁰ In particular, I draw from two theoretical constructs. The first is a recent book by Pamela Ballinger, who suggests considering the Italian case from the perspective of “long decolonization” or a decolonization that was a protracted and complicated process that took place over a number of decades.²¹ The second fits perfectly into this initial hypothesis and is the theory of decolonization in settler societies developed by Lorenzo Veracini, one of the founders of settler colonial studies and a leading scholar in this field. He developed this theory to explain how decolonization in settler countries can only occur once the settlers leave, which the Italian situation exemplifies. Colonel Gaddafi’s Libya, for example, cele-

15 Karen Pinkus, “Empty Spaces: Decolonisation in Italy,” in *A Place in the Sun. Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. P. Palumbo (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2003): 300.

16 Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2002): 440.

17 Antonio M. Morone, “L’eredità del colonialismo per la nuova Italia,” in *Imperi coloniali. Italia, Germania e la costruzione del “mondo coloniale*, ed. V.F. Gironde, M. Nani, and S. Petrungero (Napoli: L’Ancora del Mediterraneo, 2009): 74.

18 Pamela Ballinger, “Entangled or Extruded Histories? Displacement, National Refugees, and Repatriation after the Second World War,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25 (2012): 372. See also Pamela Ballinger, “Colonial Twilight: Italian Settlers and the Long Decolonization of Libya,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 51 (2016): 813–38.

19 Lorenzo Veracini, “Settler Colonialism and Decolonisation,” *Borderlands e-journal* 6 (2007), accessed March 3, 2023, <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/1337/>. See also Martin G. Thomas and Andrew Thompson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

20 Buettner, *Europe after Empire*, 4.

21 Pamela Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made. Decolonization and the foundation of postwar Italy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020).

brated Independence Day every year as a symbol of the end of colonial power, while marking the day of Italian evacuation as a symbol of the definitive break with the colonial past.²²

I will discuss the migratory flow of former Italian settlers as part of a long and failed process of decolonization that began with World War II and ended in the 1970s with the exodus of the vast majority of settlers from Libya and the Horn of Africa, drawing on these two interpretative proposals and leaving aside the difficult process of decolonization of culture and the imaginary also taking place in Italy.²³

The Multiple Waves of Settlers’ “Return”

First of all, it is useful to subdivide the various phases of a flow that is not unique. In fact, this flow went through several waves over a period of about 30 years. The very first to return were approximately 13,000 children who, with Italy’s entry into the war in June 1940, were repatriated from Libya and hosted in the summer camps of the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*, before finally being tragically separated from their families due to the war events.²⁴ Only two years later, following the British occupation of Italian East Africa, another wave of former settlers boarded the *Missione Speciale in AOP*’s so-called “white ships”: a massive evacuation carried out by fascist Italy between 1942 and 1943 to repatriate women, children, the elderly, sick and disabled. The transatlantic liners used for the mission transported around 28,000 people during the three voyages around Africa.²⁵

A second wave occurred between 1947 and 1952, while the United Nations decided the fate of Italy’s former colonies. The naval routes with Italy were reopened at the end of 1947, following Italy’s definitive waiver of any claim on the former colonies (now administered by the British, with the exception of Ethiopia where the legitimate sovereign Haile Selassie returned to the throne). The flow was almost unidirectional because the British Military Administration permitted, indeed favored, the flow towards Italy but prohibited (with very rare exceptions) the opposite movement. The flow was also gradual; we do not have exact figures but

22 Veracini, *Settler Colonialism and Decolonisation*, 3.

23 Emanuele Ertola, *Il colonialismo degli italiani. Storia di un’ideologia* (Roma: Carocci, 2022).

24 Erica Moretti, Alejandro Mario Dieguez, “Gli italiani profughi di Libia: memorie di traversate e clandestinità,” *Contemporanea* 2 (2023): 251-284; Rosario Pollicino, “Testimonial Literature and Trauma: The Case of Grazia Arnese and the 13,000 Italian-Libyan Children,” *In Verbis* 2 (2021): 185-197.

25 Emanuele Ertola, “Navi Bianche. Il rimpatrio dei civili italiani dall’Africa Orientale,” *Passato e Presente* 91 (2014): 127-43.

according to an International Refugees Organisation report, more than 200,000 Italians moved to Italy from the former colonies between 1942 and 1949: approximately 94,000 from Libya and 112,000 from East Africa.²⁶

It is an exodus worth investigating in depth because it did not affect all former settlers in the same way, but rather followed primarily social and generational influxes. These were social because those with no prospects were the first to try to flee; first, there were children and women who had been left by their husbands, who were mostly interned in British camps, and then there were the poor and the workers. Beginning in late 1947, when the travel route with Eritrea was restored in the form of bimonthly voyages of the steamer Toscana, approximately 2,000 settlers went to the Italian representative to register for repatriation, including unemployed people, horse-drawn carriage drivers, taxi drivers, carters, carpenters, bricklayers, unskilled workers, and small artisans. According to the Italian official in charge of planning the repatriations, they were all persons with occasional employment who typically struggled to survive.²⁷

The second influx is noteworthy because it reflects a generational shift. After the end of the 1940s, the largest social group to gradually leave the country was composed of young people who were not able to pursue professional or educational development in former Italian Africa. “I remember classmates who had to leave school in the middle of the year. This exodus was continuous – one witness reports –. When I came to Italy in 1951 to study at university, many of them travelled with me.”²⁸ Another witness recalls that

What did Italian students do? Some who completed high school, like myself, continued their education at a university [in Italy or abroad]; those who studied to become surveyors went on to work in Saudi Arabia’s oil fields[. . .] others who studied as accountants, took positions in banks. But there were fewer and fewer of these banks [. . .] therefore the girls were left without boys [. . .] because the Italian boys were no longer there.²⁹

In the case of Eritrea, the transition from Italian colony to Ethiopian federation (in 1952) was a difficult type of decolonization, so much so that many Eritreans regarded it as a mere shift from one annexation to another. As a political and social group, the settlers were defeated. Even in terms of demography, their population declined from over 39,000 in 1944 to 25,000 in 1948 to approximately

²⁶ Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made*; see also Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom, eds., *Italian mobilities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

²⁷ Emanuele Ertola, “La comunità italiana d’Eritrea nel dopoguerra. Economia e società fra continuità e mutamento,” *I sentieri della ricerca* 16 (2013): 193–227.

²⁸ Interview with Pier Angelo Pollera, born in Eritrea in 1933.

²⁹ Interview with Claudio Baracetti, born in Eritrea in 1938.

18,000 (1950). Some 75 % of the settlers had fled the country between 1941 and 1950, with the stress generated by the world war, the economic crisis, the loss of the privileged status of rulers, and the perceived insecurity created by terrorism that hit the nation in the late 1940s probably factors in their exodus.³⁰ At the same time, as Lorenzo Veracini pointed out, most of the settlers had no interest in attempting to build decolonized relationships. Their departure was the ultimate manifestation of how difficult, if not impossible, it was for them to imagine "the very possibility of a relation between colonizer and colonized after the discontinuation of a settler colonial regime."³¹

The settlers who remained in Africa were mostly males, either poor white individuals who could not afford a ticket or those who had no further interests or links in Italy, and in most cases, they had already integrated into African society and had long-lasting relationships with African women. To these must be added a small group of experts, dealers, and industrialists who, thanks to their technical and entrepreneurial abilities, became collaborators with the new African states and economic institutions following independence.³² Thus, a tiny Italian elite continued to play major roles in post-colonial societies, contributing to the efforts of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia and King Idris in Libya.³³ However, the compromise of decolonization (which resulted in former colonies' independence but not the emancipation of their societies, which were subject to conservative and authoritarian regimes on the one hand and the persistent socio-economic monopoly of a few settlers on the other) was doomed to fail. The socialist-inspired military revolutions that brought Muammar Gaddafi to power in Libya in 1969, and the Derg in Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1974, arose from the objection to this political and social system.³⁴

The new revolutionary orders shattered the unwritten agreement with the Italians, who became the subject of economic nationalization and the Africanization of the state administration. Thus, the last and final wave of migration from

30 Emanuele Ertola, "Blowing against the Winds of Change: Settlers Facing Decolonization in Eritrea, 1941-52," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1 (2023): 71–91.

31 Veracini, "Settler Colonialism and Decolonisation," 4.

32 See, for example, Emanuele Ertola, "La società italiana nell'Etiopia di Haile Selassie," in *La fine del colonialismo italiano. Politica, società e memorie*, ed. Antonio M. Morone (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2018).

33 Angelo Del Boca, *Nostalgia delle colonie. Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, vol. 4 (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1984); Angelo Del Boca, *Dal fascismo a Gheddafi. Gli italiani in Libia*, vol. 2 (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1988).

34 See, among others, Giampaolo Calchi Novati, *Il Corno d'Africa nella storia e nella politica. Etiopia, Somalia e Eritrea fra nazionalismi, sottosviluppo e guerra* (Torino: Società editrice internazionale, 1994); Federico Cresti and Massimiliano Cricco, *Storia della Libia contemporanea* (Roma: Carocci, 2015).

the former Italian colonies occurred in the 1970s: the mass expulsion of approximately 20,000 Italians who remained in Libya in 1970, as well as the flight of the few thousands who remained in Eritrea and Ethiopia, deprived of their assets by nationalization and terrified by the Mengistu regime's violence and the ongoing war against the Eritrean liberation fronts in the second half of the decade.³⁵

In conclusion, Italian postcolonial mobility cannot be understood as a single monolithic block. Instead, it must be articulated in its successive phases, which differ in chronology and direction of flow: the former colony of origin changed over time, without taking into account – and a systematic study in this regard is still lacking – the fact that the destination was not always Italy but in many cases other colonies or countries abroad. During the approximately 30 years of the “long decolonization,” Italian settlers migrated multiple times “back and forth across the Mediterranean in a framework heavily constrained by economics and politics” until this complex flow culminated in a forced (re)migration.³⁶

Reception and Agency

Unlike the historic settler colonies of Oceania and America, the settler societies created between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in African colonies were a small population minority with – in most cases – little political influence, and subordinate to the colonial State.³⁷ Despite their lack of relevance in the political process of decolonization, settler societies have frequently been singled out by public opinion in the metropolises as a destabilizing factor that fueled conflicts; on the other hand, former settlers have (almost everywhere) activated a narrative of themselves as victims, betrayed or forgotten by the State, and regretted by the colonized populations with whom they had friendly relations.³⁸ Exile, psychological

35 Antonio M. Morone, “Italiani d’Africa, Africani d’Italia: da coloni a profughi,” *Altretalia* 42 (2011): 20–35. See also Patrizia Audenino, “Memorie ferite: esuli e rimpatriati nell’Italia repubblicana,” *Meridiana* 86 (2016): 79–96; Patrizia Audenino, *La casa perduta. La memoria dei profughi nell’Europa del Novecento* (Carocci: Roma, 2015).

36 Ballinger, “Colonial Twilight: Italian Settlers and the Long Decolonization of Libya,” 24.

37 For a general overview see Edward Cavanagh, and Lorenzo Veracini, eds. *The Routledge handbook of the history of settler colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

38 Éric Savarese, “Mobilisations Politiques et Posture Victimaire Chez les Militants Associatifs Pieds-Noirs,” *Raisons politique* 30 (2008): 41–57; Emmanuelle Comtat, “Les disparus civils européens de la guerre d’Algérie. Processus de construction d’une cause victimaire militante,” *Papeles del CEIC, International Journal on Collective Identity Research* 1 (2017), accessed March 3, 2023, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1387/pceic.16907>.

trauma, material needs, claims against the government, and the need for recognition: all of these factors contributed to the formation of an identity that did not emerge in the colony but rather after repatriation, when "colonizers turned ex-colonizers overnight immediately became cast as helpless and innocent victims."³⁹

But, after they returned to the metropole, were the returnees forgotten, ignored, and powerless? Again, in order to successfully address this question, we must first examine the migrant waves independently. Not only must this migratory movement be divided internally, with distinct periods and socioeconomic and generational lines of separation; the way they were greeted in Italy, as well as the organizations created to promote their interests, must also be differentiated. The successive waves of migration gave rise to associations with rather different circumstances and strategies. Due to the constant stream of refugees from Libya and in anticipation of the Special Mission of Evacuation in AOI, in 1941 Mussolini approved an ordinance with which the State handled repatriation from the colonies as a specific issue for the first time. The ordinance introduced the category of "refugee from Italian Africa" describing such an individual as an "Italian citizen resident in Italian Africa who was returned for reasons entirely linked to the state of war"; starting on January 1, 1942, and continuing throughout the war, refugees in a determined condition of need would be awarded a one-off subsidy "to cover the expenditures of their first settlement in the Kingdom" as well as a monthly payment.⁴⁰ In 1945, new regulations revised the matter and for the first time, in addition to the subsidy, the legislation also provided for hospitalization in refugee camps (CRP).⁴¹ From 1949, support to former settlers was provided together with that given to refugees from other regions where Italian control had ended due to a peace treaty, refugees from other countries, and victims of conflict on Italian soil. More precise requirements were added: to be classified as such, African refugees had to have lived in the colony prior to June 10, 1940.⁴² Finally, on March 4, 1952, the Law on "Assistance for Refugees" addressed the issue comprehensively for the first time, repealing previous laws and definitively establishing all necessary measures to resolve the refugee issue along three main lines of action: subsidy, housing, and reintegration into the labor market. The first measure was a monthly stipend. The second aspect that welfare policies had to address was housing in refugee centres (theoretically for a maximum of one year), which were located in former barracks or other public buildings and designed to prevent returnees from settling, even temporarily, in suburban bidonvilles. The

³⁹ Buettner, *Europe After Empire*, 230.

⁴⁰ Bill of December 27, 1941, no. 560279.

⁴¹ Lieutenant's Decree of June 14, 1945, no. 509.

⁴² Legislative decree of April 19, 1948, no. 556.

third pillar of support was in the employment sector, with measures such as requiring enterprises involved in public works (even if partially subsidized by state or municipal governments) to hire refugees as 5 % of their staff.⁴³

In a country suffering significantly from war and with a high unemployment rate, Italian refugees from Africa were a small group within the massive influx of displaced individuals caused by World War II. In this setting, the government's efforts took more than 15 years to achieve some tangible results. Refugees entered the job market slowly, and many people did not even apply for work because the state subsidy was more than the average pay for a big family unit. Ex-settlers remained in CRPs for more than ten years: there were still 27,871 refugees in the camps in 1952, approximately 9 % of whom were ex-settlers from Italian Africa.⁴⁴

How did the refugees from Africa, now residing in Italy and receiving governmental support, perceive their condition? In this regard, they were not a monolithic and homogeneous group of beneficiaries of public assistance, nostalgically bonded to the past; on the contrary, they organized associations, published newspapers, and entered public life as an active political force. The first generation of organizations was formed in Italy at the same time as the initial immigration of former African settlers. It was a constellation of few or very small realities that arose as a consequence of nothing more than individual endeavors, were extremely modest in scale, and were mostly of a local nature. Two realities emerged from this multifaceted galaxy in the early 1940s, establishing themselves as the main points of reference, the only associations of national importance: the National Association of East African Refugees ANPAO and the National Federation of Fighters, Refugees, and Italians of Africa FENPIA.⁴⁵

Anpao, the most prominent of the two, was created in September 1944 in Rome by the Sicilian Francesco Cavallaro, who had migrated to Italy in January 1943 from Addis Ababa where he worked as a notary. The first national congress was convened in Rome on July 8, 1945, and the association had roughly 30,000 members a year later, according to a Ministry of the Interior source. During its early years, ANPAO mainly carried out assistance activities for bureaucratic procedures, searches for lost luggage, subsidy applications, and clothing distribution. Furthermore, through its political link with the dominant party Christian Democracy, ANPAO lobbied with institutions on behalf of refugees, requesting reimbursement of war damages

43 Emanuele Ertola, "Orfani dell'impero: l'assistenza pubblica ai profughi dall'Africa orientale italiana, 1942-1956," *Archivio Storico dell'Emigrazione Italiana* 14 (2018): 58–67.

44 Ertola, "Orfani dell'Impero," 58–67.

45 Emanuele Ertola, "Ritornaremo: le associazioni di profughi d'Africa nell'Italia del dopoguerra," *Italia contemporanea* 288 (2018): 11–37.

and exploring the prospect of returning former settlers to Africa. It was via lobbying and propaganda that refugees became a cohesive group with shared interests.

The other major organization, with headquarters in Milan and chaired by General Augusto Ugolini, was founded a few years later in 1949. It was far smaller and more political, with few governmental contacts and hence no power to exert pressure on institutions; thus, it mostly dealt with denouncing the existing situation of former settlers who had been living in refugee camps for years due to a lack of housing and jobs. Through its publication, *Vergogna* (Shame) and then *Riconquista* (Reconquest) – a powerful choice of names – it launched a scathing attack on Italian institutions over the claimed right to return to Africa: “We refugees have sworn to maintain ourselves permanently at war against those who, by promises, deluding us with flattery, gaining trust and qualifying it as naivety, they would like to – and they will – sacrifice us beyond what is right.” To those “traitors,” according to whom “we are the remnants of an imperialist mindset,” the Fenpia said that “we were, are and will be at the service of Italy, eager to serve any government of the people that has the decency not to succumb to foreigners.”⁴⁶

In all former colonial powers, “The request for compensation became the totemic claim through which the repatriated from different colonies – and in different times – could find a symbolic unity as victims whose pains had to be recognized and addressed.”⁴⁷ The Italian case was no different. The associations of the ex-settlers built, through a self-representation focused on their labor (in Africa) and their status as victims (in Italy), a recognizable, and politically spendable, collective identity.⁴⁸

With the conclusion of the international dispute over the destiny of the former Italian colonies in 1952, the first generation of ex-settlers’ associative entities ceased to exist. For example, this occurred in France, where the 1962 associations gradually faded away during the 1970s, giving way to a second generation of associations characterized by the so-called *nostAlgérie*, in which political goals gave way to the preservation of a “collective colonial memory” through the organization of meetings, pilgrimages, and the publication of newspapers. Similarly in Italy, as the refugee crisis subsided – if slowly – and all expectation of a “return” to Africa vanished, with the former colonies now utterly removed from public discussion, the first generation of refugees from Africa’s associations vanished. In its place, about 20 years later, a second generation appeared, born in the early

46 Ertola, “Ritorneremo,” 27.

47 Eyerman, Sciortino, *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization*, 18.

48 Emanuele Ertola, “Repatriates, Refugees, or Exiles? Decolonization and the Italian Settlers’ Return. 1941-1956,” in *Europe between decolonization and integration (1945-1992)*, ed. Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes (London: Routledge, 2020).

seventies, and divided into two very different types: on one hand, the associations of refugees expelled from Libya in 1970 who knew how to carve out a public role and exert some pressure on national governments thanks to a very incisive and great ability to interact with politics; on the other hand, the associations of former settlers from East Africa, above all from Asmara and Addis Ababa, disinterested in politics and mostly concentrated on safeguarding memory and on nostalgic recollection of the years spent in Africa.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Was the exodus of previous Italian settlers, in essence, a “return migration”? Only a tiny percentage of them had never been to Italy: the smallest children and “old colonists”⁵⁰ born and raised in Africa, a small portion of the overall settler population, which rose exponentially only in the second half of the 1930s. It was a repatriation for everyone else. Or, more accurately, an evacuation, a forced migratory movement caused by constrain (those expelled by Gaddafi and those forced to leave after the Derg’s nationalizations or fleeing the war between Ethiopia and the Eritrean liberation front) or by unfavorable (or perceived—as–unfavorable) circumstances, including the loss of the privileged status that denoted the colonial condition. Certainly, for many of them it was not a “return home” because of the material difficulties they faced, the trauma of being uprooted, and the difficulty of Italian society recognizing them as a category even in terms of their name (generic “refugees” among others, without a specific label as awarded instead to the Portuguese *retornados*, the French *pieds noirs*, and the Japanese *hikiagesha*).⁵¹

It was a forced (re)migration also because they still saw the colony as their actual home. The former settlers therefore wanted to stay, even after colonial domination ended; they saw themselves as removed, driven out, alienated, and once in Italy they asked to return. “We shall return” was their fundamental motto, the ideological core of their associations. But they meant to stay or return in that (former) colonial space, retaining their historical status of privilege in dealings with former subordinates. Lorenzo Veracini suggests that the construc-

49 Alessandra Vigo, “Dealing With ‘Returns’: African Decolonization and Repatriation to Italy, 1947–70,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 57 (2022): 751–74. See also Del Boca, *Nostalgia delle colonie*; Labanca, *Oltremare*.

50 An expression used among the settlers in Italian East Africa to refer to the first generation of Italian immigrants.

51 Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made*.

tion of new re-negotiated and decolonized relationships not only fails, but is usually not even attempted. In this regard, the Italian case is entirely consistent with comparable international examples. Former settlers departed, sometimes forced by circumstances, sometimes coerced by post-colonial regimes, and sometimes freely; in all cases, their movement to the metropole – in Italy, as in France, Portugal, or Belgium – represented the failure of the potential of rebuilding and re-negotiating. Leaving, whether forced or voluntarily, eliminates the prospect of establishing a post-colonial relationship between equal subjects.⁵²

So, how should the migration of former Italian settlers be seen in comparison? It seems consistent with other international cases. This migrant movement has been a major difficulty for the motherland to manage in practically every nation, and in some cases a true emergency. In several circumstances, such as in Italy, it was essential to establish temporary housing complexes and give public subsidies for their upkeep. Of course, from this perspective, Italy’s crisis management, with former settlers having to remain in refugee camps for up to 10 years, does not appear to be the most effective model of reintegration. Despite the catastrophic proportions of Algerian immigration, France required less time to assimilate former colonists into French society. The fundamental distinction is that the emergency in France began in the 1960s, at a time of economic success, but in Italy it began between 1940 and 1943, during World War II, and then continued throughout the reconstruction years.⁵³ In this regard, the Japanese example lends itself best to comparison. Even in Japan, the exodus from former colonies coincided with the conclusion of the war and its aftermath, and was only finally resolved with the economic boom.⁵⁴

What seems to be more genuinely unique to the Italian case was not the migrant flow itself, nor the emergency it created in Italy, nor the claims for “return” and compensation for lost goods supported by the category’s representative organizations. Instead, its peculiarity seems to lie in its temporality: the fact that Italy did not face a single mass exodus coinciding with the end of colonial rule, but rather a 30-year movement defined by numerous internal stages and dynamics. It was the protracted period of migration of Italians from Africa to Italy (and, rarely, back) which I believe is the most interesting element of the Italian situa-

52 Veracini, “Settler Colonialism and Decolonisation.”

53 For a comparison see, among many, Éric Savarese, *L’Invention Des Pieds-Noirs* (Paris: Seguiet Editions, 2002); Jean-Jacques Jordi, *Les Pieds-Noirs* (Paris: Cavalier bleu, 2008); Yann Scioldo-Zürcher, *Devenir Métropolitain: Politique d’Intégration et Parcours des Rapatriés d’Algérie en Métropole (1954–2005)* (Paris: Éditions de l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2010).

54 Lori Watt, *When Empire Comes Home: Repatriation and Reintegration in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010).

tion, and which symbolizes the time it took former colonists and former colonized to realize that the world as they knew it was irreversibly gone. This calls for rethinking and ongoing analysis of the social and cultural processes set in motion during Italy's lengthy decolonization.

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