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POSTCOLONIAL ITALY, A PUBLIC HISTORY PROJECT MAPPING COLONIAL HERITAGE

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Fascism

Italian colonialism

memory

public history

public space

Postcolonial Italy: Mapping Colonial Heritage is a public history project which Daphné Budasz and Markus Wurzer founded in Florence in 2018. The project is designed as an independent, bottom-up initiative which aims to (a) identify and collect colonial traces, (b) provide critical knowledge on these traces in order to (c) trigger debate on colonial legacies and reflect on the social, political, and cultural consequences of colonialism beyond the academic context within Italy's contemporary society. For the purpose of dissemination and accessibility, in 2019 Budasz and Wurzer created the website www.postcolonialitaly.com, which presents an interactive map that provides information about geographical sites related to colonialism. What started as a locally grounded public history project about colonial traces in Florence has over the past three years evolved into an Italy-wide participatory and collaborative venture. The map keeps growing by scholars who are working on colonial legacies in other Italian cities like Rome, Venice, Bolzano, Cagliari, Milan, Trieste, and Parma, and who are sharing their knowledge.

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Despite the relatively short duration of the Italian colonial enterprise, for the six decades from the early occupation of the Bay of Assab in 1869 to the fall of fascism in 1943 this past heavily marked Italian cities. Indeed, colonialism has left many material traces – street names, commemorative plaques, monuments, institutions, and buildings – that remain visible in public space to this day. In the decades after the Second World War, there was little engagement with these remnants probably due to a lack of interest on the part of the authorities and the population. As already pointed out in the editorial of this special issue, the attitude towards colonialism has changed in recent years for various reasons: the Italian colonial past is starting to be more widely discussed, and its legacies, including material traces in public spaces, are becoming the subject of debate.

Against this backdrop, in 2018, in Florence, we launched a public history initiative entitled *Postcolonial Italy: Mapping Colonial Heritage*. What started as a one-off event in December 2018 as a colonial memory walk in Florence organized for our colleagues at the European University Institute has since evolved into an Italy-wide participatory and collaborative project. More than seventy-five years after the end of Italy's colonial rule, colonial traces seem ubiquitous in Italian cities, but their significance is in most cases overlooked by inhabitants and visitors. Therefore, from its very beginning, the project was created as an independent, bottom-up initiative which aims at (a) identifying and collecting colonial traces, (b) providing critical knowledge on these traces in order to (c) trigger debate on colonial legacies and reflect on the social, political, and cultural consequences of colonialism within our contemporary societies. For the purpose of dissemination and accessibility, in 2019 we created the website www.postcolonialitaly.com, which features our interactive map including information about geographical sites associated with colonialism.

Postcolonial Italy was originally born from a common interest in the city we had both recently moved to – Florence – combined with an instinctive curiosity about colonial remnants. In this regard, *Postcolonial Italy* was at first a locally grounded public history project comparable to other recent initiatives led by institutions or activist groups who were also addressing colonial traces in an immediate urban environment.[1] Due to the project's positive reception we had the idea of expanding the interactive map by inviting scholars working on colonial legacies in other Italian cities to share their knowledge in this format. While Serena Alessi, Carmen Belmonte, Eleonora Sartoni, and Nikolaos Mavropoulos provided knowledge on colonial traces in Rome, Elena Cadamuro and Marco Donadon shared their insights on Venice, Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes on Cagliari, Sebastian De Pretto on Bolzano, Elisabetta Pauletti on Milan, and Iris Pupella-Nogués on Trieste.

1 For instance, see the projects *Ascari e Schiavoni. Il razzismo coloniale a Venezia* (Bettanin et al. 2017) in Venice, *Viva Menilicchi!* (Manifesta 12 2018) in Palermo, *La Città in Colonia* (Bacchini 2021) in Parma, *Viva Zerai!* (Wu Ming 2

2021) in Bologna, "Decolonize Your Eyes" (Frisina, Ghebremariam Tesfau', and Frisina 2021) in Padua, and *Memory Matters* (Biennale Democrazia 2022) in Turin.

In the course of this organic development our audiences expanded. Being in English, the project primarily drew the attention of fellow historians and international academics. However, naturally we also wanted to make this knowledge available to a non-academic Italian audience. Therefore, on the occasion of Black History Month 2021, we created an audio guide for Florence in English and Italian. More immersive than the website, this free digital tool allows participants to delve deeper into the stories on the ground and leads them on an unconventional city tour, which aims to trigger an alternative perception of the city and its identity. In 2021, thanks to our contributors and volunteer language editors, we were able to launch the Italian version of the website including the translation of the map.[2]

2 We are glad to have a great team in Devorah Block, Serena Calaresu, Moritz Deininger, and Livia Dubon.

Mapping colonial traces in Florence

The initial collection of colonial traces in Florence in 2018 was rather fruitful. To our great surprise, we easily identified more than thirty sites within the city. These traces differ not only in nature but also in how they relate to colonialism. In order to make these distinctions visible, we divided our findings into four categories, later distinguished by coloured pins on the interactive map (see Figure 1). Without going into exhaustive detail here, the following description of our findings provides an overview of the map's contents.

The first category deals with toponymy: primarily streets named after historical people who actively contributed to Italy's colonial enterprise. Situated along the river, the Lungarno Generale Diaz was named after a high-ranking military figure who took part in the Italo-Ottoman War (1911–1912), which resulted in the occupation of territories situated in present-day Libya. Writer and politician Ferdinando Martini also has a street bearing his name in Florence. A strong proponent of Italian colonialism, Martini served as Governor of Eritrea between 1897 and 1907. Several other streets commemorate members of the military from the early colonial campaigns, such as Via Pietro Toselli and Via Carlo del Prete. Moreover, the military barracks used nowadays as the headquarters of the Tuscan Carabinieri Regional Command were named after Antonio Baldissera, a general who played a central role in the occupation of the Eritrean territories in the 1880–1890s. However, in Florence colonial traces are not restricted to Italy's early colonial period and many toponyms referring to fascist colonial campaigns can be found. Indeed, Via Reginaldo Giuliani (a Dominican friar and volunteer soldier), Via Antonio Locatelli (a decorated aviator), and Via Luigi Michelazzi (a Florence-born soldier) commemorate men who died during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1941) and who were then elevated to the status of national war heroes by the fascist regime.

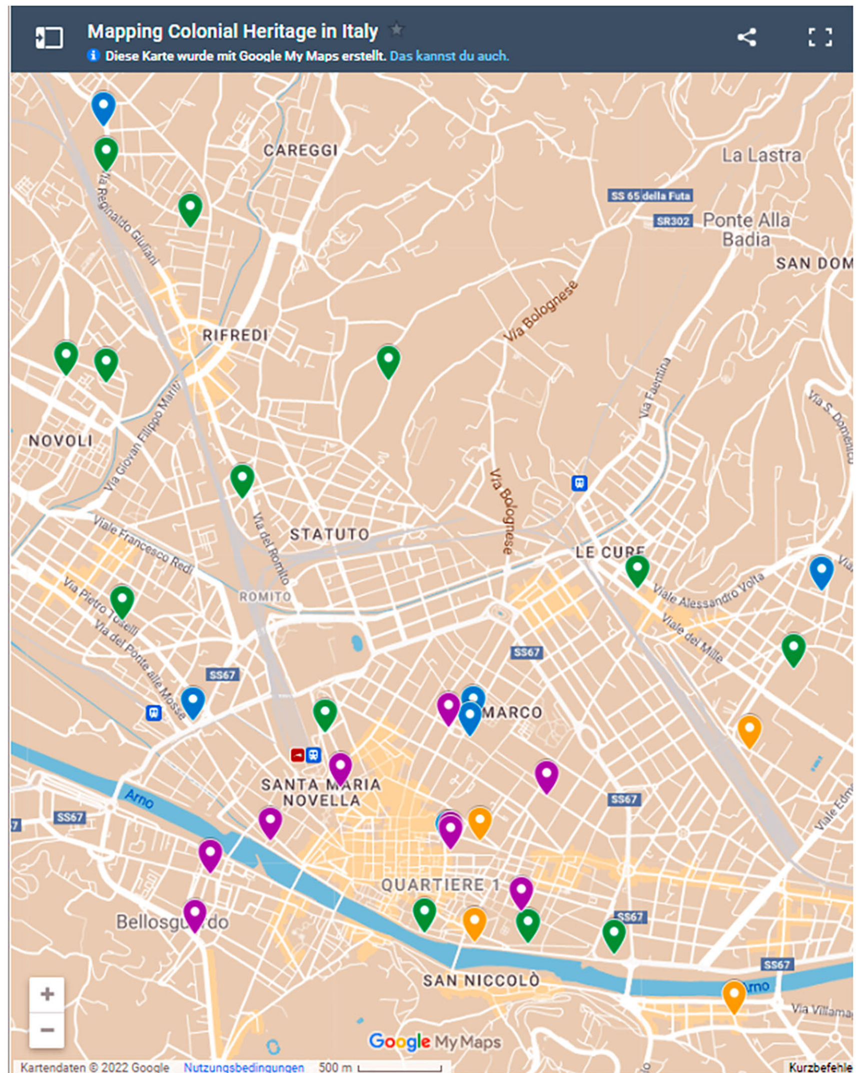

Figure 1. Colonial traces in Florence. Detail from the online map (Map data © 2022 Google).

In addition to military figures, several Florentine streets bear the names of men who facilitated the Italian colonial enterprise through their scientific work. Via Odoardo Beccari commemorates a Florentine naturalist who notably took part in a scientific mission in the Bay of Assab (in present-day Eritrea) in 1870 to research the natural resources and living conditions of a region then in the sights of the Italian Kingdom. Similarly, Via Carlo Piaggia refers to a renowned “explorer” who participated in some of the numerous expeditionary missions organized by the Italian Geographical Society, an institution engaged in Italian colonial expansion since the

1870s. Paolo Mantegazza, anthropologist and founder of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in 1869, also gave his name to a street. Although not directly involved in Italian colonialism, Mantegazza developed a human history essentially based on the belief in racial hierarchy. His works contributed to the popularization of scientific racism, which was used as an argument to legitimize European imperialism. Finally, Florence includes toponyms referring to places in the colony where colonial battles were fought, such as Via Dogali, Via Tripoli, and Piazza Adua.

The second category of traces deals with monuments. This includes commemorative plaques which, similarly to street names, refer to so-called "great men" who were involved in the colonial activities. Antonio Baldissera, already mentioned above, is for instance celebrated with a large plaque referring to his colonial victories. The monument, situated in Piazza San Marco, today a highly frequented public transport node, is particularly noticeable and even lit up at night. Other commemorative monuments in the city are dedicated to soldiers who fell during the fascist military campaign in Ethiopia, including the memorial plaque in Piazza Torquato Tasso, the one in the crypt of Santa Croce Basilica, and another on the wall of the public school Liceo Michelangelo.

Among the monuments connected to the colonial past, the Obelisk of Piazza dell'Unità Italiana (Square of Italian Unity), primarily dedicated to the wars of unification in the nineteenth century, also commemorates early colonial conflicts, such as the battles of Saati, Dogali, Adua, and the Italo-Ottoman War, which are significantly integrated into the military-focused nation-building narrative. In Piazza Ognissanti stands a sculpture of *Hercules Strangling the Nemean Lion*, whose classical inspiration at first sight conceals its colonial nature. Made by fascist artist Romano Romanelli, the statue was installed in 1937, one year after the proclamation of the empire, and can be interpreted as a metaphor for the subjugation of the Ethiopian empire by Mussolini.

The first two types of colonial traces – toponyms and monuments – are objects of commemoration. They result from political choices to inscribe a glorifying version of colonial episodes within the public space. For that reason, in many cases the histories of these traces themselves have to be distinguished from the historical narrative they intend to celebrate. The colonial dimension of the statue of *Hercules*, for example, only becomes apparent when the necessary context is provided. When it comes to toponyms, acknowledging the context makes it possible to fully grasp their historical significance. For instance, Piazza Adua refers to the historic battle Italian troops lost against the Ethiopian empire in 1896. Yet, the Florentine square was named after the event only in the 1930s by the fascist regime, who deliberately drew on this memory in order to call for revenge. Objects of

commemoration in some cases tell us much, if not more, about the context in which they were erected than about the episodes of the past they refer to.

Besides toponyms and monuments, colonial traces in cities should, from our perspective, as the third category, also include institutions whose existence and activities were closely bound up with colonialism. In Florence, a large number of institutions, many of which still exist today, have actively participated in the country's colonial enterprise.

The Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare (Overseas Agronomic Institute) is a good example of institutional colonial continuities. Founded in Florence in 1904 under the name Istituto Agricolo Coloniale (Agricultural Colonial Institute), after 1936 it was renamed Istituto Agronomico per l'Africa Italiana (Agronomic Institute for Italian Africa) to align with fascist imperial ambitions. The institute, today a scientific body of the Foreign Ministry, historically was devoted to the development of knowledge and technologies for the economic and agricultural exploitation of colonies in northern and eastern Africa. Another example of a research institution is the Erbario e Museo Coloniale di Firenze (Colonial Herbarium and Museum) – now known as the Centro Studi Erbario Tropicale (Tropical Herbarium Studies Centre) – which has focused on the study of so-called "exotic" fauna and flora collected in occupied overseas territories since 1918. The Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology) is another institution with a significant colonial legacy. Founded in Florence in 1869, the museum, the first of its kind in the country, served not only as a showcase for collections of artefacts collected abroad but also as a platform for the diffusion of social Darwinist theories. The Istituto Geografico Militare (Military Geographic Institute), founded in 1872, is another Florentine institution whose functions were essential for the modern colonial machinery. Indeed, the institute produced countless maps of the colonies which did not simply have a practical purpose: they were also an instrument of power and propaganda. Widely distributed in Italian societies, colonial maps created a potent imagination of the vast territories under Italian control which owed much to colonial propaganda without necessarily corresponding to the reality. In short, the history of these institutions shows that knowledge production was an essential component of modern colonial enterprise. Colonial knowledge was both a tool and a resource for European domination.

The last category of colonial traces includes sites, mostly private businesses, which refer in various, more or less explicit ways to colonialism. First, many companies in the food sector continue to deliberately use racist depictions of African people in the merchandizing of "exotic" products, such as coffee or chocolate. Colonial imagery remains widespread in Italy and it is not unusual to find offensive racist advertisements, not only dating from the colonial period, especially in coffee shops. In fact, this is

not surprising considering that local antiques shops are filled with colonial memorabilia: postcards, newspapers, books, and other vehicles of colonial propaganda can easily be purchased. Finally, another interesting phenomenon has been included in the map: local (family) businesses explicitly referring to their own real or imagined colonial heritage through the naming of the business or the products they sell. These cases reveal that, far from being forgotten, the colonial past is rather selectively remembered in Italy.

In conclusion, *Postcolonial Italy* should be understood as an ongoing public history project whose primary aim is to stimulate critical reflection beyond the academic context on Italian colonialism and its legacies. The particularities of the project come from the fact that it relies on a pooling of local knowledge and from its collaborative and volunteer-based aspects. Instead of adopting a systematic approach and seeking comprehensiveness, our focus is rather on the project's outreach. Indeed, in recent years, teachers and local associations have started to use the map and audio guide in Florence for its learning content. If the ultimate aim of the project is to stimulate historical awareness of the colonial past, further development might focus on the pedagogical potential of the platform.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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