

**Hidden in Plain Sight:**  
**Italian Concentration Camps in Cyrenaica: 1930-1933**



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<sup>1</sup> "A Step Towards Civilization." Photograph of an unnamed concentration camp in Cyrenaica. Rodolfo Graziani, *Libia Redenta, Storia Di Trent'anni Di Passione Italiana in Africa* (Napoli: Torella, 1948), 97.

**Abstract:**

Over the course of three years the fascist colonial authorities in the Italian colony of Cyrenaica emptied an entire region of its people in an effort to quell an anti-colonial rebellion and prepare the colony for settlement and incorporation into Mussolini's envisioned Fascist empire. In this short time span, fascist authorities forcibly deported the semi-nomadic peoples of Cyrenaica from their homeland in the Jebel region and interned them in concentration camps on the desert coast. These policies resulted in the deaths of more than half of the semi-nomadic population of Cyrenaica, the decimation of their herds, and the near elimination of their way of life. Italy proudly broadcast this episode of colonial conquest to its fellow Western imperial powers who watched a genocide unfold with relative disinterest. This international neglect provided Fascist Italy with the opportunity to pursue its genocidal policies with minimal consequences or scrutiny, strengthen its geopolitical position in colonial Africa, and elaborate an increasingly radical, violent, and self-assured ideology for Italian Fascist colonialism.

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## Introduction

When Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922 he and his National Fascist party inherited liberal Italy's colonial empire; a paltry string of coastal towns and islands in the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa acquired over the course of a few decades of violent conquest in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fascist colonial imperialism is most commonly remembered in the West for Italy's 1935 conquest of Abyssinia, one of a handful of places in Africa left relatively untouched by European colonialism. However the general who oversaw this invasion, Rodolfo Graziani, had sharpened his teeth elsewhere in Africa. Beginning in 1930 Graziani led the brutal suppression of the anti-colonial Senussi revolt in the Italian colony Cyrenaica in North Africa. Over a period of four short years the Fascist colonial government forcibly deported an estimated 100,000 "semi-nomadic" people from the colony's interior and held them in a string of 16 concentration camps on the Mediterranean Coast. From 1929 to 1934 Cyrenaica's estimated population dropped from 225,000 to 142,000, indicating that 83,000 people disappeared from the colony in only five years. Of the 83,000 missing, about 60,000-70,000 are believed to have died as a result of the policies of deportation and internment.<sup>2</sup> These tragic events certainly meet the criteria for genocide laid out by Raphael Lemkin, and were declared such by Italian historian Giorgio Rochat in his 1973 article "La repressione della resistenza araba in Cirenaica nel 1930-31, nei documenti dell'archivio Graziani." Nevertheless, the details of the genocide have for decades been relatively unknown.<sup>3</sup>

The genocide that the Italians committed in Libya falls at the intersection of two fields of study in Italian history, the study fascism and the study of Italian colonialism. Despite the fact that the *Ventennio Fascista* fell entirely within the Italian colonial period, these areas of study

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<sup>2</sup> Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya: Shar, a Hidden Colonial History* (Routledge, 2020), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Rochat, "La repressione della resistenza araba in Cirenaica nel 1930-31, nei documenti dell'archivio Graziani," *Il Movimento di Liberazione in Italia* 25, no. 110 (January 1, 1973).

and pieces of Italian history were, until recently, treated separately by historians and received disparate amounts of scholarly attention.

Fascism has been a hot topic in western academia since its inception. One of the earliest writers to provide an analysis of fascism was Gaetano Salvemini, who in his 1928 *The Fascist Dictatorship in Italy* declared fascism to be nothing more than a political incarnate violence which developed in response to the economic and social crises of the post-war.<sup>4</sup> The exiled leader of the Communist Party of Italy, Palmiro Togliatti, provided an understandably Marxist analysis of fascism in his *lezioni sul fascismo* lectures delivered in Moscow in 1935. He argued that fascism was “an openly terrorist dictatorship comprising the most reactionary, chauvinistic, imperialistic elements of finance capital.”<sup>5</sup> The first writer to produce a historical account of fascism was Angelo Tasca who, in his 1938 *La Naissance du Fascisme*, argued that in order to understand fascism one must necessarily study its history and origins. To Tasca, the rise of fascism in Italy was the result of the failure of Italy’s left to seize on the post-war moment, and of the allegedly abnormal development of Italian democracy.<sup>6</sup>

By the time of *La Naissance du Fascisme*’s publication, however, Europe was on the brink of war and Mussolini’s fascism was but one flavor of a rapidly expanding political ideology meaning that Italian fascism had to compete with these other forms of fascism for attention from academics. In the postwar period there was a notable shift in the study of fascism. There was a desire to create a generic fascism, one that was stripped of its national (and nationalist) particularities in order to provide a framework for analysis of “fascism” where it existed as or within political systems around the globe. Since the 1950’s scholars have produced

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<sup>4</sup> Gaetano Salvemini, *The Fascist Dictatorship in Italy* (New York: H. Fertig, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> Palmiro Togliatti, *Lezioni Sul Fascismo*, Argomenti (Roma: Editori riuniti, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Angelo Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism, 1918-1922* (London: Methuen, 1938), 5.

many studies and histories of fascism ranging from Marxist analyses to more discursive histories exploring different aspects of fascism within its various national contexts.

At present, there is an ongoing reconvergence of these many divergent strands of fascism studies. Robert O. Paxton best sums up the current academic approach to studying fascism in his *The Anatomy of Fascism* written in 2004. Paxton asserts that it is still best to avoid nominalism and to maintain a general approach to studying fascism since, much like liberalism and communism, it was a generalized phenomenon which, despite national particularities, could be identified as such. The methodology that Paxton puts forth is to “watch fascism in action, from its beginnings to its final cataclysm, within the complex web of interaction it forms with society.”<sup>7</sup> This is the approach that I take in this thesis. Colonialism was an action of fascism and is therefore an essential part of any assessment of Italian fascism.

The lack of historical scholarship on the subject of Italian imperialism in comparison to the abundance of scholarship on Italian fascism can best be explained by the pernicious and still popular myth of the *italiani brava gente*. Simply put, it is the idea that Italians are fundamentally good people and therefore could not have committed any atrocities on par with those committed by the other imperial powers, or even other fascisms. The Italian government had an outsized role in promoting this historiographical silence. In 1952 the Italian government authorized the *Comitato per la documentazione dell’opera dell’Italia in Africa* to compile 40 volumes on Italian activities in Africa.<sup>8</sup> This committee was made up of 24 former colonial functionaries who essentially wrote 40 hagiographies of themselves and their collaborators, and established the

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<sup>7</sup> Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* /, 1st ed. (New York :, 2004), 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Ghiglione, “As Europe Reckons With Racism, Italy Still Won’t Confront Its Colonial Past,” *Foreign Policy*, accessed December 22, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/30/as-europe-reckons-with-racism-italy-still-wont-confront-its-colonial-past/>.

norms for the study and discussion of Italian colonial history that would dominate until the 1990s.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s some at the radical fringe of the Italian academy began to study the colonial empire in more depth. Two Italian scholars in particular, Angelo del Boca and Giorgio Rochat began to resist the hegemony of the *brava gente* myth by investigating and publicizing the history of specific atrocities committed by Italy in Africa. In 1966, Del Boca published the first article of this genre which exposed the immense violence of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Del Boca faced immediate condemnation from the Italian academy and press, with one critic writing that, “there are some things about which we cannot speak because we are, of course, *brava gente*.”<sup>9</sup>

The task of reconstructing a history of the genocide in Cyrenaica was a monumental undertaking that spanned decades. It began with Giorgio Rochat’s 1973 article “The Repression of Resistance in Cyrenaica 1927-1931,” in which Rochat asserted that the actions taken by the Fascist Italian Government amounted to a genocide based on his readings of a series of letters between Pietro Badoglio and Rodolfo Graziani. Rochat’s article faced immediate and sustained backlash from the Italian academic world - he was still publishing defenses of the article in 1980.<sup>10</sup>

Rochat eventually republished the article in 1986 as part of an edited volume on the leader of the Senussi rebellion against Italian rule, Omar al-Mukhtar. In this version, Rochat adds a preface explaining the many ways that the Italian government has actively sought to hide and suppress this history. According to Rochat, studies of colonialism during the fascist period were

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<sup>9</sup> Anais Ginori, "Foibe, gas e rimozione: gli italiani in Etiopia," eddyburg, May 23, 2006. <http://eddyburg.it/article/articleview/6677/0/153/>.

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Rochat, “IL GENOCIDIO CIRENAICO E LA STORIOGRAFIA COLONIALE,” *Belfagor* 35, no. 4 (1980): 449–55.



generally avoided in favor of less contentious subjects from the 19th century. This culture of avoiding a confrontation with the fascist past left the final word on the fascist colonial period to the fascist national press from the 1930s who, “displayed a total incomprehension of, and deep contempt for Cyrenaican society and its long resistance to Italian occupation,” and “openly distorted documentary sources for the purpose of propaganda.”<sup>11</sup>

The archival sources available to combat this narrative were limited. The National State Archives in Rome were open to Italian students and researchers without hindrance, but much of the documents relating to Italy’s actions in Africa were fiercely guarded. Instead, Rochat turned to the personal papers of General Rodolfo Graziani, and what remained of the archives of the Ministry of the Colonies after it was suppressed in 1953 and its archive absorbed into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The papers that remained from the Ministry of the Colonies were incomplete and disorganized because the members of the aforementioned *Comitato per la documentazione dell’opera dell’Italia in Africa* were permitted to take documents home with them in order to work, but it became nearly impossible to replace and reorganize all the files upon their return.<sup>12</sup>

It was under these same conditions of a disorganized and incomplete yet somewhat accessible archive that Italian authors Angelo del Boca and Gustavo Ottolenghi were able to write their books on Italy’s colonization of Libya. The experience of Libyan-American political scientist Ali Abdulatiff Ahmida was much different. Ahmida reports that he traveled to Rome in 1986 while still a graduate student at the University of Washington to study the concentration camps in Cyrenaica at the Foreign Ministry’s archives, and that on the first day of research he was informed that Libyan scholars were not permitted in the archive since Italian scholars were

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<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Rochat in “The Repression of the Arab resistance in Cyrenaica” in Enzo Santarelli, Luigi Goglia, and John Gilbert, eds., *Omar Al-Mukhtar: The Italian Reconquest of Libya* (London: Darf, 1986), 35-37.

<sup>12</sup> Rochat in *Omar al-Mukhtar*, 37-40.

barred from Libyan archives. This turned out to be a lie and an example of the explicit censorship and suppression of this fraught colonial history four decades after Italy officially lost its colonies.<sup>13</sup> Luckily for researchers writing in the present, Italy has lessened the censorship of its colonial past and researchers such as Ahmida, American historian Michael Ebner, and Italian journalist Eric Salerno have been able to publish important studies on the military and social histories of the genocide in Cyrenaica by using a mix of official Italian sources with Libyan oral sources.

This thesis will go beyond the concentration camps themselves in order to explore how this genocide unfolded, how the other Western powers interpreted Italy's actions, and what role the central Fascist state had in shaping the genocide and its reception abroad. Each of these issues is complex and speaks to different aspects of how the genocide in Cyrenaica shaped Fascist ideology and Italy's place in the world in the interwar period. As such, this thesis will be divided into three chapters with each chapter addressing one of these issues.

The first chapter is a brief reconstruction of the story of these concentration camps. This chapter will provide a sense of the lived reality of those subject to forced deportation and internment before engaging with the narrative put forth by fascist propaganda in the following chapters. This history will be reconstructed mostly through secondary sources alongside a few primary sources including a report from the International Labor Organization and E. Evans Pritchard's roughly contemporary study of the Senussi. Only a limited amount of Italian primary sources are employed in this chapter in order to present a narrative of the genocide as free from the influence of fascist propaganda as possible.

The second chapter will explore the coverage of the concentration camps and the violence in Cyrenaica in American, British, and French newspapers and official government

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<sup>13</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya*, 18.

papers. This chapter will analyze how the genocide in Cyrenaica was portrayed and interpreted by the press across these various Western contexts and compare the popular interpretations to the actions taken by their respective national governments.

The third and final chapter analyzes the Fascist regime's plans for the genocide, and how it was discussed, debated, and portrayed within official Fascist circles and the Italian press. The source base for this chapter is the speeches and writings of the leaders of the colonial administration in Libya: Minister of the Colonies Emilio De Bono, Governor of Libya Pietro Badoglio, and General Rodolfo Graziani, all of whom played key roles in presenting and normalizing the genocide to the international community.

## Chapter 1: *Shar* شرير (Evil)

### The origins of the Senussi

Italians had actually been slowly penetrating the economy of North Africa's coastal towns since the late 19th century, and by the turn of the 20th century there was a considerable number of Italian settlers (primarily peasants and laborers) living in French controlled Algeria and Tunisia.<sup>14</sup> This increasing Italian economic penetration revealed the weakness of the Ottoman Empire to the various tribes who inhabited the Jebel Akhdar and the Libyan interior.

Since the 16th century the Ottoman authorities in Libya had contented themselves with exerting control over the towns of the coast while affording a good deal of autonomy to the local Arab tribes. Over the centuries Ottoman suzerainty functioned as a buffer between the increasingly muscular European powers in the Mediterranean and the Arab tribes of the North African interior. The gradual erosion of Ottoman power at the hands of European empires in the late 19th century prompted the leaders of the Senussiyya, a muslim religious brotherhood founded in the early 19th century with roots in Cyrenaica, to organize the various tribes of the Jebel Akhdar (Green Mountains) and interior Sahara into a cohesive social whole.<sup>15</sup>

The Senussi confraternity's socio-political organization was rooted in the promotion of Islamic values and education, trade, self-reliance, and *jihad* or defense of the faith amongst the local tribes. These activities were organized through a system of lodges which all swore loyalty to the quasi-monarchical Grand Senussi. Each lodge was led by a local *shaykh* who was assisted by his *wakil* administrators and *agha* aides. The Senussi lodge network was adapted from a

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<sup>14</sup> Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare : Storia Dell'espansione Coloniale Italiana* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2002), 33-36.

<sup>15</sup> Ali A. Ahmida, "FROM TRIBE TO CLASS: THE ORIGINS AND THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE IN COLONIAL LIBYA," *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 63, no. 2 (2008): 297-310.

model developed in the fourteenth century by Medieval Iberian Sufi orders to organize resistance to the Spanish *Reconquista*. It served the Senussi well, and by 1870 they were overseeing a de facto state that contained the Jebel and the oases on the trans-saharan trade routes between Cyrenaica, Sudan, Egypt, and Chad.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Early Italian colonial period**

An Italian invasion force landed in Libya in 1911 and found quick success in conquering the settled towns of the coast. By 1912 Italy occupied much of coastal Tripolitania and the area around Benghazi in Cyrenaica, and the war soon shifted from one against Ottoman armies to a brutal guerilla war with the anti-colonial forces organized by the Senussi.<sup>17</sup> The conflict bogged down until Italy was forced to grant greater autonomy to the local population as a result of being drawn into the first world war in 1915. This relative withdrawal from Libya during the years of the war offered a brief moment of home rule for Libyans .

In order to reassert nominal control over Cyrenaica in the immediate postwar and prevent it from falling into the hands of the French or the British, the Italian government promulgated a constitution for the colony in 1919. This constitution provided for a Parliament of 69 members, of which seven were to be appointed by the Italian government, eight by the Grand Senussi, and the other 54 elected according to rules of suffrage determined by the leadership of individual tribes. The first Parliament was seated in Benghazi in 1921 and was composed of two Libyan Jews, eight Italians, eight members of the Senussi dynasty, and 51 tribal leaders. The Parliamentarians organized themselves into three main parties and elected a cousin of the Grand Senussi, Sidi Safi-Eddin, to be the Speaker of the Parliament.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Labanca, *Oltremare*, 120-124.

<sup>18</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia* (Roma: Laterza, 1986), 137-143.

A *New York Times* article from 1921 praised Italy for using the Benghazi Parliament to balance the difficulties of “govern[ing] a people with cherished ideas of independence whose independence is not to be permitted on account of the position they hold in relation to the political, military, and industrial interests of the government trying to administer their affairs.” A balance which the imperial governments in Egypt, Morocco, and India were also trying to strike.<sup>19</sup> *The New York Times* urged the governments in London and Paris who were dealing with the crises of the Rif War, the fallout of the Amritsar Massacre, and the independence movement in Egypt to watch the Benghazi parliament closely, because “It is deemed certain that the Grand Senussi will continue to have an ever-growing influence on the Moslem world.”<sup>20</sup> This liberal imperial fantasy of preserving empires by spreading democracy abroad would soon crumble.

### **Fascism comes to Libya**

The National Fascist Party seized power in Italy in 1922 and almost immediately began to crack down on the autonomy of the Senussi in Cyrenaica. Rebellion broke out across Libya once again and Fascist Italy responded with horrible displays of force and cruelty.<sup>21</sup> By 1926 the Fascists, under the direction of Governor Emilio De Bono had officially “pacified” Tripolitania while Omar al-Mukhtar continued to lead a fierce and tenacious rebellion in Cyrenaica. This steady escalation of violence coincided with the broader process of the fascisization of the Italian state. In a speech to the Fascist Cabinet Federzoni declared that Cyrenaica must now conform to the “superior exigencies” of the Fascist regime, and that the destruction of Cyrenaica’s “vain” and “puerile” parliamentary institutions was now necessary.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>“ITALY LETS ARABS TRY HOME RULE; New Parliament Set Up by the Senussi Is Formally Launched. WATCHED BY NEIGHBORS,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 1921.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Michael R. Ebner, “Fascist Violence and the ‘Ethnic Reconstruction’ of Cyrenaica (Libya), 1922–1934,” in *Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World*, ed. Philip Dwyer and Amanda Nettelbeck, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 205.

<sup>22</sup>“ITALY WITHDRAWS COLONIAL AUTONOMY,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 1927.

With the rebellion in Tripolitania crushed and the Benghazi parliament formally suppressed, the fascist regime was free to use whatever means necessary to “pacify” Cyrenaica. The “pacification” of Cyrenaica was by no means the first time that the Italian government employed novel weapons and tactics against its colonial subjects. The initial invasion of Libya in 1911 saw the first use of aeronautical anti-civilian tactics. The Italian air forces would swoop low over Libyan villages and hand-drop explosives on military targets in order to terrorize the civilian population.<sup>23</sup> The Fascists utilized airplanes in Libya again in 1926 when Italy became the first country to intentionally use poisonous gas against civilian populations by dropping canisters of phosgene gas on caravans in the Libyan interior.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of the 1920s the military situation in Cyrenaica had become untenable for the Italians. Omar al-Mukhtar’s highly mobile guerilla bands known as *duar* were able to attack Italian military positions and then quickly disappear back into civilian society making them nearly impossible for a formal army to suppress. The Governor of Cyrenaica from 1926 to 1929, Attilio Terruzzi, bemoaned that even armies of 5,000 or 10,000 men were insufficient against even a few hundred guerilla fighters who, owing to their semi-nomadic lifestyle, weren’t tied to any specific location and seemed to be able to appear and disappear spontaneously across hundreds of kilometers.<sup>25</sup> Terruzzi’s strategy was to use brute force and technological superiority to combat an enemy with better knowledge of the terrain and integration into the local society. Trucks, tanks, and planes proved to be minimally effective in the valleys and mountains of the Jebel region, and by 1929 Emilio de Bono, now Minister of the Colonies, began to push for more drastic measures. Pietro Badoglio, who replaced Terruzzi as governor, initially resisted these

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<sup>23</sup> Labanca, *Oltremare* 122.

<sup>24</sup> Ebner, “Fascist Violence and the ‘Ethnic Reconstruction’ of Cyrenaica (Libya), 1922–1934,” 207.

<sup>25</sup> Attilio Terruzzi, *Cirenaica Verde: Due Anni Di Governo, Dicembre 1926-Gennaio 1929* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1931), 334.

calls for escalation, but in March of 1930 a frustrated Badoglio was forced to rely on ambitious Italian general and newly-appointed Vice Governor of Cyrenaica, Rodolfo Graziani, to end the Senussi rebellion once and for all.<sup>26</sup>

### **Mass Deportations**

The exact start date of the policy of deportation and internment is murky. Most of the archival historians (del Boca, Ottolenghi, Rochat), agree that the mass deportations began in the spring of 1930 and lasted for three months until all of the target tribes were interned. Ahmida, on the other hand, posits that the deportations may have begun in 1929 based on the dates given to him in interviews with survivors. This discrepancy can likely be explained by the fact that the Italian military had in fact begun to use forced deportation as a form of collective punishment for individual instances of rebellion and resistance about a year prior to the mass deportations that would come in 1930. For example, on October 31st, 1928 the Italian authorities accused the people of the central Libyan town of Hun of aiding the resistance fighters. After deporting the men accused of being resistance fighters and hanging 19 more, the Italians made an example of the town by deporting the entire population of 1,078 to the coast.<sup>27</sup>

Forced deportations may not have been widespread in 1929, but the one at Hun indicates that the Fascist authorities had begun to recognize mass deportations as a viable tool for implementing colonial policy. Furthermore, these earlier instances of deportation match the descriptions of those carried out by Graziani in 1930, and do not substantially differ from what would happen colony-wide a year later. Since the actual practice of forced deportation in 1929 did not differ in any substantive manner from those of 1930, it would be a matter of semantics to say, as most archival historians do, that the genocide began in 1930 when the policy of mass

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<sup>26</sup> Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia*, 159-164.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya*, 32.



deportation and internment was implemented colony-wide as opposed to 1929 when it was first employed.

In June of 1930, by order of Pietro Badoglio, all of the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples, who made up an estimated 120,000-130,000 of Cyrenaica's 225,000 inhabitants, became subject to deportation and internment.<sup>28</sup> Whole tribes were forced to march from their homelands either in the Jebel or the Libyan interior to a string of 16 different camps in the coastal desert near Sirte. The distance and length of the marches varied depending on the locations of the camp and of the tribe's homeland. In many cases the march from homeland to concentration camp took a few weeks, but some of the longest took over two months.<sup>29</sup>

The marches themselves were an essential part of the genocide. Both Italian archival sources and Libyan oral sources confirm that a large number of those deported from their homelands did not arrive at the camps. Of the estimated 120,000-130,000 deportees only 80,000 were recorded by Graziani as actually arriving at the camps in 1930.<sup>30</sup> At Marsa el-Brega, one of the largest concentration camps in Cyrenaica, there were supposed to be 22,500 inhabitants made up of 9000 nomads from the area surrounding the camp and 13,200 tribesmen who were living a two months march away, but by the time the distant tribe arrived only 11,000 of them were still alive.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rochat, "IL GENOCIDIO CIRENAICO E LA STORIOGRAFIA COLONIALE", 453.

<sup>29</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya*, 79.

<sup>30</sup> Rodolfo Graziani, *Cirenaica pacificata* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1932), 104.

<sup>31</sup> "I CAMPI FASCISTI - Dalle Guerre in Africa Alla Repubblica Di Salò," accessed October 11, 2020, [http://campifascisti.it/elenco\\_tipo\\_campi.php?nazione=100&id\\_tipo=1](http://campifascisti.it/elenco_tipo_campi.php?nazione=100&id_tipo=1).



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### **Inside the concentration camps**

The silence of the Italian archives on the details of deportation and internment as well as the names and number of those deported, interned, and died is deafening. As a result, much of the secondary literature written by Italian archival historians is unable to provide much of an insight into the camps aside from banal administrative details. So, it is here that we rely on the Libyan oral sources from Ahmida's *Genocide in Libya*.

The people of Libya have a long and intimate history with oral tradition, epic poetry, and storytelling. Many of the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes in Cyrenaica were illiterate, so the recitation of stories and poems was a way of preserving the history and culture of the community. This rich oral tradition is usually standardized within a tribe and sometimes even across the entire region, making it a useful repository of collective memory for historians. The

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<sup>32</sup> Photograph of Eritrean Ascaris troops escorting the nomadic population during the forced march from the Jebel to Sirte from: Rodolfo Graziani, *Libia Redenta, Storia Di Trent'anni Di Passione Italiana in Africa* (Napoli: Torella, 1948), 80.

sources that Ahmida included in *Genocide in Libya* are a mixture of epic poems composed in the camps and transmitted to the descendants of survivors, and interviews with survivors themselves, many of whom were in their teens when they first entered the camps.<sup>33</sup>

According to survivors of the Marsa el-Brega camp the Italian soldiers were ordered to use whips and guns to ensure that those marching to the camps were hurrying along at a satisfactory pace. Those who did not walk fast enough were whipped and those who passed out from exhaustion or lack of food were shot.<sup>34</sup> Even the animals that the largely pastoral tribes brought with them on the march to the camps were subject to punishment. A survivor of the Magrun camp recalled how the soldiers burned and shot the camels that stopped which caused a deadly stampede.<sup>35</sup> A majority of those who died during the deportation marches were children and elders.

The suffering did not end once they reached the coast. For many of the prisoners of the larger camps like Agaila and Marsa el-Brega, the camps were not reached by a direct overland route. They were crowded onto ships in the coastal towns and held for days while they were transported to the camps. There was no food or water provided on the boats and those who died or appeared to be near death were thrown overboard.<sup>36</sup> Even getting off of the boats was a dehumanizing affair. A survivor of the Agaila camp recalled that the camp's port facilities didn't allow for direct disembarkment from large European ships, so "they boxed us up and put us in nets and used a cargo arm to lift us up and drop us on the shore."<sup>37</sup>

The camps themselves were laid out according to what the Italian authorities believed an Ancient Roman military encampment or *castrum* would have looked like. Families were

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<sup>33</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya*, 20.

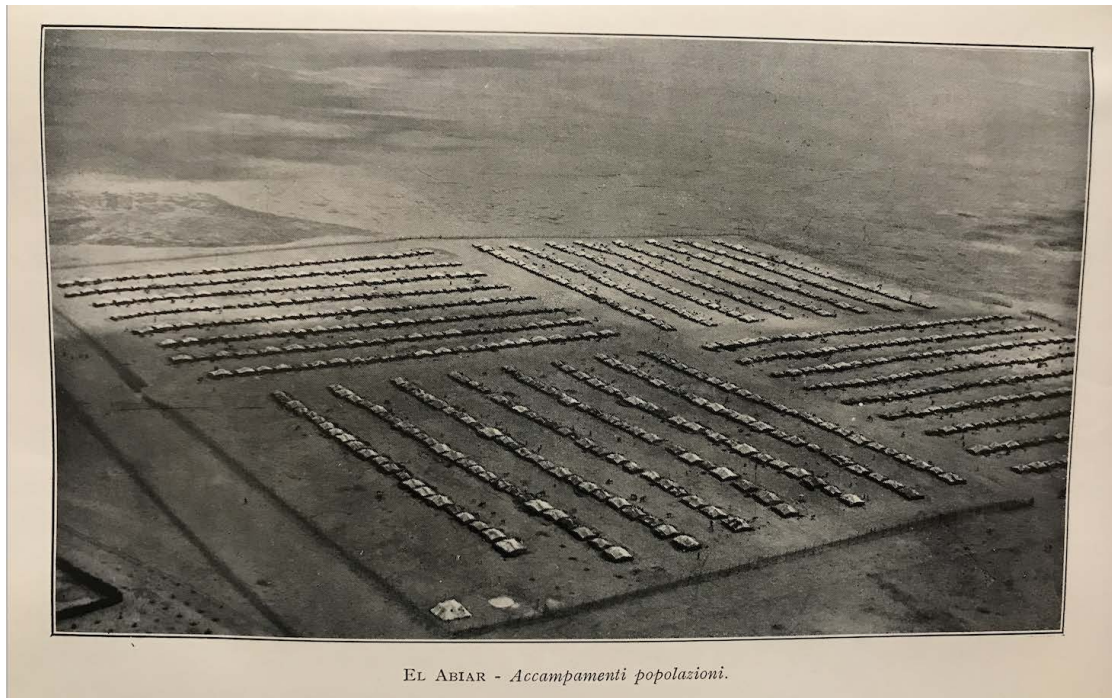
<sup>34</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya* 81.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya* 83.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya* 88.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya* 82.

assigned to one of many canvas tents arranged in a grid. This central grid was surrounded by “pastureland” and enclosed by a barbed wire fence.<sup>38</sup> The camps were policed by *Ascari* troops brought in from Eritrea, and Libyan troops recruited (either forcibly or voluntarily) from Tripolitania and the cities of Cyrenaica.<sup>39</sup>



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The colonial troops who policed the camps were encouraged to be as harsh as. According to Ahmida, many of the survivors that he interviewed believed that this cruelty was because a Libyan collaborator, al-Sharif al-Ghariani, advised the Italian state that in order to defeat the Senussi they had to “cut the roots and the tree shall fall.” meaning that it was necessary to sever the Senussi from their civilian social base.<sup>41</sup> Whether or not this Libyan collaborator actually existed is unclear, but the notion that the Italians were trying to stop Omar al-Mukhtar’s

<sup>38</sup> “Concentration Camps for Native Labour on the Coast of Cyrenaica”, *International Labour Review*. Volume 26, (1932), 410.

<sup>39</sup> “I CAMPI FASCISTI - Dalle Guerre in Africa Alla Repubblica Di Salò.”

<sup>40</sup> Bird’s Eye view of El Abiar concentration camp in Angelo Piccioli *La Nuova Italia D’Oltremare* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1932), 197.

<sup>41</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya*, 80.

resistance by isolating and destroying its base of support is correct. Moreover, Italian propagandists were keen to broadcast the image of the fascist “new man” disciplining the untamable Arab nomads abroad. This potent mixture of apparent martial necessity and political desire gave colonial troops a blank check to surveil and punish as they saw fit.

Punishments were doled out liberally and often publicly. Internees could find themselves whipped, insulted, beaten, or hanged for any number of alleged transgressions from communicating with those in other concentration camps to exchanging what little rations the Italian authorities provided them. The most vicious punishments were doled out in response to perceived insults to Italy’s national pride. Internees were made to stand and salute the Italian flag every morning and evening, and failure to do so would often result in being publicly beaten and humiliated. A survivor from the Agaila camps recalled that “when a man once failed to salute the commander he was whipped 100 times. Then, when he refused to say, ‘Long live the king of Italy,’ he was whipped 700 more times.”<sup>42</sup>

Alongside the attacks on their persons, the interned also had to contend with the destruction of their possessions, their herds, and their way of life. The Italian authorities were acutely aware of the importance of the tribes’ herds of sheep, cattle, and camels to their culture and diet, and actively sought to destroy tribal flocks. This led to a precipitous decline in the livestock population as indicated by the 1929 Italian livestock census reporting 600,000 heads of livestock in 1929 while the 1934 livestock census reported only 67,000.<sup>43</sup> E. E. Evans Pritchard estimated that the Italian army killed as many as 170,000 animals on its own in this period, while the rest are believed to have been simply left to die of starvation.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya*, 66.

<sup>43</sup> Giorgio Rochat, “IL GENOCIDIO CIRENAICO E LA STORIOGRAFIA COLONIALE,” 453.

<sup>44</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 32.

The destruction of the herds was a destruction of native wealth that cannot be overstated, but the herds were also as much a source of food for the tribes as they were a source of wealth. Much of the death reported by survivors of the camps was the result of starvation and malnutrition. The destruction of the herds deprived the interned of a much needed source of food; a nutritional void which the Italian authorities only filled with “650 grams of grain, a weekly ration of pasta with tomato sauce , two cups of orzo, coffee, an onion, and a lemon for the indigent among the detained.”<sup>45</sup>

Yet, before the starvation could kill them physically, the interned suffered a symbolic death. The herds were symbols of their semi-nomadic way of life and their destruction was especially demoralizing, so much so that after starvation, the second most common cause of death that survivors reported witnessing was depression. Survivors of the largest camps - Agaila, Marsa el-Brega, and Soluch - report 100-150 people dying each day at the most desperate points in their internment. People simply gave up hope because their entire means of existence: physically, socially, and culturally were violently stripped from them.<sup>46</sup>

The actual number of those who died and the rate of death is one of the most difficult statistics to pin down, because official records from the camps don't exist. Census records for the whole of Cyrenaica show that the population of 225,000 in 1929 was reduced to 142,000 by 1934. Not all of the 83,000 missing people can be attributed to the deportations and concentration camps, but most historians estimate that between 60,000 to 70,000 of those missing died during the deportations and internment. These deaths represent roughly a quarter of Cyrenaica's 1929 population, however this number still includes the populations of the towns whose inhabitants were not subject to deportation. When the 60,000-70,000 deaths are subtracted

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<sup>45</sup> “Concentration Camps for Native Labour on the Coast of Cyrenaica”, *International Labour: Review*. Volume 26, (1932), 412.

<sup>46</sup> Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya*, 103-107.

from the 120,000-130,000 who were subject to deportation it becomes clear that about half of the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of Cyrenaica were killed in only a few years' time. This level of death among the interned was fiercely denied by the Italian authorities, yet even their own census proves that a huge number of people had disappeared from Cyrenaica when the camps were finally closed in 1933.

Where the survivors of the concentration camps went after the camps were closed is still unclear. Eric Salerno, an Italian journalist, interviewed a number of survivors of the camps for the socialist newspaper *Il Manifesto* in 1979 and found many of them still living at the sites of some of the camps in the desert.<sup>47</sup> Their continued presence is a testament to the success of the concentration camps in destroying their nomadic and semi-nomadic way of life.

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<sup>47</sup> Eric Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia : Le Atrocità Nascoste Dell'avventura Coloniale Italiana, 1911-1931* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2005), 90-114.

## **Chapter 2 : The view from abroad**

The fact that the Italians were committing a “genocide” would not have been clear to the rest of the Western powers, since genocide as a concept had not yet been defined. However, that doesn’t mean that other major powers weren’t aware of the drastic measures that the Italian state was taking to displace the indigenous peoples of the Jebel region of Cyrenaica and eliminate their way of life. Granted, the Great Powers did not have a strong record on humanitarian interventions in the early 20th century, but there were other atrocities that the colonial powers committed in the interwar period that drew widespread ire in the international press, such as the Amritsar massacre and the Rif War, so one could have expected Italy to face similar condemnation for its actions in Cyrenaica.

This lack of condemnation by the international press should not, however, be taken as a moment to project contemporary moral judgments onto the past, but instead as an opportunity to investigate what the liberal international press actually did report about Cyrenaica from 1930 to 1933. An analysis of the newspaper coverage of the Italian conquest and colonization of Cyrenaica is an exercise in understanding the mass culture and geopolitical preoccupations of the countries in which the news was published. The purpose of understanding what the western public outside of Italy knew, then, is not to answer some hypothetical question of why didn’t any other country intervene to stop the atrocities from occurring, but rather to get a more full understanding of the information available to the international public about the concentration camps in Cyrenaica.

The primary western observers who covered the Italian colonization of Cyrenaica were the British, American, and French presses. For the purpose of this thesis the broad category of



the British press includes newspapers that were located or headquartered in the wider British colonial sphere like India and Ireland since these smaller national presses reflected both the national context within which they were published and the wider imperial cultures that they were linked to.

### **Major trends in international reporting on Cyrenaica**

\_\_\_\_\_The reporting of major international newspapers on the Italian atrocities in Cyrenaica varied significantly, but there are a few general trends that emerged across the various national presses. The reporting on the events in Cyrenaica came in waves that corresponded to important developments in the Italian conquest of the region. The Senussi-led anti-colonial rebellion in Cyrenaica had been raging for nearly two decades, so the coverage of the ongoing and often banal violence in the colony was quite sparse prior to the appointment of General Graziani to oversee the region's "pacification."

Much of the pre-Graziani reporting focused on isolated instances of intense violence, novel ideas in colonial administration, and the ongoing border dispute between Italian Cyrenaica and English-dominated Egypt. The cause célèbre of international reporting on Cyrenaica in the 1920s was the establishment of the Benghazi parliament in 1921. *The New York Times* reported that the new parliament represented a unique and exciting development in colonial rule. The parliament was framed as a didactic exercise to aid the Senussi in achieving their own stated ends. The Italians argued that "only by self-government can you hope to win Moslems from the luxuries of the Turks and educate the ignorant among them to the full beauties of Islam as it is taught in the Koran."<sup>48</sup> According to *The New York Times*, this new parliament ought to be watched closely by observers in London and Paris. It likely was watched closely by government

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<sup>48</sup> "ITALY LETS ARABS TRY HOME RULE; New Parliament Set Up by the Senussi Is Formally Launched. WATCHED BY NEIGHBORS," *The New York Times*, June 26, 1921.

officials in Britain and France, but the press in these imperial metropolises was more reserved than the Americans. A correspondent in Rome for Britain's *The Observer* simply noted that "the grant of a constitution to a native population at such an early epoch in a colony's history marks a real break from the classic colonial theory hitherto followed by England and France."<sup>49</sup> This dichotomy between the optimism of American observers and the restraint of British ones about the colonial innovations implemented by the Italian government was a trend in reporting on events in Cyrenaica that was carried over into the Fascist era.

### **Italy deports 80,000 Arabs to the coast**

The news that Italian authorities had relocated the entire population of the Jebel to concentration camps on the coast first broke in international newspapers in early October 1930. The broad strokes of the narrative picture were consistent across the anglophone and francophone press. The phrases "80,000 people", "600,000 heads of livestock", "concentration camps on the coast", and "one of the largest movements of people in modern history" were echoed in all the reporting.

As the saying goes, the devil is in the details, and this rang especially true for reporting on the concentration camps in Cyrenaica. While all news outlets agreed on the basic facts of the story, it is the details that were reported by individual newspapers that created a fuller picture of what was happening on the ground in Cyrenaica and provides insight into the full scope of what information was available to the Western public. For example, the "80,000 people" indicates that Italian authorities did not release any information on the deportations prior to the arrival of the tribes in their respective camps since there is no indication that these people were the 80,000 survivors of the 120,000 who were initially deported.

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<sup>49</sup> Our Own Correspondent, "First Arab Parliament: New Phase of Colonial Government," *The Observer* (1901-2003), May 8, 1921.

The first English language news outlet to report on the deportation of the inhabitants of the Jebel was Boston's *Christian Science Monitor*. On October 3rd, 1930 the *Christian Science Monitor* ran the story, "Italy Inaugurates New Colonial Policy by Transferring African Tribes to Coast" in which it declared that Italy "has introduced a system entirely new in the world's history of colonial government in Africa - it has carried out a mass transfer of native tribes and their goods from the hinterland where control is difficult to a stretch of coast and assigned to them new cultivable land under the supervision of government forces."<sup>50</sup> The *Christian Science Monitor*'s article listed the standard figures of 80,000 people and 600,000 heads of livestock and repurposed the theme of the newness of Italy's colonial policy that the *New York Times* had introduced in its reporting on the Benghazi Parliament. However, the policy of forcing the native inhabitants of a region into concentration camps in order to suppress anti-colonial resistance was not actually new at all. The first documented use of concentration camps as a method of suppressing a rebellion by native peoples in colonial Africa was carried out by the German Empire during the conquest of present-day Namibia in 1907.<sup>51</sup> What was genuinely new about the Italian policy of forced deportation and internment was that it was framed not as both a military manoeuvre and as a novel method of making the land more productive. The German military commanders in Namibia were unambiguous about their intent to annihilate a specific group of people, whereas in *The Christian Science Monitor*'s retelling the Fascist intent appears benevolent. Italian authorities gave the people they deported "new cultivatable land" in "a civilized area."<sup>52</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor* even went so far as to speculate that the newly

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<sup>50</sup>"Italy Inaugurates New Colonial Policy by Transferring African Tribes to Coast," *The Christian Science Monitor* (1908-Current File), October 3, 1930.

<sup>51</sup>In 1907 the German military implemented a policy of driving members of the Herero and Nama tribes who had been rebelling against German colonial rule since 1903 into concentration camps in the Namib Desert where they were left to die. It is estimated that about 80% of the Herero and Nama peoples died during this episode of horrific colonial violence. For more information see Isabel V. Hull. *Absolute Destruction : Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Cornell University Press, 2006, 70-90.

<sup>52</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor* (1908-Current File), October 3, 1930.

resettled Arab population may “make good on ground which at one time constituted the granary of Rome at the height of the Empire.”<sup>53</sup>

This framing of Fascist Italy as a benevolent and innovative colonizer was parroted by newspapers across the West in their own articles on Italy’s new colonial policy. However, it is unlikely that *The Christian Science Monitor* actually set this apologetic tone. Fascist Italy was depicted as a modern and exciting new breeding ground for colonial ideas and practices well before *The Christian Science Monitor* reported on the concentration camps in Cyrenaica. For example, *The New York Times* published an article in June 1930 praising General Graziani for his idea to institute “air tribunals” which used airplanes to fly judges to remote regions of Libya in order to dispense colonial justice.<sup>54</sup>

Parsing through the many articles published on the opening of the concentration camps in the anglophone press reveals a vivid account of the march from the Jebel to the concentration camps on the coast. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that a series of wells had been dug along the route from the Jebel to Sirte by Fascist military officials prior to the initiation of the long march across the desert, an account which was corroborated by the French newspaper of record, *Le Temps*.<sup>55</sup> The *Times of India* reported that their correspondents had reason to believe that the military operations associated with the march across the desert had begun at least three months prior to the announcement by the fascist government in October.<sup>57</sup> This claim was backed

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> “AIR TRIBUNAL SPEEDS JUSTICE IN CYRENAICA: Vice Governor Solves Problems by Sending Court to Scenes of Trials in Planes.,” *New York Times*, June, 5 1930.

<sup>55</sup> “Quit Desert Home: ITALIANS FORCE 80,000 ARABS TO ABANDON HOMES Drive Tribes from Desert to Coast to Pacify Libya.,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 5, 1930.

<sup>56</sup> “L’Italie,” *Le Temps*, October 4, 1930.

<sup>57</sup> *The Times of India (1861-Current)*, October 4, 1930.

up by the *Los Angeles Times* which reported that the deportation was carried out in secret over the course of months and was only announced to the public once it was completed.<sup>58</sup>

The newspapers also quickly recognized that the concentration camps in Cyrenaica signaled a shift in the tactics Italy was willing to employ to suppress the rebellion in its colony. *The Boston Globe* reported that the Italian government's move to deport the inhabitants of the Jebel was clearly made out of "its enduring determination to break the spirit of the Moslem rebels of the Jebel." The same article went on to report Italy had supplemented the deportations by disbanding all formal military corps made up of Libyan Arabs, sending new guns and munitions to the colony that used larger rounds so that the Italian weapons stolen by the rebels would be useless should they steal new munitions, and that the military had brought in colonial *Ascar* troops from Eritrea to oversee the concentration camps.<sup>59</sup> An article by *The Manchester Guardian* claimed that the Italians had begun using aerial bombardment in the Jebel region to drive Omar al-Mukhtar out of the mountains and into the open where he could be captured more easily.<sup>60</sup>

### **Uprisings in the Arab World**

\_\_\_\_\_The news that the Fascist government had managed to deport the entire population of the Jebel to the coast was a major news story that drew the eyes of the world to Italy's small colonial empire for a brief moment, but once that moment had passed the colony slipped back into obscurity. Naturally, there were still minor events happening in Cyrenaica since the Italian military was still hunting down rebels in the mountains and deserts, but as the NY

Herald-Tribune put it when Omar al-Mukhtar was captured in September, 1931, "Great nations

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<sup>58</sup> "TRIBE IN AFRICA PULLS UP STAKE: Great Migration Forced on People Secretly Move of 80,000 Aimed as Blow at Rebels Italian General Seeks to Surround Foe," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), October 4, 1930.

<sup>59</sup> "ITALY TRANSPLANTS 80,000 MOSLEMS: Whole Population Forced Down to Cyrenaica Coast Rebellious Jebel Natives Removed From Their Immemorial Home," *Boston Daily Globe*, October 4, 1930.

<sup>60</sup> Our Correspondent, "80,000 ARABS MOVED TO COAST: Italian War in Cyrenaica GREATEST TREK OF MODERN TIMES," *The Manchester Guardian* (1901-1959), October 4, 1930.

usually have somewhere in the background of their daily affairs a minor war in progress on some desert sands or in tropical jungles. Only at rare intervals are they brought into reality for any except a few clerks in the colonial officers or soldiers following their trade.”<sup>61</sup> The news that came out of Cyrenaica between the establishment of the camps in October, 1930 and the capture of Omar al-Mukhtar in September of 1931 reflected this pattern of passive ignorance. Whatever was covered in the Western press in this period was only published by larger newspapers based out of New York and Chicago.

The first news story out of Cyrenaica after the opening of the camps was an article covering the Italian Cabinet’s approval of a plan to confiscate the property of the Senussi confraternity published in *The New York Times* on December 19th, 1930. The Italian Cabinet saw the action as an important step towards the ultimate “pacification” of the colony. The headline of the article which read “ITALY TO CONFISCATE SENUSSITE PROPERTY - Move Taken to Break Up Rebel Activities in Cyrenaica Is Not Aimed at Religion” made it explicit that this action was meant to restrict Senussi rebels’s access to their own property and supplies in order to crush an anti-colonial uprising, but the line “not aimed at religion” makes it clear that the Italian government was keen to use the foreign press to manipulate the optics of such an action in order to preemptively deflect potential criticism.

The article included a statement from the Ministry of the Colonies saying that the confiscation of the Senussi property was justified since it did not affect the Senussi’s ability to function as a religious order, and “also on the grounds that the majority of the lands now belonging to the Senussites are the fruit of usurpations of the interests of the state and the native

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<sup>61</sup> Joseph B. Phillips, “‘Charmed’ Chief Of Arabs Dies as Traitor to Italy: Omar El Muktar, Nearing 80, Seized in Cyrenaica as Famous White Horse Falls Long Harried by Troops 20,000 Natives Required in See Rebel Leader Hanged,” *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, September 27, 1931.

population.”<sup>62</sup> This defense was designed for use against two potential critics of the Fascists’ actions: Muslims angry at the suppression of a religious order, and those outraged at the treatment of those forced into concentration camps. Nonetheless, Italy’s words did little to prevent accusations of cruelty. *Le Temps* reported on December 22, 1930 that Italy was facing criticism from abroad, and felt the need to further defend its actions. In response to this *Il Giornale d’Italia* put out a statement to the foreign press saying that in Cyrenaica, “the colonial policy of Italy is humane but without weakness and can be approved without any reservation.”<sup>63</sup> Italy claimed that the Senussi had broken a November 1928 truce, so Italy was no longer obligated to respect their nomadic way of life. At the same time, the statement released to the *New York Times* elided the “interests of the state and the native population,” framing the internment of the native population and the destruction of their way of life as necessary to protect them from the Cyrenaicans from the predation of the Senussi.

Meanwhile, voices of condemnation from the Arab world were becoming increasingly forceful. Anti-Italian sentiment grew as refugees fled Cyrenaica into neighboring Egypt and Tunisia bringing news about their treatment at the hands of Fascist officials. In late April, 1931 the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem issued a call for all Muslims to attend services at the Mosque of Omar in honor of the “Muslim martyrs who have died in Tripolitania” which quickly developed into a riot that consumed the city.<sup>64</sup> The violent manifestation of anti-Italian anger and a call to prayer for the martyrs of *Tripolitania* indicate that the Italian efforts to control the narrative surrounding the concentration camps in Cyrenaica were working in some regards and failing in

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<sup>62</sup> “ITALY TO CONFISCATE SENUSSITE PROPERTY; Move Taken to Break Up Rebel Activities in Cyrenaica Is Not Aimed at Religion.,” *The NY Times*, December 19, 1930.

<sup>63</sup> ‘*La politique coloniale de l’Italie est humaine mais sans faiblesse et peut être approuvée sans aucune réserve.*’ In *Le Temps*, December 20, 1930.

<sup>64</sup> “HOLY CITY MOSLEMS BEGIN ITALIAN FIGHT; Memorial Services Called for ‘Martyrs Who Have Died in Tripolitania.’ ACTS IN CYRENAICA MEANT Charges Are Strenuously Denied but Feeling Is Strong In Jerusalem--Consulate Guarded.,” *The NY Times*, April 4, 1931.

others. The identification of those who had died at the hands of the Italians as “martyrs” indicates that Italian efforts to transform the Senussi from a religious brotherhood into a political entity had failed, but the identification of Tripolitania as the site of Muslim oppression, which *The New York Times* points out was meant to be a reference to Cyrenaica, is proof that the Italians were at least partially successful in obscuring the details of their actions in Cyrenaica. As pointed out earlier, the Italians did manage to deport the population of the Jebel to the coast in secrecy with the wider world only finding out about the concentration camps when the Fascist Minister of the Colonies announced their existence months after the deportations had begun.<sup>65</sup> Mistaking Cyrenaica for Tripolitania may have been an honest error, but the fact that the Grand Mufti accused Italy of committing atrocities in the wrong North African colony over six months after Italy announced the opening of the camps suggests that the news that was trickling out of Cyrenaica was incomplete and slow to reach potentially sympathetic populations.

The protests spread across the Levant and on May 1st, 1931 a riot broke out in the Lebanese port city Tripoli. According to *The New York Times* a crowd of over 7,000 Muslims marched in procession from a mosque to the Italian consulate and the home of the Italian consul. The crowd proved to be such a threat to the peace of the city that a corps of gendarmes and French soldiers was dispatched to protect the consul. The violence that ensued resulted in the death of five gendarmes, the wounding of an unspecified many rioters, and drew the attention of Italian authorities who were enraged by the display of anti-Italian sentiment.<sup>66</sup> The Minister of the Colonies, Emilio De Bono, condemned the Grand Mufti in particular for inciting both riots and assailed what he described as an anti-Italian movement based on lies perpetrated by an

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<sup>65</sup> “TRIBE IN AFRICA PULLS UP STAKE: Great Migration Forced on People Secretly Move of 80,000 Aimed as Blow at Rebels Italian General Seeks to Surround Foe,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1930.

<sup>66</sup> *Le Temps*, May 7, 1930.



“Arabic and Arabophilic press” in the Middle East and France.<sup>67</sup> De Bono also denounced a boycott against Italian goods that was beginning to take shape in Cairo and Damascus, and wryly suggested that the Grand Mufti should file a complaint with the League of Nations if he truly believed that Italy was committing atrocities.

Despite De Bono’s stern condemnation, violence continued to spread through the region. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported on August 30th, 1931 that violent unrest had broken out in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, which could be attributed to a growing anti-Italian sentiment across the Arab world. The article, which was written by correspondents in London, reports that British and French authorities fiercely denied the rumors of violence in their colonies, but that lower level officials had confirmed them.<sup>68</sup> According to *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, Arab tribes who had fled across the border from Italy’s colonies were encouraging the violence, and that the presence of the refugee tribes in Egypt inspired Muslim evangelists of the Al-Hazar University in Cairo to spread anti-colonial, and presumably anti-Italian, sentiment from Palestine to Morocco. The content of their message and any printed material that they may have been distributing was inaccessible to American reporters of the time, but the *Chicago Daily Tribune* does tell us that the violence in Tunis was directed at that city’s large Italian population rather than the French civilians or colonial authorities.<sup>69</sup>

### **Archaeology and the “Romanization” of Cyrenaica**

While the inhabitants of the Jebel were suffering in concentration camps, Italian authorities flooded the anglophone newspapers with updates from the ongoing archaeological excavations at the sites of the Ancient Greek colonies of Cyrene and Apollonia. The site of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> “ARMIES OF THREE NATIONS BATTLE ARAB UPRISINGS: North Coast of Africa Is Swept by Revolts.,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963), August 30, 1931.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

ancient Cyrene had already been partially excavated by an American archaeological team when Italy invaded Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1911. Even prior to the advent of fascism Italy was fiercely protective of its cultural patrimony at home and what it perceived to be its nation's cultural patrimony abroad in the form of Roman artifacts and ruins to such an extent that Italian archaeologists are believed to have killed a member of the American archaeological team in Cyrene when the Americans refused to evacuate the site in 1912.<sup>70</sup>

Archaeology took on an important role in Fascist Italy and the fascist dominated areas of the Mediterranean as it became a key tool of the Fascist state's promotion of the idea of *romanità*, or the unifying Romanness of the Italian peninsula and its Mediterranean colonies. Excavations at major Roman sites like Leptis Magna in Tripolitania and on the island of Rhodes were hugely popular with the international arts community, but the excavations that took center stage in 1931 and 1932 were those happening at Cyrene and Apollonia in the Jebel. American and British newspapers and magazines published a number of articles highlighting the artifacts that were discovered at these sites. Italian archaeological updates were so prevalent that the uncovering of a votive statue of Venus would have been a bigger story than the violence happening in the very regions in which the artifacts were found.<sup>71</sup>

The article published about the archaeological discoveries in the Jebel, while aiding the diffusion of Fascist *romanità* propaganda abroad, also helped to distance the current inhabitants of the Jebel from their land in the minds of foreign observers. Italian intellectuals wrote many articles in prominent newspapers orientalizing the Libyan provinces and projecting them into a mythic, classical past throughout the years that the concentration camps were in operation. The

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<sup>70</sup> Marta Petricioli, "Le Missioni Archeologiche." in *Fonti e Problemi Dellla Politica Coloniale Italiana: Atti Del Convegno Taormina-Messina*, 23-29 Ottobre 1989, 691-697.

<sup>71</sup> "From the World's Great Capitals--Rome: Mussolini's Son Edits Paper Apollo Fountain Brought to Light Fascitizing" Architecture Traffic Law Reform Asked Botticelli Painting Discovered," *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-Current File)*, April 27, 1931.

*New York Herald-Tribune* published a three page article on the rediscovery of the “Athens of Africa” in November 1931 which gave a detailed inventory of the flashiest artifacts discovered at Cyrene and a brief history of the city’s ancient past.<sup>72</sup> The author also includes as a brief aside that the Italian archaeologists had destroyed a Byzantine era basilica in the process of excavation, but made no mention of the conflict in the region. This destruction of the physical heritage of a culture that was deemed “other” by the Italian archaeological authorities, in this case a Byzantine basilica, speaks to the violent nature of the fascist projects of self-actualization that occurred in both the military reconquest and archaeological excavations in Cyrenaica in the early 1930s.

Similar articles about the “Athens of Africa” ran again in 1932 in the newspapers of smaller cities like *The Daily Boston Globe* and *Baltimore Sun* indicating the growth in the reach and power of this image of Cyrenaica as an archaeological haven.<sup>73</sup> A similar had been crafted for neighboring Tripolitania only a few years earlier. In 1925 Tripolitania, which at the time was experiencing its own anti-colonial rebellion, was profiled in a *National Geographic* article that emphasized both the ancient Roman roots of the region and the modernity of the new Fascist colony.<sup>74</sup> This mix of classical antiquity and fascist modernity is exactly the image that Fascist propagandists would have wanted foreign publics to have of Cyrenaica as well. The extent to which a small Italian colony could ever enter the popular consciousness of the American, British, or French people is probably very slim, but there is some evidence that this ancient image of

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<sup>72</sup> Luigi Pernier, “Restoring the Athens of Africa: Cyrene the Ancient City of Libya That Forms a Connecting Link Between Biblical History and Classical Antiquity, Explored, Excavated and Restored by Italian Archeologists,” *New York Herald Tribune* (1926-1962), November 1, 1931.

<sup>73</sup> “City Known As Athens Of Libya: Archaeologists Bring To Light Many Secrets Of Cyrene, Founded By Greek Refugees Once Had Population Of 100,000 -- Was Center For Commerce As Well As Culture,” *The Sun* (1837-1995), April 24, 1932; “DESERTED CYRENE MINE TO STUDENTS: Once Athens of Africa, Now Almost Forgotten Heap of Ruins,” *Daily Boston Globe* (1928-1960), May 29, 1932.

<sup>74</sup> Gordon Casserly, “Tripolitania, Where Rome Resumes Sway: The Ancient Trans-Mediterranean Empire, on the Fringe of the Libyan Desert, Becomes a Promising Modern Italian Colony,” *National Geographic Magazine* (Washington, United States: National Geographic Partners, July 1, 1925).

Cyrenaica gained at least a small foothold in popular imagination. Probably the most bizarre example of this is a 1934 “Ripley’s Believe it or Not” article published in *The Hartford Courant* which claimed that Lethe, the river of forgetfulness from Greek mythology, was actually located in a cave hidden in the mountains of Cyrenaica.



<sup>75</sup> Ripley, “Believe It Or Not: Explanation of Preceding Cartoon,” *The Hartford Courant* (1923-1995), October 5, 1934.

The success of the fascist elision of Cyrenaica's classical past with its fascist present in the view of the international community is difficult to ascertain. What the many articles published on excavations in Cyrenaica do tell us though is that the discovery of a new classical marble was generally treated as more newsworthy than the brutal repression of an anti-colonial resistance happening at the same time in the very region where the artifacts were being discovered. The excavations at Cyrene and Apollonia regularly garnered pages long articles with images of the artifacts in question, whereas the *New York Times* article announcing the deportation of 80,000 people from the same region was dwarfed by a Macy's advertisement for children's coats.<sup>76</sup>

### **The Capture of Omar al-Mukhtar**

\_\_\_\_\_The Capture of Omar al-Mukhtar and the declaration of the end of fighting in Cyrenaica were the last major stories that Western newspapers covered in depth and with great uniformity. Newspapers in the United States, Britain, and France provided roughly the same sketch of the events that unfolded with varying levels of detail, romanticization of Omar al-Mukhtar as a military leader, and praise for Italy's efficiency in his capture.

The *NY Herald-Tribune* announced that Omar al-Mukhtar was captured on September 11th, 1931, but that the details of the events that led to his capture were scarce. It was speculated that he might have been attempting to raid one of the concentration camps (referred to in the article as "tent encampments") in order to gain access to supplies like food and munitions.<sup>77</sup> The article also reports that "Even the Italians who tell of his capture spend as much space recounting his strength and ability as estimating the importance of his downfall." This appraisal of Omar

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<sup>76</sup> "80,000 IN DESERT TREK EVACUATE GEBEL AREA; Italy Effects African Migration to Halt Levies by Nomad Rebels of Men and Food.," *The New York Times*, October, 10, 1930.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph B. Phillips From the Herald Tribune Bureau, "Italians Capture Muktar, Rebel Chief in N. Africa: Aged Leader Caught in Running Fight, Bringing Reduction of Senussi Nearer Far-Reaching Results Seen Conquest Will Bring Up Question of Boundary," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, September 16, 1931.

al-Mukhtar as a brave warrior and fierce adversary of European arms was echoed by other newspapers as more details about his capture were released by Italian authorities. The anglophone press focused its stories on the most poetic and orientalist aspects of al-Mukhtar's capture such as the symbolic fall of his white horse on the desert sand, the drama of the Italian cavalry chasing down al-Mukhtar's raiding party, and the nobility of a man nearing 80 years of age who led such a long and difficult rebellion.<sup>78</sup>

In the process of dramatizing the story of al-Mukhtar's capture, both British and American newspapers managed to create a narrative that ran contrary to the facts reported in the same article. The *Manchester Guardian* reported that Omar al-Mukhtar had broken off relations with his followers in the concentration camps in order to prevent reprisals against them and maintain his "status as their chieftain."<sup>79</sup> This fit the romantic framing of Omar al-Mukhtar as the selfless leader of his people that the *Guardian* was using to portray him well, but it was reported in the same article that he was captured while attempting to raid one of those very camps for supplies.

The Fascist authorities quickly tried and condemned the newly captured Omar al-Mukhtar. The *Washington Post* released an article on Omar al-Mukhtar's execution at the Soluch concentration camp. The Italian authorities chose to execute Omar al-Mukhtar at the Soluch camp deliberately. Omar al-Mukhtar's relatives and the relatives of much of the Senussi leadership were held in the el-Agheila camp where they were guarded fiercely to prevent any potential "connivance" with the Senussi fighters.<sup>80</sup> The Soluch camp, on the other hand, was the most populous of the concentration camps.<sup>81</sup> Soluch's 20,000 prisoners made it much larger than

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<sup>78</sup> Phillips, "'Charmed' Chief Of Arabs Dies as Traitor to Italy."

<sup>79</sup> "REBEL LEADER CAPTURED: Italians' Foe in North Africa," *The Manchester Guardian* (1901-1959), September 17, 1931.

<sup>80</sup> Eric Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia : Le Atrocità Nascoste Dell'avventura Coloniale Italiana, 1911-1931* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2005), 89.

<sup>81</sup> "I CAMPI FASCISTI - Dalle Guerre in Africa Alla Repubblica Di Salò."

the 6,000 prisoners of el-Agheila, and all of them were required to attend the execution.<sup>82</sup> The Fascists chose Soluch in order to use the execution of Omar al-Mukhtar as political theater in order to instill fear of the cruel efficiency of fascist justice into the hearts of as many of the imprisoned Cyrenaicans as possible. It should also be noted that the *Post* referred to the inhabitants of Soluch as “political prisoners” which hid the fact that there were many women, children, and elders imprisoned at Soluch who were also forced to witness Omar al-Mukhtar’s execution from American readers.

### **Cirenaica Pacificata and the future of Italian North Africa**

Not long after killing Omar al-Mukhtar, Pietro Badoglio’s colonial regime in Libya officially declared Cyrenaica to be pacified. The declaration on its own didn’t garner much attention from the international press, likely due to the fact that many had assumed that the fighting would end soon after Mukhtar’s death, but the news that Italy was no longer tied up in a colonial conflict did trigger new speculation about Italy’s future ambitions in Africa.

Many in the American press assumed Italy’s next move would be to claim Tunisia. The diplomatic conflict between France and Italy over control of Tunisia had been simmering for over half a century by the time the Senussi rebellion in Cyrenaica was suppressed. Italians had been migrating from Southern Italy to Tunisia in search of land and work since the mid-19th century.<sup>83</sup> When the Congress of Berlin was held in 1878 it was generally assumed that Italy would take control of Tunisia, but in 1881 France declared a protectorate over Tunisia leaving Italy frustrated and the status of Italians living in Tunisia in limbo.<sup>84</sup> By 1930 the Italian population of Tunisia exceeded 100,000 and was much larger than any other European

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<sup>82</sup> “Mukhtar’s Unromantic End.,” *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), October 5, 1931.

<sup>83</sup> Labanca, *Oltremare* 33.

<sup>84</sup> William I. Shorrock, “The Tunisian Question in French Policy toward Italy, 1881-1940,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16, no. 4 (1983): 631–51, 642.

population in that colony, so it seemed likely to Americans that Mussolini would turn his imperial gaze there.<sup>85</sup>

In reality, the bigger threat to French colonial holdings was in the Sahara where Graziani's troops had pushed close to the edge of French-controlled Lake Chad in their efforts to drive the Senussi from the oases on the trans-Saharan trade routes. The Parisian newspaper *Le Temps* interpreted this encroachment as evidence of Italian dreams of an "Atlantic-Mediterranean" corridor and that if Graziani reached Lake Chad Italy would demand the mandate of Cameroon.<sup>86</sup> Once the Senussi rebellion was suppressed Italy did in fact lay claim to Cameroon and allied with Germany to demand a redistribution of the mandatory territories.<sup>87</sup>

Italy's claims to Cameroon and Tunisia, even with its new muscular position in Libya, did not extract the major reshuffle of colonial holdings that many western observers had expected. In fact, from the outside it would appear as if nothing substantial had changed in the realm of colonial politics between Italy and France, but behind the scenes the French and Italian foreign ministries had reached a secret agreement on colonial politics in 1933. Italy would stop pushing for France to relinquish Tunisia and stop sending troops into the French Sahara in exchange for France providing "clandestine advantages" to Italy in Ethiopia and tacitly approving an eventual invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>88</sup> Italy's invasion of Ethiopia is another story altogether, but this shady backroom deal reflects how the changing situation on the ground in Africa where, in only a few short years, Libya went from a swath of land claimed, yet loosely

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<sup>85</sup> Ralph W. Barnes, "Italians Wrest Libyan Oases From Senussi: Rome Expects Latest Victory To Strengthen Her Claim to French-Occupied Zone," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, February 1, 1931.

<sup>86</sup> *Le Temps*, February 26, 1931.

<sup>87</sup> T. J. C. MARTYN, "RENEWED DEMAND FOR COLONIES HITS AT WORLD-WAR SETTLEMENT: Both Italy and Germany Would Reopen the Question of Mandates -- The Position of the Powers Before and After the War," *New York Times*, 1932.

<sup>88</sup> Shorrock, "The Tunisian Question in French Policy toward Italy, 1881-1940," 645.



controlled, by Italy to a colony conquered through extraordinary ferocity and wedged between the British and French spheres of control affected Italy's relations with other imperial powers.

While the French government was taking a conciliatory approach to Fascist ambitions in Africa, the tone of the French press was nominally condemnatory. There was a recognition within the French press that Graziani's extraordinary cruelty towards the Senussi and the people of Cyrenaica were distinctly fascist in nature. Even *Le Temps*, a newspaper not known for being particularly polemical, profiled Graziani as "the most typical representative of a few thousand of the *new men* from the [Italian] peninsula," adding that his methods represented an "enthusiasm, faith, and will to act whose impetus was obviously fascism."<sup>89</sup> Much of the condemnation of fascist repression in Cyrenaica was focused on fascism itself rather than the specificity of the "vexations" that the fascists were causing the people of Cyrenaica. The communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, for example, wrote a sweeping article that began with a condemnation of Italian actions in Cyrenaica, but then expanded to include Italian imperialism more broadly, and even the failures of Fascist domestic policy in addressing Italy's high unemployment.<sup>90</sup>

In contrast to France's active engagement with Italy in the colonial realm, Britain remained aloof. Papers from the British foreign service in Africa during the period of the Senussi rebellion rarely mention happenings in Cyrenaica at all. Aside from a few complaints about skirmishes taking place along the border with Egypt or Sudan, the only mention of the repression in Cyrenaica within the foreign papers comes from a low level member of the British diplomatic corps in Cairo. In his relation to the foreign office in London he reports that the Italians have

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<sup>89</sup> *Le Temps*, 2/26/1931., *Le Temps* 7/24/1931.

<sup>90</sup> Parti communiste français Auteur du texte, "L'Humanité : Journal Socialiste Quotidien," issue, Gallica, March 16, 1931, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k403839j>.

declared Cyrenaica “pacified” and that, while he disagrees with the methods they used, he thinks that it will be a good opportunity for Italy to grow tourism in the region.<sup>91</sup>

Looking only at official government reports, however, belies the reality of the British, or Anglo-Egyptian, activities in Cyrenaica. As British anthropologist E. Evans Pritchard points out, the British were indeed funneling weapons into Libya through local Egyptian traders smuggling contraband across the border. This was by no means a sign of support for an anti-colonial movement, but a concerted effort to maintain stability in Egypt and instability in Libya. As *Le Temps* reported, the British authorities were well aware of the officially unacknowledged contraband trade between Cyrenaica and the oases of Western Egypt, but refused to suppress it in order to maintain their own precarious position in Cairo after Egypt gained nominal independence in 1922.<sup>92</sup>

### **Chapter Conclusion**

\_\_\_\_\_ Taking a step back to look at the concentration camps in Cyrenaica from the viewpoint of the other major western powers requires one to disengage from the specificity of the horrors of the camps. The extreme actions taken by the Fascist state during the repression of the Senussi rebellion in Cyrenaica were perceived as novel practices in the enforcement of colonial rule, but did not warrant extraordinary attention from observers in the United States, France, or the British Empire. In fact, none of the newspapers surveyed for this chapter sent a correspondent to Libya to investigate the concentration camps or the conditions that the Arabs in the Levant were protesting against.

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<sup>91</sup> Consul Cowan in Peter Woodward et al., eds., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs--Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print. Part II, Series G, Volume 13: From the First to the Second World War. Africa, 1914-1939* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1994), 335-336.

<sup>92</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 105-106.

Indeed, the “pacification” of Cyrenaica was treated by other imperial powers as just another imperial conquest, albeit with unique means of controlling the colony. The treatment of such tactics as novel within the framework of the banality of a colonial conquest allowed the fascists to avoid criticism for their distinct actions in Cyrenaica while still attaining their goals of implementing their rule over the entirety of the colony. Within this context of relative international neglect, fascist officials were given the leeway to pursue policies of destruction, terrorism, and genocide with very little scrutiny. This lack of scrutiny, and in some cases praise for the Fascist’s tactics in Cyrenaica would embolden fascist authorities in Rome for further escalation of violence and the pursuit of increasingly militaristic policies in the African colonies and Europe.

### **Chapter 3: *L'impero Realizzato?***

\_\_\_\_\_The Fascists' motives for the repression in Cyrenaica, like almost everything in Italian fascism, were a hybrid of ruthless policy and projections of lofty fascist idealism. Cyrenaica represented to Fascist Italy both a pressing colonial conflict that had to be resolved and an opportunity to make good the phrase *mare nostrum* by definitively establishing Italian rule on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean. As such, the fascists military authorities responsible for the genocide in Cyrenaica spoke of their actions as the mechanizations of a blunt, unfeeling modernity that was simultaneously cloaked in the language and imagery of Roman grandeur and imperial largesse. Within the Fascist government and on the world stage parliamentary and ministerial officials argued that the concentration camps were a temporary necessity in order to suppress a rebellion in their colonies and was not indicative of a desire to punish the native people of Cyrenaica or destroy their way of life.

The Fascist parliament had not planned the concentration camps, rather they were created by the military authorities on the ground in Cyrenaica resulting in a fundamental disconnect between what the central government in Rome said about the Fascist plans for the concentration camps and the reality the actions taken by governor of Libya, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, and vice governor of Cyrenaica, General Rodolfo Graziani. The Minister for the Colonies, Emilio De Bono, in a February, 1931 address to Parliament admitted that when he had last addressed the Parliament in the February of 1930 to request the approval of the colonial budget he had promised that Cyrenaica would be "pacified" within a year which was not the case so therefore, military operations such as the assault on the sacred oasis of Kufra, and the forced migration of the population of the Jebel into concentration camps had neither been presented before the Parliament for consideration, nor factored into that year's budget.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Emilio De Bono in *Atti Parlamentari della camera dei deputati*, Rome, Italy, February 24, 1931. 3904.

When De Bono presented the colonial budget to Parliament in February, 1930 he had already named Graziani the vice governor of Cyrenaica and tasked him with suppressing the Senussi rebellion, but it wasn't until a month after the address that De Bono sent precise orders to Graziani on how he should proceed. This one month gap between De Bono securing the Parliament's support for the colonial budget and unspecified military action in Cyrenaica and sending his orders to Graziani allowed Graziani to act without much supervision from the government in Rome. An unintended consequence of this lack of parliamentary oversight was that the officials in Rome and the Italian press were unaware of Graziani's plans and of the concentration camps' existence, so they were forced to develop rhetorical justifications for them in real-time as news spread about their existence. Despite leaving the Italian press blindsighted to potential attacks, De Bono forged ahead with his plans to end the conflict in Cyrenaica by any means necessary.

### **The Planning Phase**

Omar al-Mukhtar blindsided Fascist authorities when he reignited the Senussi rebellion in June, 1929 after signing a peace pact in 1928, leaving them scrambling to appoint someone to finally quash the rebellion which had intermittently shaken the colony for nearly two decades. In January of 1930, Emilio de Bono appointed General Rodolfo Graziani to be vice governor of Cyrenaica in order to face the rebellion head on.<sup>94</sup> Graziani was the most famous general of the Fascist campaigns in Africa and was considered undoubtedly capable of putting an end to the Senussi revolt in Cyrenaica.<sup>95</sup> After a brief stay in Rome, Graziani arrived in Benghazi on March 27th, 1930 with the following set of directives from Minister De Bono and the Governor of both Libyan colonies, Pietro Badoglio:

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<sup>94</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 46.

<sup>95</sup> Rochat, *La repressione della resistenza in Cirenaica 1927-1931*, 1973, 55.

1. Make a clear and material distinction between subject and rebellious tribes in terms of their location, interactions, and traffic.
2. Provide security and protection to the subject tribes, but monitor their activities.
3. Remove subjects from all Senussite influence and prevent the collection of tribute by any representatives of the Senussi
4. Constant and vigorous enforcement of the closure of Egyptian border in order to avoid the possibility of the adversaries getting resupplied
5. Systematic and firm purge of the indigenous environment, and, if necessary, the Italian as well, beginning with the major urban centers and especially Benghazi.
6. Use irregular Tripolitan troops to counter the enemy's brigandage and for any intended retaliatory action with the final objective being their eventual policing of the territory against any enemy actions
7. Decisive and discrete actions, light on the use of troops, in order to batter, disorient, and upset the rebels, and force them to submit to our initiative always and everywhere.
8. Immediately prepare for the complete occupation of the colony's territory, namely the oasis of Kufra.<sup>96</sup>

Despite this already extensive list of directives, Graziani was quick to add his own objectives including: the disarmament of the indigenous population of the colony, the gradual reduction of reliance on native irregular troops from Cyrenaica, the swift implementation of the death penalty against those charged with "conivance with the rebels," and a study of the provisions necessary for the eventual contraction of subject bedouin encampments in order to suffocate the resistance of Omar al-Mukhtar.<sup>97</sup> Graziani's new objectives were met with general approval from Rome, but consternation from Tripoli. Governor Badoglio, prior to learning of De Bono's approval of Graziani's actions, wrote to Graziani to remind him that the best propaganda is action, therefore the only useful part of his plan was the disarmament of the colony while the rest was just idle chatter.<sup>98</sup>

This initial reproach from Badoglio was the start of a volatile dynamic that developed between the Graziani, Badoglio, and De Bono. Graziani had already earned himself a reputation as a man of action in elite Fascist colonial circles, and was reported to be a shrewd careerist who

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<sup>96</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 49. See appendix for original Italian.

<sup>97</sup> "connivenza con i ribelli" Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 66.

<sup>98</sup> Rochat in *Omar al-Mukhtar* pg. 59

was willing to use those around him as pawns in order to climb his way up the Fascist hierarchy.<sup>99</sup> Badoglio feared that Graziani would attempt to take the credit for the eventual Fascist victory over the Senussi, so he sought to establish himself as the source of authority in Libya and as the architect of the plans behind any Graziani victory. Thus, a spirit of envy and one-upmanship drove the radicalization of the violence enacted upon the indigenous population of Cyrenaica.<sup>100</sup>

In a letter to Graziani addressed on June 20th, 1930, Badoglio wrote, “it is now necessary to create a wide and precise territorial distance between rebel formations and the subjugated population. I do not hide the extent and gravity of this measure which will mean the ruin of the so-called submissive population but by now the path forward has been laid out before us and we must follow it to the end even if the whole population of Cyrenaica were to perish.”<sup>101</sup> Graziani wrote in his memoir *Cirenaica Pacificata* that he received these orders from Badoglio during the period that De Bono was touring Libya and that both Badoglio and De Bono “confirmed their faith in me and left me ample freedom to act as I saw fit.”<sup>102</sup> The discrepancy between Badoglio’s letter and Graziani’s account of receiving orders from both Badoglio and De Bono speaks to the simmering tensions between governor and vice governor. Furthermore, it should also be noted here, that Graziani had actually already begun a policy of concentrating subjugated tribes near urban centers in the Jebel region such as Barce in order to keep a closer eye on them.<sup>103</sup> What the order from Badoglio introduced into the equation was the movement of the already concentrated tribes from the Jebel to the coast. Badoglio’s orders should then also be noted for their quite

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<sup>99</sup> Rochat in *Omar al-Mukhtar* pg. 56.

<sup>100</sup> De Bono, in his speech before the Camera in February, 1931 said that he had actually come up with the plan for concentration camps four years prior, but that he simply didn’t implement it. The historical record does not support these claims. This is another example of fascist careerism related to the concentration camps, but Graziani and Badoglio would not have had knowledge of this at the time.

<sup>101</sup> Rochat in *Omar Al-Mukhtar*, 62.

<sup>102</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 100.

<sup>103</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 69.

explicit genocidal intent. Badoglio says flat out that the entire population of Cyrenaica could potentially perish during the march across Cyrenaica. Since Badoglio would have known that the tribes were already living in concentrated encampments under the supervision of the military, this order was a deliberate escalation of a pre-existing policy and was the order that would start the mass deportations and internment.

### **The Concentration Camps as Propaganda**

As these two letters from Badoglio to Graziani show, the Fascists were conscious of both the potential for mass death that the forced deportation and concentration of the inhabitants of Jebel could cause, and that the efficacy of the concentration camps in suppressing the Senussi rebellion could make for good propaganda. The problem for the Fascist officials was that the concentration camps drew quick condemnation from the Arabic press and only moderate enthusiasm in the West, so the propaganda that came out of the concentration camps was highly polemical. Barely two years after the opening of the camps, Graziani published *Cirenaica Pacificata*, a memoir detailing and defending his exploits in Libya. This was followed closely by two more technical works of propaganda from De Bono's Ministry of the Colonies, *La Libia in venti anni di occupazione italiana* and *La nuova Italia d'oltremare - L'opera del Fascismo nelle colonie italiane*.<sup>104</sup>

Graziani's *Cirenaica Pacificata* is essentially a "how I did it" from the point of view of the man who claimed to have brought peace to Cyrenaica when nobody else could. Graziani is very direct about the book's polemical nature. He prefaces his work with "This book was written essentially for the truth." in order to correct the "lies" that the "panislamic press" had spread about his actions in Cyrenaica, and he assures his readers that he will narrate the events with

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<sup>104</sup> The names of these books in English are *Pacificied Cyrenaica*, *Libya in 20 Years of Italian Occupation*, and *The New Overseas Italy - The work of Fascism in the Italian colonies*, respectively.



“absolute and objective historical faithfulness.”<sup>105</sup> He then ties up his preface by conceding that his work brings him much pride because he knows that he saved the people of Cyrenaica from destruction at the hands of “religious fatalism,” and that his actions will bring humanity and civilization many benefits and a prosperous future.<sup>106</sup>

### **The destruction of *nomadismo***

Graziani fiercely denied allegations from the Arabic press that the decision to move the population into concentration camps was premeditated, which is supported by the letters from Badoglio.<sup>107</sup> According to Graziani, preparing the camps and moving the population took about three months.<sup>108</sup> The arrival at the camps is depicted as a massive public health achievement. Graziani says that the *barbari* were greeted by nurses waiting to vaccinate them, and remove parasites.<sup>109</sup> Despite these claims medical care was not widely available in the concentration camps and regular Typhus outbreaks occurred in the larger camps like Soluch.<sup>110</sup> The lies about the quality of the medical care in the camps aside, Graziani’s choice of the word “barbarians” (*barbari*) is very telling about the way the Fascists viewed the Cyrenaicans. If they were barbarians, then they were expendable in the face of the Fascio-Roman advance. Graziani adds a racial element to his notion of barbarism by positing that through colonization the “noble Italian race” will renew the Arabs who will become “a new Mediterranean race, a new daughter of Rome, and a sister to those mixed races which gave the world the medieval civilizations of Sicily and Andalusia.”<sup>111</sup> The new Mediterranean race of Cyrenaica, per Graziani’s view, wouldn’t be

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<sup>105</sup> “Questo libro fu scritto, essenzialmente per la verità.” Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 1.

<sup>106</sup> “con assoluta ed obbiettiva fedeltà storica” Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 1.

<sup>107</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 104.

<sup>108</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 114.

<sup>109</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 120.

<sup>110</sup> Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia*, 91.

<sup>111</sup> “La razza nobile e forte potrà rinnovare quegli incroci superbi di ardenti bellezze e sfolgoranti attività intellettuali colle stirpi conquistatrici dell’altra sponda, per una razza mediterranea nuova figlia di Roma e sorella a quelle che hanno dato al mondo le civiltà medievali di Sicilia e di Andalusia.” Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata* 118.

purely Italian, but rather a hybrid of Muslim-Arab and Italian fascist culture in the same way the Muslim occupied regions of Latin speaking Medieval Europe were. This worldview does allow space for the continued existence of the Cyrenaicans as a people, but they would have to be assimilated and their “barbaric” culture either abandoned or destroyed.

The language of cultural destruction was much more explicit in the words of Minister of the Colonies, Emilio De Bono. De Bono, aside from his status as one of the Fascist Quadrumvirate who commanded the March on Rome, was the only parliamentary deputy among the three officials overseeing the concentration camps. As such, he had to speak regularly before the Parliament in order to gain the financial support necessary to fund Italy’s activities in the colonies. De Bono said that the establishment of concentration camps was a measure necessary to pacify the colony and to “tear its inhabitants from their primitive conditions, especially nomadism.”<sup>112</sup> In a speech from 1931, De Bono analogized the concentration camps to ancient Roman farm colonies in which recently conquered people were learning to adopt a settled agricultural lifestyle, and leveraged this Roman rhetoric to request an additional 12,000 lire per hectare of land surrounding the camps in order to develop the land to such an extent that it could become the permanent home of those imprisoned there.<sup>113</sup>

### **Plans for Italian Settlement**

The notion that the prisoners in the camps would want to settle where they were permanently signalled a shift in Fascist rhetoric from the camps being a temporary extraordinary measure that were necessary to suppress the rebellion to becoming a permanent fixture of colonial Cyrenaica. The camps were never tied directly to the development of the Jebel for the settlement of Italian colonists, but the records published in *La Libia in Venti Anni di Occupazione*

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<sup>112</sup> “Concentration Camps for Native Labour on the Coast of Cyrenaica”, *International Labour Review*. Volume 26, (1932), 402.

<sup>113</sup> Atti Parlamentari 7 maggio, 1931.

*Italiana* and *La Nuova Italia D'Oltremare - L'opera del Fascismo nelle colonie italiane* indicate that at the same time that De Bono was asking Parliament to fund the concentration camps for another year, the Italian government was also conducting studies to determine the best agricultural practices in the Jebel. The Jebel was a uniquely arable region of the otherwise arid Cyrenaica. Fascist functionaries had carried out extensive hydrological studies in the Jebel in 1930 which indicated the sustainability of year-round agriculture in the region.<sup>114</sup> Its climate and soil were compared to the Islands of Greece and considered suitable for the mass settlement of Italian colonists.<sup>115</sup> These studies were used to produce maps of the entirety of Cyrenaica indicating the different types of crops and growing seasons of the various regions of the colony. These maps, when overlaid with the maps of the land confiscated from the Senussi in 1930, and land already claimed as government patrimony published in *La Nuova Italia D'Oltremare* indicate that the land from which most of the tribes imprisoned in the concentration camps were expelled was the prime spot from European colonization.<sup>116</sup>

The Fascist officials explicitly linked the emptying of the Jebel to the preparation for demographic colonization by establishing the Agency for the Colonization of Cyrenaica, announced by De Bono in 1932. This agency's purpose was to attract Italian farmers to voluntarily settle in the Jebel and cultivate the land as their own with the agency's financial support. The first wave of farm colonists to settle the Jebel were announced in May of 1932 and arrived shortly thereafter.<sup>117</sup> This was greeted by fascist officials as a welcome signal that Cyrenaica was finally fully integrated into Italy as its "Fourth Shore." In the Benghazi based *Cirenaica Illustrata* the local leader of the new farm colony compared the work he and his

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<sup>114</sup> *La Libia in Venti Anni di Occupazione Italiana*, pg. 217

<sup>115</sup> Martin Moore, *Fourth Shore*, (London: Routledge, 1940), pg 66.

<sup>116</sup> *La Nuova Italia D'Oltremare*, 532-548

<sup>117</sup> "ITALY PLANS FARM COLONY.; Seeks to Populate Cyrenaica, Long a Scene of Guerrilla Warfare.", *The New York Times*.

compatriots were engaging in to the settlement of Littoria, a newly incorporated province of Italy that was built on land reclaimed from the Pontine Marshes south of Rome.<sup>118</sup> Such a comparison tied the colonization of Cyrenaica to the broader project of land reclamation and internal colonization on the peninsula which the Fascist state counted as one of its major economic and propaganda triumphs.

In spite of Rome's plans for the colonization of the Jebel, De Bono declared that the concentration camps were no longer necessary in a speech before the Chamber of Deputies in April of 1932, and had only allocated funds for them in the colonial budget for one more year. Thus, by September of 1933 the concentration camps were officially closed and their inhabitants allowed to return to their homes, though it is still unclear how many of them were actually able to.<sup>119</sup>

### **Normalizing colonial violence in the Italian Press**

The policy of concentrating the indigenous population of the Jebel was announced to the Italian public ex post facto. Much like in the United States, United Kingdom, and France, the Italian press was only made aware of the concentration camps after they had already been constructed and filled. It was through these initial newspaper articles that the vast majority of the members of the Italian parliament came to learn of the camps existence as well, and it wasn't until 1932 - over a year after the camps were opened - that members of the Italian parliament and press went in person to investigate the conditions within them. This meant that for most of the period of the camps' existence the Italian parliament and press were reliant on the words of De Bono, Badoglio, and Graziani in order to understand the purpose of the concentration camps and the conditions inside of them.

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<sup>118</sup> *Cirenaica Illustrata* March, 1930, pg. 33

<sup>119</sup> Del Boca *Gli italiani in Libia*, pg. 197

The lack of information about the concentration camps is reflected in the Italian press's reporting on their opening. The first articles on the camps were published in the first days of October 1930. An article in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, a newspaper founded by Benito Mussolini himself, announcing the "energetic" actions of General Graziani was only three paragraphs long and hidden beneath a nearly full page story announcing the engagement of Princess Giovanna of Italy to King Boris III of Bulgaria. Information about the camps was scant, but the article was augmented by high praise for Graziani who was described as "strong," "dignified," "direct," and even "Roman."<sup>120</sup>

The international press began reporting on the concentration camps in Cyrenaica roughly a week after the first Italian reports were published. This left little time for the Italian press to gather more information on the camps before newspapers began publishing polemics against what they perceived as French condemnation of Italy's actions in Cyrenaica. *Il Popolo d'Italia* took issue with *Le Temps*'s article on the establishment of concentration camps saying that the policy was "inspired by the doctrines of force and imperialism."<sup>121</sup> The unnamed Italian journalist replied with indignation that if France was concerned about forceful imperialism it should "take a look inside its own house." *Il Popolo d'Italia* didn't try to defend the concentration camps themselves or even deny that Italy was pursuing forceful imperial policy, but instead points to the violence that France wrought on its own colonies. This line of defense strips the act of forcibly deporting a population into concentration camps of its specificity and casts it as simply another permutation of the general colonial violence which was already acceptable to the liberal imperial powers.

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<sup>120</sup> "L'energica azione di Gen. Graziani in Cirenaica," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, October 3, 1930.

<sup>121</sup> "ispirato dalle dottrine di forza e d'imperialismo." "Le operazioni militari in Cirenaica in un commento francese," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, October 11, 1930.

The tactic of normalizing the Fascists' use of concentration camps by shifting the discourse from the specificity of the camps towards general colonial violence became more refined in parallel with the polemics published against them. The Italian daily newspaper, *La Stampa*, which had been a fierce defender of liberal democracy until its owner was forced by Mussolini to sell it to a Fascist in 1926, published one of the most thorough rebukes of French criticism of Italy's concentration camps in December of 1930.<sup>122</sup> The article in *La Stampa* was published in response to a particular attack from the French political commentator Pierre Bernus. Instead of engaging with Bernus's specific charges, *La Stampa* took Bernus's article to be proof of a wide-reaching and deliberate effort by the French press to make Italy look bad in the eyes of Muslims living under French rule. Following this line of logic, *La Stampa* attacked France for its violence and misrule in two of its own Muslim colonies, Algeria and Syria. According to *La Stampa*, the concentration camps were an essential part of Italy's strategy to pacify its North African colonies which took only 20 years as opposed to the century long violent struggle to assert French control over Algeria. *La Stampa* argued that the concentration camps were also a source of social harmony since they represented Italy's efforts to impose Italian law equally on all members of Cyrenaica society, both nomadic and settled peoples, whereas a congress in French occupied Damascus had just condemned France's repressive rule in the Syrian cities while affording Syrian Bedouins near total freedom.<sup>123</sup>

### **Parliamentary debates**

The impulse to normalize the concentration camps was also felt by members of the Italian Parliament. The topic was broached in the general discussion on the annual colonial budget in both chambers of the Italian parliament in 1931 and in 1932 with individual deputies and

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<sup>122</sup> "La Stampa | Italian Newspaper," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/La-Stampa>.

<sup>123</sup> "La situazione in Cirenaica in giudizio francese," *La Stampa*, December 9, 1930.

senators defending the choice to operate concentration camps while elaborating their own ideas of how they fit into the schema of Fascist colonialism.

The 1931 budgetary discussion was dominated by Ezio Maria Gray, a fascist parliamentarian and journalist who had advocated for and covered Italy's initial invasion of Libya in 1911. Gray had read De Bono's proposed budget which included a 20% cut in colonial spending, and gave a long speech in defense of not sparing any expense on the colonies. Gray said that Africa was to 20th century Europe what the Americas were to 16th century Europe, and that Italy had to be willing to do whatever was necessary to ensure its fair share of the continent or risk falling behind the rest of Europe for another 500 years.<sup>124</sup> According to Gray the concentration camps were a quintessentially Roman, and therefore Fascist, form of imperialism, which sought to assimilate peoples with their cultural distinctions intact into a broader imperial culture through their own slightly coerced volition. He pointed to the growing enrollment of Libyan Jews in Italian language schools in Tripoli and Benghazi as a sign that Italian colonialism was already working to that effect.<sup>125</sup> Gray argued that the concentration camps presented a unique opportunity for Italy to teach the Arab youth about Italian culture, and to study their nomadic way of life in order to determine how best to integrate them into the imperial system.<sup>126</sup>

Gray's vision for the future of Cyrenaica and the concentration camps differed starkly from Graziani's. Gray envisioned a form of colonialism that emulated an idealized version of Ancient Rome that provided for and integrated its subjects into a unified system that wasn't reliant on the forms of legal and racial present in other European colonies.<sup>127</sup> The reality on the ground in Cyrenaica, however, was much different since Graziani saw himself as working within

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<sup>124</sup> Atti Parlamentari, February 24, 1931. 3899.

<sup>125</sup> Atti Parlamentari, February 24, 1931. 3892.

<sup>126</sup> Atti Parlamentari, February 24, 1931. 3894.

<sup>127</sup> Atti Parlamentari, February 24, 1931. 3893.

the same models of the older European colonialism that Gray denounced. Graziani wrote that he was on track to achieve a demographic replacement in Cyrenaica that could only be surpassed by the United States or New Zealand.<sup>128</sup> These divergent ways of conceptualizing Italian colonialism are the most substantive examples of discordant opinion on the concentration camps within the fascist government. Nevertheless, while the reasons for pursuing such a brutal colonial policy differed amongst fascist officials, all of them agreed that it was necessary for the “pacification” of the colony.

De Bono assuaged Gray’s concerns about cuts to the colonial budget by assuring him that the concentration camps had actually created the conditions that allowed for such cuts to be made without cuts to social spending. With the population of the Jebel concentrated in only a handful of locations the number of Omar al-Mukhtar’s fighters had dwindled to somewhere between 500 and 600 which allowed for a massive rollback of military operations saving the central government 13,000,000 lire per year. The concentration camps also effectively ended the free movement of goods into Cyrenaica via the Sahara which in turn forced goods to pass through the port of Benghazi generating a 4,000,000 lire increase in customs revenue which would supplement the funds from Rome.<sup>129</sup>

The subject of the colonial budget and the concentration camps also gave De Bono the opportunity to exalt the power of the fascist state before the Chamber of Deputies. De Bono upheld the European and American news coverage of the concentration camps as a triumph of Fascist propaganda and a sign of the growing respect that Italy was accruing on the world stage.<sup>130</sup> De Bono, like Graziani, defended Italy against the “panislamic circles and French press who treat us as barbarians and villains for the actions we have taken,” by asserting Italy’s right to

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<sup>128</sup> Graziani, *Cirenaica Pacificata*, 232.

<sup>129</sup> Atti Parlamentari, February 24, 1931. 3904

<sup>130</sup> Atti Parlamentari, February 24, 1931. 3906.



act according to its own will within the land that it controls.<sup>131</sup> On behalf of the ministry of the colonies, De Bono elaborated a radical vision of national sovereignty for Italy saying that “I will not look to substantiate legitimacy for our actions. Fascist Italy need not imitate anyone; it operates according to its own right and conscience, and does what it believes is best to safeguard its needs and protect its dignity as a colonial power.”<sup>132</sup> De Bono’s speech weaponized the liberal-nationalist ideas of national sovereignty and self-determination in order to divorce Italy from the very moral economy that provided such language, and in doing so attempted to invalidate any attacks against the Fascist state made via appeals to the moral norms of liberal internationalism.

### **The camps in peacetime**

Governor Pietro Badoglio declaration of peace in Cyrenaica in January 1932 brought an official end to the conflict which, according to fascist rhetoric, was the contingency that necessitated the existence and maintenance of the concentration camps. Rather than close the camps, Fascist officials simply changed the narrative and the camps went from sites of a regrettable temporary repression to symbols of the colony’s agrarian future.

Once Cyrenaica was “pacified”, Fascist parliamentary deputy Biagio Pace took it upon himself to investigate the conditions in the concentration camps which had garnered so much attention in Italian colonial circles. Pace was an historian and archaeologist who brought these skills with him when he investigated the camps.<sup>133</sup> After spending a few weeks in Cyrenaica, Pace

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<sup>131</sup> “*I circoli e la stampa panislamici e per riflesso Le gazzette straniere, specialmente francesi, ci trattano da Barbai e da malvagi commentando i provvedimenti da noi presi.*” Atti parlamentari, February 24, 1931. 3904.

<sup>132</sup> “*Non c’è proprio bisogno che io vada in cerca di esempi per suffragare la legittimità dei nostri modi di agire; l’Italia fascista non ha bisogno di imitare nessuno; essa opera secondo il suo diritto e la sua coscienza e in casa sua fa quello che crede meglio a salvaguardia delle sue necessità e a tutela della sua dignità di potenza colonizzatrice.*” Atti Parlamentari, February 24, 1931. 3904.

<sup>133</sup> “Biagio Pace / Deputati / Camera Dei Deputati - Portale Storico,” accessed February 6, 2021, <https://storia.camera.it/deputato/biagio-pace-18891113/componentiorgani#nav>.

wrote and circulated a report of his observations among the members of the Fascist Parliament which became the most important eyewitness account of the camps until the publication of Graziani's *Cirenaica Pacificata* later that year.<sup>134</sup> The contents of the report have been lost, but it is cited heavily by Fascist parliamentarians in the record of their discussions on the colonial budget for 1932-1933.

Emilio De Bono began his address to the Chamber of Deputies after two days of discussion on the colonial budget praising Pace for his report. The parliamentary record shows that Even Mussolini who was in attendance in Parliament that day interjected to give it his highest praise.<sup>135</sup> De Bono said that the report depicted the reality of life in the camps much more faithfully than the fiction created by, "Our enemies abroad, those professional idealists who speak and write only for God's hearsay, who described the life of indigenous people in concentration camps like a life of hell."<sup>136</sup> The contents of the report must have painted a generally positive image of life in the concentration camps, but with the admission of some faults for the sake of credibility, because De Bono declared that Pace "wore no eyepatches" and made both the camps' successes and failures clear in his report.

The harsh realities that De Bono forced the Italian Parliament to confront during his presentation of the Pace report were limited to those which the government's own records would preclude him from covering up. The Fascist livestock census, for example, showed population decreases of 75-90% depending on the species, and De Bono acknowledged this as a tragic consequence of moving the herds from the lush Jebel to the arid coast. Yet, De Bono managed to put even this in a positive light by adding that the death of their livestock forced many of the

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<sup>134</sup> Atti Parlamentari 8 aprile, 1932, 6136.

<sup>135</sup> Atti Parlamentari 8 aprile, 1932, 6136.

<sup>136</sup> "All'estero i nostri nemici in genere, gli idealisti di professione e molti di coloro anche che parlano e scrivono solo per dei sentito dire, hanno descritto la vita degli indigeni nei campi di concentramento come una vita di inferno." Atti Parlamentari 8 aprile, 1932, 6143.

internees to start growing barley which, the government hoped, would tie them to the land and end their semi-nomadic way of life.<sup>137</sup>

The health of the internees was another prominent topic since rumors of scurvy in the concentration camps had made their way to the peninsula. De Bono admitted that there was a minor increase in the incidence of scurvy, but that many other diseases that were endemic among the internees were being systematically treated by Italian doctors and nurses. Pace reported that Italian doctors were able to treat the “diverse forms of syphilitic manifestations” in the Arab population, reduce the mortality rate of “gynaecological diseases” by 60%, and nearly eradicate the trachoma which afflicted nearly the entire population of the Jebel.<sup>138</sup>

The successes in the realms of health and agriculture contained in the Pace Report and spoken of by De Bono in Parliament would become the final word on the concentration camps in the eyes of international organizations. In 1932, League of Nations officials in Geneva notified Italy that they were investigating possible instances of forced labor in Africa, and that as part of this investigation the International Labor Organization would compile a report on the concentration camps in Cyrenaica. News of this investigation was greeted with indignation by members of the Fascist parliament. One deputy, Valerio Valery maintained before the Chamber of Deputies that forced labor was the greatest force of progress in Africa, even though, he admitted, the indigenous laborers who were compelled to work for the Italian state on public works projects were paid, so their labor wasn’t forced per se.<sup>139</sup>

The report that the ILO published with the results from its inquiry into the concentration camps repeated almost verbatim the speeches given by Minister De Bono in Parliament. In fact the only sources which the report cited were the proceedings of the sessions of the Italian

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<sup>137</sup> Atti Parlamentari 8 aprile, 1932, 6137.

<sup>138</sup> Atti Parlamentari 8 aprile, 1932, 6144.

<sup>139</sup> Atti Parlamentari 8 aprile, 1932, 6126.

Parliament in which De Bono presented the colonial budget for 1932 and the Pace Report.<sup>140</sup> The ILO investigated the concentration camps as an issue of treatment of native laborers, and therefore focused on itself solely on labor conditions. The compulsory work on road building and canal digging projects which Valery had alluded to were described as “voluntary public works.” for which the adult men were able to earn “enough to support their families and even keep some for savings.”<sup>141</sup> Agricultural labor was divided into three separate endeavors, the cultivation of small private vegetable gardens, the reconstitution of the herds which were decimated during the “forced transfer of the population,” and the intensive cultivation of barley.<sup>142</sup> The report noted that the fascist government had invested 12,000 lire per each hectare in order to prepare it for cultivation by digging wells and providing seed, but that now that the natives were settled those funds “might more usefully be devoted to the encouragement of settlers from the home country.”<sup>143</sup>

The ILO report’s source base does not indicate any interaction with the camps. Instead it relied solely on Italian governmental sources and took an uncritical approach to their analysis. The result is that the words of Fascist parliamentarians were echoed and amplified by the report. Quotes such as, “Mr. Pace declares that ‘the demographic movement in the camps is, generally speaking, equivalent to that among the Native inhabitants of urban centres whose living conditions have undergone no change. The birth and death rates are perfectly normal, and the infantile mortality, which was previously on an appalling scale, has also been lowered.’” on the mortality rates in the camps belie the huge increases in mortality in the camps, yet they received

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<sup>140</sup> “Concentration Camps for Native Labour on the Coast of Cyrenaica”, *International Labour: Review*. Volume 26, (1932), 410.

<sup>141</sup> “Concentration Camps for Native Labour on the Coast of Cyrenaica”, *International Labour: Review*. Volume 26, (1932), 411.

<sup>142</sup> “Concentration Camps for Native Labour on the Coast of Cyrenaica”, *International Labour: Review*. Volume 26, (1932), 412.

<sup>143</sup> “Concentration Camps for Native Labour on the Coast of Cyrenaica”, *International Labour: Review*. Volume 26, (1932), 413.

the ILO's stamp of approval and were published for the rest of the world to consume.<sup>144</sup>

Ultimately, their insertion of Fascist statistics which were generated explicitly for use as propaganda into the ILO's report cemented Fascist propaganda as the definitive authority on the living conditions in the concentration camps in the eyes of the West until historians began to revisit the question in the 1970s.

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<sup>144</sup> "Concentration Camps for Native Labour on the Coast of Cyrenaica", *International Labour: Review*. Volume 26, (1932), 416.

### Conclusion

\_\_\_\_\_The question of how such a dark and tragic moment in history could be covered up and forgotten about for nearly half a century is one that looms large over this thesis. The veil which has long obscured the reality of life in the concentration camps for those interned has only recently been slowly drawn back, and with each new piece of the story that comes to light come more historical knots to disentangle.

What is most striking, given the topic's relative obscurity in the West in the present, was how much Western publics actually knew about the concentration camps. The Fascists were very keen to promote themselves in any way they could, and the concentration camps represented another opportunity to paint themselves as innovative modernizers. For some parts of the international community Italy's colonial zeal alone was enough to convince them of the Fascist government's good intentions. The American press in particular, which had the unique privilege of not having any stake in the geopolitics of African colonialism, was the most willing to accept and parrot the official fascist line that the camps were a necessary development in colonial governance.

Those national presses who at least expressed some level of skepticism towards the Fascists, such as the British, were still too concerned with their own internal imperial issues to worry about the subjects of another empire. To some extent the British, who tacitly supported the shipments of contraband weapons through Egypt into Cyrenaica since the first Italian invasion in 1911, share part of the responsibility in perpetuating the violence which the Fascists then used as a pretext to justify an attempted genocide.

The French press did take a slightly more activist approach in condemning Fascist violence in Cyrenaica, and the unique evil of the concentration camps. However, the disconnect

between the word of French cultural-intellectual elite and the motives of the French government was vast, and the French government was not willing to back up the words of its writers with any concrete action. Even the fears of an Italian invasion of Chad which writers at French newspapers like *Le Temps* expressed were not a concern for both the Italian and French governments. Instead, the French government concerned itself with what it considered to be more pressing issues like settling a naval accord with Italy, easing diplomatic tensions in Central Europe, and maintaining watch against the ever-looming spectre of Germany.

The lack of institutional support for the anti-fascist rhetoric that came out of the French and Arabic press in the French and British colonies rendered it functionally useless in opposing Italy's actions. Instead, these polemics provided the Fascists with foils against which they could redefine their actions and empire in their own words. Any attack that came from the French press could be met with a response pointing out France's own brutal track record in suppressing colonial rebellions, and in this way the particular cruelty of deportation and concentration camps became just another indistinguishable drop in the bucket of colonial violence. This line of reasoning was bolstered by the success of Graziani's campaign of suppressing the Senussi rebellion. This military victory allowed Fascist officials to claim the concentration camps as symbols of Fascist administrative genius with such success that by the time that an organ of the liberal international system took action to investigate the concentration camps, they were already predisposed to accept the Fascist rhetoric as fact.

The fascist line of defense against the French attacks also reveals one of the great flaws in the interwar liberal internationalism. In theory, liberal republican states like France and the United States should have been against Italy's actions in Libya. The genocide of Cyrenaica's semi-nomadic and nomadic populations was unique in its brutality, efficiency, and openness.

Fascist Italy violated the professed norms of liberal internationalism in Cyrenaica, yet when the Fascist violence was put against the backdrop of the violence suffered by all parts of the colonized world at the hands of the liberal powers the facade of the internationalist rhetoric fell. When justifying their actions in Cyrenaica, the Fascists repeatedly declared that they were beholden to no morality other than their own, and they were able to support this position because even those who espoused and claimed to uphold the international system of morality did not abide by it.

The hypocrisy and national-imperial self-interest of the United States, Britain, and France, who tolerated and even cooperated with Fascist Italy as it shattered liberal international norms, provided Italy with the opportunity to commit a genocide in plain view of the world. Furthermore, the lack of strong condemnation from the Western powers allowed the Fascists to use Cyrenaica as a testing ground for its increasingly radical methods for obtaining, settling, and elaborating the ideology of its new Mediterranean Empire with minimal hindrance.



### Appendix

Le direttive di massima, emanate dalla volontà del Duce, ed impartite da S. E. De Bono e dal Maresciallo Badoglio, ai fini dell'assoluto stroncamento della ribellione da raggiungersi a qualunque costo, erano quanto mai semplici e lapidarie per chi conoscesse già l'intima natura del problema cirenaico.

Eccole:

1. Netta e materiale distinzione tra sottomessi e non sottomessi, sia in sede di ubicazione, sia in sede di rapporti e traffici.
2. Dare ai sottomessi sicurezza e protezione, ma vigilarne ogni attività.
3. Sottrarre nettamente i sottomessi da ogni influenza senussita, evitando assolutamente la riscossione per parte dei rappresentanti della Senussia o di chicchessia, di qualunque genere di *zacam*.
4. Controllo costante e preciso dei mercati e rigorosa chiusura del confine egiziano, in modo da evitare ogni possibilità di rifornimento all'avversario.
5. Epurazione sistematica ma ferma dello ambiente indigeno ed, occorrendo, nazionale, cominciando dai maggiori centri urbani e specialmente da Bengasi.
6. Impiego di elementi irregolari tripolitani, per effetto politico, per controbattere il brigantaggio avversario e per una intensa azione di rappresaglia avente per obiettivo finale la polizia completa del territorio.
7. Azione snella, decisa, leggera delle truppe, tesa a battere, disorientare, sconvolgere, i *duar* ribelli, e costringerli a subire sempre ed ovunque la nostra iniziativa.
8. Orientarsi subito verso la completa occupazione dell'intero territorio della colonia:

Kufra.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Rodolfo Graziani, *Cirenaica pacificata* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1932), 48.

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