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Libyan deportees on the Italian island of Ustica: Remembering colonial deportations in the (peripheral) metropole

In 1911, the Italian liberal government launched the colonial occupation of what is now known as Libya, which was met with unexpected local resistance. The government resorted to mass deportations to the metropole to sedate the resistance, which continued for more than two decades under both the liberal and Fascist regimes. This chapter of Europe's and Italy's colonial history has been almost entirely removed from collective memory. The article explores the extent to which colonial deportations are remembered on the Sicilian Island of Ustica, which witnessed the deportation from Libya of more than two thousand people. Currently, the island is home to the only cemetery in Italy that is entirely dedicated to Libyan deportees. I argue that the visits of Libyan delegations, which took place from the late 1980s to 2010, succeeded in challenging colonial aphasia at the local level. Yet, as a result of Ustica's peripheral position within the national space, the memory work developed through the encounter between local and Libyan actors remained marginal, despite its potential to redefine the Mediterranean as a symbolic space where colonial histories are articulated and remembered. Italy's outsourcing of the memory work in relation to colonial deportations implies a missed opportunity to interrogate the postcolonial present and thus question persistent dynamics of power in Europe that exclude the constructed Other.

Introduction¹

In 1911, the Italian liberal government launched the colonial occupation of what is now known as Libya, which was met with unexpected local resistance. The government resorted to mass deportations to the metropole to sedate the resistance, which continued for more than two decades under both the liberal and Fascist regimes. Thousands of 'rebels' (including elderly people, women and children) were deported to more than twenty locations in Italy throughout the 1910s.² The majority were sent to the southern Italian islands of Ustica, Favignana, Ponza and Tremiti and to the military prison in Gaeta (Di Pasquale, 2018: 212). Under Fascism, deportations became more selective. The main targets were influential members of the Libyan community, who were deported to Italy to enable negotiations in the colony and avoid further rebellions. Although imprisonment and confinement were routine practices under European colonial rule (da Conceição Neto, 2019), they were usually implemented within the colony, and 'colonial subjects were rarely deported to Europe' (De Vito et al., 2018: 2). Italy, on the other hand, deported thousands of people from the colony, not only from Libya but also from Eritrea (Lenci, 2003), Somalia (Di Pasquale, 2018:212) and Ethiopia (Ferraro, 2016). Nevertheless, deportations from Libya were far more systematic and numerous than elsewhere (Di Pasquale, 2018: 212). While Italian and Libyan historians have thoroughly researched the issue over the past 30 years (Libyan Studies Centre, 1989; Missori, 1996; Di Pasquale, 2018), scholars have overlooked issues concerning the memory of colonial deportations and its impact on local and national communities.

Over the past few years, colonial memory and the legacy of colonialism in Europe have gained increasing relevance. As Sierp (2020: 688) has observed, European countries struggle to come to terms with their colonial past at both the national and the supra-national levels. Italy's case is illustrative in this sense. Lombardi-Diop and Romeo have argued that the anomalous decolonization process of this country 'set it aside from other colonial powers and creates different postcolonial trajectories' (2014: 427). Italy lost its colonies in the aftermath of World War II, without the involvement of anti-colonization movements (as happened in other countries), and thus missed an opportunity to confront its colonial past. In this sense, Italy experienced 'political decolonisation

without cultural decolonisation' (Labanca, 2015: 125), which arguably shaped its oblivious and revisionist attitude towards the colonial past. In fact, the myth of *Italiani brava gente* ('Italians, good people'), whereby good Italians exported civilization and kindness to the colonies, is 'deeply rooted in the national culture and identity' and portrays Italian colonialism as 'an atypical example of the genre' (Mellino, 2007: 462). Mainstream narratives depict Italian colonizers as 'more human, more tolerant, more generous' than others (Del Boca, 2011: 105), thus obliterating colonial crimes. According to Ellena (2001: 42), colonialism was not entirely removed from Italy's public memory but 'frozen', marking 'the empty hole around which various attempts to give body to the nation have been shaped'. The portrayal of Italian colonialism as an unsuccessful mission crucially contributes to the 'denial of racism and violence' as key tenets of Italy's colonial endeavour (Idem). In a similar vein, Mancosu uses the term 'colonial aphasia' to argue that 'Italian colonial memory nowadays still seems scattered and weak, yet latently present in the subconscious of the nation' (2021: 404).

To further investigate the problematic relationship between Italy and its colonial past, this article explores the extent to which colonial deportations have been remembered on the island of Ustica. The memory work on colonial deportations from Libya to Italy across former sites of confinement deserves academic attention. Yet, this article focuses mainly on Ustica for a number of reasons. Between 1911 and the early 1930s, this small Sicilian island witnessed the deportation from Libya of more than two thousand people. Only Ponza witnessed a similar presence of deportees³, but this island was mainly used as a 'quarantine site', with scarce interaction between locals and prisoners, who were held there for limited periods of time. Furthermore, while deportations to the Tremiti islands, Favignana, Ponza and the military prison in Gaeta ceased in the late 1910s, Ustica was used as a site of confinement also by the Fascist regime, until 1934. In this sense, the island witnessed a large presence of Libyan deportees, and for the longest period of time. In addition to that, the island is home to the only cemetery in Italy that is entirely dedicated to Libyan deportees. These elements, alongside the significant memory work developed by locals, which will be illustrated later, justify my primary focus on Ustica in this article.

On the one hand, I explore how colonial deportations have been remembered (or forgotten) in Ustica and which factors have shaped oblivion and remembrance. On the other hand, I seek to determine the impact of local memory work on Italy's relationship with its colonial past. To understand how the community of Ustica deals with the memory of colonial deportations, I will first review the island's history as a site of confinement and identify two key traits shaping it: insularity and its location in southern Italy. I will then explore how the island remembers its past as a site of confinement and the extent to which the memory of colonial deportations fits local and national patterns of remembrance and oblivion. In the second part of the article, I argue that the visits of Libyan delegations to the island to commemorate the deportees were a key factor in shaping Ustica's relationship with the colonial past. I will show that the Libyan visits, which took place from the late 1980s to 2010, succeeded in challenging colonial aphasia at the local level. Yet, as a result of Ustica's peripheral position within the national space, the memory work developed through the encounter between local and Libyan actors remained marginal, despite its potential to redefine the Mediterranean as a symbolic space where colonial histories are articulated and remembered.

Insularity and internal colonialism: explaining Ustica's history as a site of confinement

Ustica is a small island off the north coast of Sicily, in the Tyrrhenian Sea, approximately sixty-five kilometres from the city of Palermo. The deportation of Libyans to this island is part of its long history as a site of confinement. Two key traits shaped this history: insularity and its location in the South of Italy. The interplay of these traits reflects the presence of peculiar internal colonialism dynamics that will be illustrated by providing a concise review of Ustica's history as a site of confinement.

Ustica's insularity has crucially shaped its trajectories as a site of confinement over the past three centuries. As argued by Baldacchino (2012: 56), 'space and the physico-material environment' play a 'critical role' in 'articulating human consciousness, and thus in making meaning'. The interaction between 'space' and 'meaning' underpins an understanding of islands as 'malleable platforms' (Idem), both in fiction and in real life. Writers and philosophers construct islands as 'premier sites, and models, for carefully designed and manicured spaces' (Idem: 57), insofar as 'Paradise Island' or 'Treasure Island' are popular 'tags' in the public imaginary (Royle and Brinklow, 2018: 16). At the same time, the island's malleability and isolation makes it the site of confinement par excellence. Throughout the centuries, islands have been used as 'depositories for the rejected, unwanted or suspected of disease' (Idem). Prisons – Alcatraz being a well-known example – and quarantine sites (Idem) have proliferated within the island space. Nowadays, islands such as Lampedusa, Nauru, Lesbos and Christmas Island have also become symbolic sites of detention and segregation for migrants (Baldacchino, 2018: xxv). The island space makes surveillance easier and escape more difficult. Its disconnection from the mainland exacerbates the detainees' isolation and makes it harder to scrutinize the performance of the 'guardians'. These considerations (partly) explain the choice of Ustica as a site of confinement by different regimes across centuries.

The island became a site of confinement for common criminals and political prisoners in the eighteenth century, when Sicily was ruled by the Bourbons (Ailara and Caserta, 2012: 19). After the unification of Italy (1861), the Italian government converted Ustica and other seven small southern islands into *domicilio coatto* ('police exile') sites. This was a peculiar surveillance regime, whereby suspected criminals and political activists – mostly socialists and anarchists – 'were simply sent into internal exile by administrative order' (Gibson and Poerio, 2018: 343) without prosecution.⁴ Inmates were 'free to wander the island without supervision' but still subject to police surveillance. This was, then, a 'strange hybrid system that combined restriction and freedom without any pretence of providing rehabilitation' (Idem).

At the end of October 1911, the first group of Libyan deportees (approximately 920 people) arrived in Ustica, at a time when the local population was about 1000 people (Ailara and Caserta, 2012: 35–36). The existence of a consolidated surveillance system on the island made it the perfect destination for Libyan deportees. They were accommodated in overcrowded *cameroni*,⁵ which caused several epidemics. Unlike other inmates, the Libyans were initially not allowed to move around town during the day, officially because of the high risk of an epidemic outbreak (Idem: 51). By 1912, all Libyan deportees had returned to Libya, thanks to a general amnesty (Nisticò, 2002: 97). Between 1911 and 1912, 132 deportees died in Ustica as a result of dire living conditions. The oldest victim was 70 years old, while the youngest was 16 years old (Ailara and Caserta, 2012: 60). In 1915, after the Italians were defeated in the battle of al-Qardabiyah (Tripolitania), the government ordered new deportations: 778 people were deported to Ustica, and more arrived in the following months. At the beginning of 1916, the 1360 deportees officially outnumbered the residents (Idem: 63). This time, the deportees were less isolated from the local residents, who employed many of them in different sectors. Nonetheless, living conditions remained dire, leading to the death of 141 people (Idem: 64). In this phase, the deportees were treated as hostages by the Italian government to obtain the release of Italian prisoners in Libya (Di Pasquale, 2012: 218). By the end of 1916, most inmates were relocated back to Libya. As Italy struggled to control Libya, deportations continued after 1916, with some Libyans spending longer periods in Ustica.

In 1926, the Fascist regime revitalised the *domicilio coatto* as a political and social repression tool (Gibson and Poerio, 2018: 352) and renamed it *confino* ('confinement'). Thousands of anti-fascists were deported to small islands (including Ustica), as well as remote locations in the South of Italy, to be disconnected from the rest of society. Victims of *confino* also included homosexuals, Gypsies and whoever was *suspected* of being an opponent of the regime but could not be properly

tried (Idem: 353). The degree of freedom enjoyed by inmates depended on their personal situation and the rules in force locally. Most of them were given 'arbitrary sentences of indeterminate and potentially endless length' (Idem: 354), which impacted severely on their mental health. By the end of the 1920s, there were a few dozen Libyan deportees in Ustica – mostly prominent members of the Libyan community, who received much more favourable treatment than their predecessors and had frequent interactions with locals – as well as anti-fascist militants and intellectuals who had been deported to the island (Ailara and Caserta, 2012: 87–97). In 1934, the conquest of Libya seemed complete and the last Libyans in Ustica were relocated elsewhere. Many of them were allowed to return home, while others were forced to reside in Italy (Idem: 105). From 1940 to 1943, Ustica served as a concentration camp for men and women captured in the Balkans (Capogreco, 2001: 229). Prisoners included Slovenians, Croatians, Albanians, Greeks and Montenegrins, all accused of opposing the Italian invasion. By 1942, there were over two thousand of them. They were not allowed to leave the town centre, and during the night, they were locked in the *cameroni*. With the fall of Mussolini in 1943, both the *confino* and internment regimes were dismantled. However, after the end of World War II, Ustica remained a site of forced residence mainly for common criminals, homeless people, prostitutes and mafiosi. The forced residence regime was not dismantled until 1961.

As I have argued earlier, islands are the place of confinement par excellence: 'to island is to control' (Baldacchino, 2012: 57). When the Italian government launched the *domicilio coatto* regime in the nineteenth century, it was established that the most dangerous individuals should be sent only to the islands, which were all located in the South of Italy (Garfinkel, 2019: 157). Furthermore, while the Fascist *confino* system also included mainland locations, individuals who were regarded as more dangerous were sent exclusively to the islands (Garofalo et al., 2019: 72).

In addition to insularity, another element that determined Ustica's fate as a site of confinement throughout history was its location in the South of Italy. Di Pasquale has observed that southern areas were chosen as sites of confinement not only in virtue of their isolated position, but also because of a 'racialized vision of the southern populations' (2018: 222), which sustained the emergence of the so-called 'Southern Question' after the unification of Italy. The 'Southern Question' involved 'the problematization of the Italian South' by ruling elites and intellectuals, who considered it 'underdeveloped, backward and ultimately different from Northern and Central Italy' (Giglioli, 2017: 411). The South of Italy was constructed and represented as 'internally homogenous and qualitatively "other"' (Schneider, 1998: 8), thus fuelling a divide that, to some extent, still exists today. The Otherization of southern Italy was upheld by the racialization of its population as 'badly whitened black' (Pesarini, 2021: 38), owing to the proximity with Africa and past Arab domination. As argued by Romeo and Lombardi-Diop, Italy's 'Southern Question' translates into an 'internal colonialism' dynamic that

provides an example of how postcolonial discourse may emerge not only as an emanation of the colonial periphery, but as an expression of subalternity from within the nation-state, and therefore outside traditional geographies of power that have historically juxtaposed Western hegemonic and Third World nations, as well as white and non-white subjects. (2014: 431)

Furthermore, insularity can reinforce processes of Otherization: islands are 'physically separate and culturally distinct' and 'within the boundaries of the putative national state, [they] can provide the perfect local Other' (Agnew, 2000: 382). Thus, the choice to deport unwanted individuals (including Libyans) to small southern islands reflected the 'internal colonialism' dynamics that constructed southern Italy as a peripheral space within the nation. Insularity exacerbated this process, turning Ustica – and the other islands used as sites of confinement – into a peripheral space within the

periphery. As I will show further ahead, these dynamics significantly affected the memory (and oblivion) of colonial deportations.

Ustica's relationship with its difficult past

To understand how Ustica remembers colonial deportations, we must explore its relationship with its past as a site of confinement. As Aleida Assmann has observed, 'remembering and forgetting do not necessarily constitute absolute opposites; instead, they may alternate over time' (2012: 55). This section shows that in Ustica, patterns of amnesia and remembrance have indeed coexisted and alternated over time, being shaped by the interplay of national and local dynamics. This applies to both the memory of *confino* and the Libyan presence on the island.

The dismantlement of *confino* and the subsequent creation of a concentration camp arguably represented a key turning point in Ustica's history, which coincided with the end of World War II and the birth of the Italian Republic in 1946. At the national level, this crucial phase was underpinned by a strong desire to move on: 'Italy needed to be reconstructed and lives rebuilt after the horrors of the conflict' (Foot, 2011: 73). The determination to leave the war experience behind was accompanied by a general sense that the country wanted to forget Fascism and its brutality. Oblivion was pivotal to the preservation of the 'Italians, good people' myth (Idem). For decades after the war, mainstream national narratives would depict Italians as 'good, humane people, basically untainted by fascism (...) and in fact a victim of fascism and the war itself' (Patriarca, 2010: 189). Fascism was a mere 'parenthesis in Italian history (...) an external virus that had penetrated its healthy historical body' (Fogu, 2006: 149). As a result, most Fascist crimes fell into oblivion. The islands that had directly witnessed many of the atrocities perpetrated by the regime received no input to memorialize the past.

The national 'desire to move on' was a relevant factor in shaping local oblivion dynamics in Ustica, alongside a mix of economic and cultural elements. In the early 1950s, the island was slowly converted into a tourist destination, and a part of its inhabitants was hostile to the forced residence regime still in place, which could threaten the expansion of tourism infrastructure (Graziosi, 2020: 42). However, many also acknowledged the positive economic impact that the presence of both inmates and police forces had on Ustica and opposed the end of the regime, which was nonetheless dismantled in 1961. The shift from 'a *confino*-based economy to a touristic one' (Ailara, 2016: 7) contributed to a general climate of amnesia. It was believed that making Ustica's history of confinement visible would have been detrimental to its tourist appeal, an attitude that partly persists in the present. As Vito Ailara has argued,⁶ '[t]he islands' communities have lived their history and experience with confinement with many difficulties (...) It is as if the islander (and I am not just referring to Ustica) felt guilty for having cohabitated with the inmates for (...) two centuries' (2021a). Throughout history, decisions to turn the island into a site of confinement have always been imposed from above, with no local involvement in the decision-making process. Yet, the presence of inmates (and police forces) generated income for many, which – according to Ailara – partly explains the residents' sense of guilt.

Hence, local dynamics and national amnesia explain why this part of Ustica's history has remained almost invisible for decades, even though some notable anti-fascists were sent to *confino* on the island.⁷ For example, it was only in the late 1980s that – under the Communist mayor Nicola Longo – the town council placed a plaque on the façade of the house where Antonio Gramsci and Amedeo Bordiga had lived under *confino*, to mark the 50th anniversary of Gramsci's death. The plaque commemorates both politicians, describing them as 'operating for the good and the progress of human coexistence'. The building is highly visible, given that it is located in one of the most central streets in Ustica.

The foundation of a research and documentation centre, the Centro Studi e Documentazione Isola di Ustica (hereafter CSDIU), represented a further turning point in the development of local memory work on Ustica's past. The centre was founded in 1997 by a group of locals to promote 'activities and initiatives centred on the island of Ustica, in order to encourage knowledge and the rediscovery of its cultural heritage' (CSDIU: n.d.). Since its foundation, the CSDIU's activities have focused both on studying the island's past and promoting knowledge and awareness of its history. The CSDIU has thoroughly examined the presence of *confinati* on the island; through books and articles published in its magazine and conferences, it has significantly contributed to the reconstruction of this segment of local and national history. As I will show further ahead, the CSDIU's activities also involved doing research on the presence of Libyan deportees in Ustica.

The CSDIU's many initiatives include the placement of a plaque on the building in a side street of the town centre where Nello Rosselli, an anti-fascist intellectual, lived during his time under *confino*. The CSDIU placed the plaque in 2000, to commemorate the anniversary of Rosselli's birth. The Gramsci and Bordiga plaques, alongside the one dedicated to Rosselli, are among the very few visual traces of the presence of the island's *confino* regime. Significantly, they are not signposted on local tourist maps. Likewise, many *cameroni* still exist today but have been converted into restaurants or shops, and an unaware visitor will therefore not be able to identify them as sites where hundreds of inmates spent every night waiting for freedom. In this sense, the CSDIU plays a key role in challenging amnesia, mainly at the local level.

For several decades, the presence of Libyan deportees in Ustica has been part of a general collective amnesia, with guilt seemingly also playing a role. Ailara acknowledged that the dire conditions in which deportees were forced to live on the island, especially in the first phase of deportations, contributed to a general sense of guilt and a desire to forget (Ailara, 2021a). As mentioned earlier, Mancosu (2021) has observed that Italy suffers from 'colonial aphasia', which – in Stoler's words – encapsulates the presence of 'colonial histories' in the present. These histories 'may be displaced, occluded from view, or rendered inappropriate to pursue (...) difficult to retrieve in a language that speaks to the disparate violence it [colonial histories] engendered'. Yet, they are never entirely 'forgotten nor absent from contemporary life' (Stoler, 2020: 128). A similar pattern has characterized the relationship between the Ustica community and the memory of the Libyan presence until the late 1980s. The case of the 'Cemetery of the Arabs', built in the aftermath of the first deportation to Ustica in 1911, is illustrative of this relationship.

As mentioned previously, it is estimated that 132 deportees died on the island between 1911 and 1912, and there was a pressing need to bury the deceased. The director of the penal colony, Antonio Cutrera, bought the land adjacent to the existent cemetery on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior and converted it into a burial area for the deportees (Ailara, 2021b: 39). In 1913, he ordered to erect a plaque on the cemetery's internal walls, which reads as follows: '*In questo cimitero dal 29 ottobre 1911 al 9 giugno 1912 furono sepolti 132 relegati arabi*' ('132 Arab prisoners were buried in this cemetery between 29 October 1911 and 9 June 1912'). The plaque was decorated with a star and the crescent, to recall Islamic symbolism (Caserta and Ailara, 2012: 59). During the second wave of deportations (1915–1916), 141 victims were buried in the cemetery (Ailara, 2021b: 39). The area became known as the *Cimitero degli Arabi* ('Cemetery of the Arabs'), which reflects a homogenising approach typical of the colonial mindset: Libyans were generically framed as 'Arabs'.

The cemetery is essentially a mass grave without tombstones. Libyan deportees are not remembered by their name and there is still uncertainty as to the exact number of the deceased buried there (Caserta and Ailara, 2012: 59). It is also worth noting that other victims of the confinement regime were buried in this space. From 1913 onwards, the area was designated for the burial of *any* inmate present on the island: German and Italian soldiers were buried there during

World War II, as well as deportees from the Western Balkans (Ailara, 2021b: 39). As it stands, the 'Cemetery of the Arabs' does not commemorate any of these deceased. Its denomination has inevitably overshadowed *other* histories of confinement and detention in Ustica while making the Libyan presence somehow visible. At the local level, this stratification of histories testifies to the development of a hierarchy of memories, which reflects local and national forms of amnesia.⁸

One of the key functions of cemeteries is to materialize specific memories (Vanderstraeten, 2014: 459). The presence of the 'Cemetery of the Arabs' on the island somehow challenged amnesia, as it materialized the Libyan presence within a highly symbolic place for the Ustica community: its cemetery. Yet, at the local level, colonial aphasia implied that this presence was de-historicised and de-articulated for decades. The aforementioned former mayor of Ustica Nicola Longo recalled that during his childhood, he and his friends would go to the cemetery and peek into the ossuary: '[They said] this was the Cemetery of the Arabs (...) there was not much information on it, aside from what our parents would tell us: there were these Arabs, they were many (...) living in very poor conditions...' (2021). Similarly, Ailara mentioned that the Libyans were 'never present in everyday conversations. There were some memories, and then an adage used to label those things that never end: – Ali, when are you leaving? Tomorrow. – And then 30 years went by' (Ailara, 2021a). Finally, Attilio Licciardi – another former mayor of Ustica – said that 'until a few years ago, when you were talking about someone who would postpone a decision, the elders would say "they are like the Arabs"' (2021). Hence, the Libyan presence was somehow incorporated into the community's communicative memory (Assmann J, 1995: 127), but with few organic attempts to historicize it. Italy's lack of engagement with its colonial past at the national level significantly contributed to fuelling colonial aphasia at the local level. 'Aphasia is a dismembering,' Stoler claims (2020: 128), 'a difficulty in speaking, a difficulty in generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts to appropriate things.' Although the 'Cemetery of the Arabs' materialized the presence of the colonial subject before the local community, this was not articulated within the historical context (the colonial period). The next section will demonstrate that colonial aphasia was challenged mainly thanks to external input, namely the visits of Libyan delegations to the island between the late 1980s and 2010, which prompted local memory work on the colonial past.

Challenging colonial aphasia: Libyan delegations in Ustica

On 26 October 1989, the anniversary of the first deportation of Libyans to Italy, Libya celebrated its annual 'day of mourning'. On that day, Colonel Qaddafi sent a delegation of more than a hundred and fifty people – including war veterans and deportees' descendants and relatives – to visit former sites of confinement in Italy (Lannutti, 1989). The visit was part of Qaddafi's campaign to obtain colonial reparations from the Italian state,⁹ in which the issue of colonial deportations played a significant role. The campaign tied in with a broader nation-building project, which also entailed developing a national (rather than regional) narrative of Libya's past (Baldinetti, 2010: 23). Through a series of cultural cooperation agreements with Italy in the 1980s, the Libyan Studies Centre could finally access Italian archives to investigate the trajectories of Libyan deportees.¹⁰ In 1987, the Centre published a book on Libyan deportees in the Italian islands, followed by a trilingual edition (in English, French and Italian) titled *The Libyan Deportees in the Prisons of the Italian Island* in 1989. The book presents a collection of documents reconstructing the trajectories of Libyan deportees between 1911 and the early 1930s. It also signals the activism of Libyan citizens around the issue, including transcripts of the letters of 'the sons and relatives of the Libyan Arab citizens deported to Italy' that had been delivered to the Italian Ambassador in Tripoli on the 26 October anniversaries of 1987 and 1988 (Libyan Studies Centre, 1989: 196–198, 203–205). The letters included a list of requests to the Italian government, which mostly focused on obtaining information about the fate of the deportees who had never returned home. The final request was for compensation to 'those alive

and the families of the dead for all the damages they suffered' (Idem: 198). The book starts with an excerpt from Qaddafi's speech on the 'day of mourning' in 1988:

On this day we say to the Italians that (...) we are in front of an operation of genocide, effected by Italy against a neighbouring Mediterranean people. And it is not possible that we shall ever forget our relatives (...) As from today, we shall teach this list to our children, and we shall tell them: there is a country, neighbouring across the Mediterranean sea, which took away your uncles, aunts, and grandfathers. (Muammar Qaddafi, 1988, cited in Libyan Studies Centre, 1989: 9)

As 1989 marked the twentieth anniversary of the revolution, this was a crucial opportunity for Qaddafi to revive his campaign for colonial reparations, and the visits of Libyan delegations to Italian former sites of confinement were fundamental in this sense. As the then mayor Longo recalled, there was widespread curiosity among the population of Ustica, who had been informed of the upcoming visit. This was an unprecedented event and the delegation was rather numerous, hence impossible to ignore on a small island with less than fifteen hundred residents:

[They were] probably 200...they came with their *barracani*, all dressed up. [There was] great curiosity among the Usticans, we told them these were the relatives and friends of those who had been rounded up in Tripoli after the Sciarra Sciat battle, and that we shouldn't be proud of that. For us it was a moment of reflection, [it was] a way to understand the damages that Fascism had done over that period. (...) We prepared some pictures of the first people who arrived...and they were curious. And I remember someone asking: are there any children? Any of our relatives? (Longo, 2021)

The delegation visited the cemetery and prayed there, spending only a few hours in Ustica. After this first visit, on 26 October of every year until 2010, a delegation from Libya – usually accompanied by the Libyan consul in Palermo – would visit the island. The delegation would visit the cemetery to pray for the deceased and have a quick meal offered by the island's town council. The Libyan consulate in Palermo liaised with the town council to organize the visits. The mayor would normally welcome the delegations, which allowed the local community to gain some insight into the expectations of the delegations. As former mayor Licciardi has observed, there was a sense that Libyan delegates saw local authorities as diplomatic representatives of the Italian state; Ustica was therefore seen as the appropriate forum to voice their demands for colonial reparations (Licciardi, 2021). In this sense, former mayor Longo recalled that 'there were some hardliners who insisted on compensation, and we would try to calm them down, telling them that the only thing we could do was to provide a dignified welcome', as the issue of compensation 'had to be dealt with at a higher level' (Longo, 2021). Libya asked Aldo Messina, mayor between 2003 and 2013, to get a DNA test to prove that he was not a descendant of the deportees (Messina, 2021). Given the uncertain fate of hundreds of deportees who never returned to Libya, DNA tests would have confirmed (or confuted) the thesis that they had remained on the islands, mixing with the local population.¹¹

The annual visits of Libyan delegations stirred curiosity and interest among the local population. They encouraged members of the CSDIU to explore and reconstruct the Libyan presence on the island by relying on oral history and archival research (Ailara and Caserta, 2012). Such efforts culminated in a photo exhibition officially inaugurated in 2004, which travelled across Italy in the following years. To date, the CSDIU's work is possibly one of the few and most accurate attempts to visually document the lives and trajectories of Libyan deportees in Italy, as well as their interaction with locals. In 2010, Qaddafi invited the mayors of Gaeta, Favignana, the Tremiti islands and Ustica

to attend the inauguration of the CSDIU's exhibition in Tripoli, alongside members of the centre itself. The delegation also met with Qaddafi in his tent in the desert, which implies a direct relationship between Libya and the local communities of these former sites of confinement, Ustica included.

Furthermore, the relationship between Libya and Ustica was further consolidated thanks to an event that also saw the involvement of Italian national actors. This was represented by the conference that was held on the island in 2004, 'Libyans exiled in the colonial period'. The conference was part of a broader historical research project on the trajectories of Libyan deportees in Italy, funded by the Italian government between 2000 and 2005, in an effort to settle the colonial dispute (Baldinetti, 2010: 24). The project was developed by the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient,¹² in collaboration with the Libyan Studies Centre. Its findings were disseminated through a series of academic conferences held in former deportation sites, with the last one being held in Ustica. The conferences were attended by both Italian and Libyan academics, and the proceedings of the conference were published both in Arabic and Italian, with the exception of the proceedings of the last conference held in Ustica, which were never published. Nevertheless, this project represented a further opportunity for an encounter between representatives of the Libyan community and Ustica; the CSDIU was actively involved in the conference, and its members had also contributed to some of the conferences held in the previous years.

The interaction between Libyan delegations and the Ustica community allowed for significant development of the cemetery space. As mentioned earlier, the plaque placed in 1912 somehow materialised the presence of Libyan deportees on the island and in the cemetery. However, every year, the delegations would voice Qaddafi's demands to refurbish the area and give a more dignified recognition to the victims of colonial deportations. In the late 1990s, these demands were finally met. A wall was built to delimit the area, with arches and domes imitating Arabic architecture. A fountain for ritual ablutions and a stone slab with the kiblah, the arrow indicating the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, were also added to the space. The refurbishment was funded by the Libyan government, while the Ustica town council provided logistic support in terms of planning and overseeing the works (Licciardi, 2021).

[Insert: (Figure1) Caption: Internal view of the 'Cemetery of the Arabs' with the fountain for ritual ablutions in the background].

As Aleida Assmann has argued (2011: 282), 'even if places themselves have no innate faculty of memory, they are of prime importance in the construction of cultural memory'. This was, then, a key turning point in the process of remembering colonial deportations in Ustica, as it contributed to making the past presence of Libyan deportees on the island visible.

Over the years, two more plaques were placed in the cemetery area. One was placed on the cemetery's external wall – on mayor Messina's initiative – and reads 'to the Libyan victims of the deportation in Ustica.'

[Insert (Figure2). Caption: the plaque placed by mayor Messina on the cemetery's external wall]

The second one was placed by the CSDIU in 2022, to mark the entrance to the cemetery area and simply remind visitors of its denomination (the plaque reads 'Cemetery of the Arabs' in Italian and Arabic).

[Insert (Figure3). Caption: the plaque placed by the CSDIU to mark the entrance to the ‘Cemetery of the Arabs’]

Both plaques are illustrative of local memory work in relation to colonial deportations. The first plaque seeks to historically contextualize, for the very first time, the Libyan presence in the cemetery by naming the deceased ‘Libyans’ (and not generically ‘Arabs’) and by granting them the status of ‘victims’. However, this is not enough to encapsulate colonial drama: the word ‘colonialism’ does not feature in the plaque, which somehow reflects a certain difficulty to articulate the colonial past. Nonetheless, the plaque is one of the few institutional attempts (given that it was placed upon the mayor’s initiative) to commemorate the victims of Italian colonialism in the country. Furthermore, by using both the Italian and Arabic languages to mark the site’s denomination, the second plaque explicitly acknowledges its transnationality as a site where Libyans and Italians remember the victims of colonial deportations.

After Qaddafi’s death, Libyan visits to Ustica stopped and there seems to have been no contact between the island and Libya for a few years. However, some occasional visits have occurred in more recent times, which confirm the relevance of Ustica as a memory site. In 2018, the then Libyan Prime Minister al-Sarraj stopped in Ustica after a summit in Palermo and – accompanied by the mayor – paid a visit to the cemetery (Viviano, 2018). In the summer of 2022, Libyan scholar Faraj Najem visited the island escorted by the Italian consul in Benghazi; exchanges between Benghazi and the CSDIU over future cultural collaboration are still ongoing (CSDIU, 2022: 44).

This section has shown that the visits of Libyan delegations have had a significant impact on Ustica. As argued by Ailara (2021b: 40), up until the visit of the first Libyan delegation, the ‘Cemetery of the Arabs’ was a mere toponym, whose origin was ignored by the new generations’. In this sense, Libyan delegations allowed for the articulation of those ‘scattered memories’ (Mancosu, 2021) that had fuelled colonial aphasia on the island for decades.¹³

Outsourcing colonial memory, silencing the postcolonial present

In this last section, I will analyse the potential of local memory work in Ustica to challenge internal colonialism dynamics and colonial aphasia, as well as its impact on the postcolonial present.

Stoler (2020: 123) has observed that ‘colonial histories possess unruly qualities’. While they ‘may remain safely sequestered on the distant fringes of national narratives where they have long been deemed to belong’, they are not dead. The visits of Libyan delegations to Ustica are illustrative in this sense: by claiming space and recognition, they shed light on a colonial past that has never completely disappeared and further illuminate Italy’s reluctance to confront it. In addition, the colonial histories revived by the Libyan visitors complicated the internal colonialism dynamics that had relegated Ustica to the margins of the national space for centuries. As I have mentioned earlier, central governments historically constructed and treated Ustica as a remote peripheral space, where unwanted subjects were conveniently exiled and kept out of sight. Yet, Libyan delegations treated the island as a key representative of the national community, thus putting it in the spotlight and challenging the insularity and internal colonialism dynamics that had constructed Ustica as a periphery within the periphery. This is because the Libyan delegations had a double agenda. On the one hand, they wanted to commemorate their deceased on the island. On the other hand, they voiced Qaddafi’s campaign for compensation, thus putting Ustica and its community at the centre of the dispute between Libya and Italy. The 1996 delegation carried a banner, significantly asking for ‘[...] equal compensation for what has been perpetrated by the Italian invader against the rights of our neutral and peaceful people is needed’. The banner was written in Italian, which indicates that there was a clear intention to deliver this message to the local population. In 1998, the head of the Libyan delegation Saadi Abdelnabi Taher concluded his speech¹⁴ by exhorting Italy to fulfil the

promises made through the joint communiqué signed by Italy and Libya a few months earlier.¹⁵ To lay the foundations for an equal relationship between the two countries and turn the Mediterranean into 'a place of peace and security', Taher argued, Italy had to deal with its colonial past. While Ustica was evidently not the only space where Libya voiced its requests to the Italian government, the island was seen as a key site in this regard.

On the other hand, it can be questioned whether the relationship with Libya actually challenged Ustica's marginality within the national space. Such a relationship has seen little involvement from the Italian government, which never sent a representative to welcome delegations to the island. This absence contributed to the feeling that over the years, Ustica's mayors were acting as 'diplomatic representatives' of Italy. As Labanca (2010: 16) has observed, 'Libya, and Italy's colonial past in Libya' represented 'an embarrassment for contemporary Italy'. While Qaddafi somehow obliged Italian governments to confront their colonial past in Libya because of their economic and geopolitical interests in the country, Ustica was never central in the dispute. Yet, for more than two decades, Italian governments outsourced the memory work on colonial deportations to former sites of confinement such as Ustica, thus reproducing the same internal colonialism dynamics that had turned these sites into penal colonies. Italy's 'undigested relationship' with its colonial past (Ben-Ghiat 2006, 321) is upheld by ultra-positive narratives of Italian colonialism. Local memory work on colonial deportations had the potential to challenge such narratives and prompt a critical reflection on Italian colonialism. Yet, the transformation of Ustica into a transnational memory site where colonial deportations are remembered does not taint the 'Italians, good people' myth because such memory work remains peripheral. In this sense, the articulation of the national space along centre-periphery lines mimics the colonial aphasia condition identified by Mancosu (2021: 404), in which colonial memories are 'scattered' and therefore 'weak'. What is visible and openly declared in Ustica remains latent and unarticulated in the national sphere. Although the Libyan delegations prompted local memory work on colonial deportations, thus challenging colonial aphasia at the local level, the marginalization of Ustica within the national space limited the impact of such memory work at the national level.

The persistent marginality of the memory work on colonial deportations within the national space raises broader questions about the postcolonial present and the role of memory in challenging the reproduction of colonial dynamics of power. As Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (2014: 427) have argued, postcolonial perspectives 'reposition colonial history and its legacy at the centre of the debate on contemporaneity'. In this sense, it is impossible to ignore that the geographical trajectory of colonial deportations reproduces that of current migration routes from Libya to Italy. This has been noted by Del Boca, who observed that accounts of the 1911 deportation by Libyan historians remind us of the boats arriving in Lampedusa, 'with their load of wretches and dead' (2011: 261). While the historical context and the actors involved are clearly different, both colonial deportations and deadly migrant journeys are the outcomes of dynamics of power and exclusion perpetuated by the West against the constructed Other. As it is widely known, Libya plays a controversially fundamental role in managing the movement of migrants trying to reach Fortress Europe from North Africa. The 2008 Treaty of Friendship between Italy and Libya, which was also meant to solve the countries' colonial dispute, consolidated Libya's role as 'the gatekeeper of Italian racist [immigration] policies' (Palma, 2020: 174). Hence, as Brambilla provocatively asks, 'how would it be possible to repair the Italian colonial atrocities committed against Libya, when new horrors are going on in the same country using unchanged strategies of confinement?' (2014: 234). While the answer can surely not come from Ustica, the outsourcing of memory work on colonial deportations to this small island helps to silence fundamental questions about Italian and European securitarian approaches to migration. As Rothberg (2011: 538) has noted, 'cultural memory and discourses on the past' have the power to 'create arenas where injustices are recognized' and potentially redressed. As long as

the memory of colonial deportations remains disarticulated and hidden from the national space, its potential to highlight the 'historical continuum' (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2012: 2) between the colonial past and the postcolonial present is minimal – and so is its power to recognize and redress injustice.

Conclusion

This article has explored the memory work that concerns an overlooked chapter of Europe's colonial history: the deportation of thousands of individuals from Libya to Italy between 1911 and the early 1930s. I have focused specifically on the case of Ustica, in light of a number of elements that made its history as a site of confinement for Libyan deportees particularly worthy of analysis. However, future research will be able to further problematise the Ustica case in relation to the experience of other islands, where local memory work has so far been less extensive¹⁶.

As I have shown in the first part of the article, the trajectories of Libyan deportees are intertwined with Italy's internal colonialism dynamics. These justified the relegation of unwanted individuals to remote southern islands such as Ustica, which central governments perceived and constructed as a peripheral space. For decades, the presence of Libyan deportees in Ustica remained on the margins of collective memory. This was partly the result of general post-war amnesia, but Italy's inability to properly articulate the colonial histories scattered across the country also reflected its troubled relationship with the colonial past. The arrival of Libyan delegations on the island from the end of the 1980s onwards significantly challenged colonial aphasia at the local level and prompted members of the community to study the history of deportations and commemorate the victims. However, local memory work on colonial deportations to Ustica remains disconnected from the national space, where ultra-positive narratives of colonialism and colonial aphasia remain unchallenged. Once a small peripheral island that used to hide unwanted subjects from the sight of central governments, Ustica is nowadays the repository of important colonial memories, crucially nestled in its 'Cemetery of the Arabs'. Yet, the location of these memories in a marginal space of the nation reflects Italy's persistent colonial aphasia condition and obstructs a broader reflection on the country's postcolonial present.

On the other hand, the Ustica case attests to the livelihood of colonial histories and their potential to prompt memory work. The 'Cemetery of the Arabs', a space that was co-created by Libyan and Italian actors, testifies to such potential. As Proglia has argued, the Mediterranean is filled with 'Eurocentric narratives' (2018: 412) and often represented as an 'archive of Italian/European cultural memories' (Idem, 411) that obliterate the voices and lived experiences of those who have been excluded from this space. The transnational dimension of the memory work on colonial deportations in Ustica can contribute to redefining the Mediterranean as a symbolic space where colonial histories are addressed and remembered. Libyans embody the postcolonial subject who, by claiming recognition of the damage inflicted by colonialism, simultaneously articulates the colonial past. Their agency is therefore fundamental: as mentioned above, the 'Cemetery of the Arabs' is one of the very few places in Italy where the victims of Italian colonialism are remembered. Yet, for Ustica to continue representing a transnational memory site where colonial histories are articulated and remembered, Europe must keep the door open to future visitors from Libya.

After 2011, changing geopolitical balances in Libya have hampered the Libyans' ability to continue commemorating colonial deportations in Ustica. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing that the EU's restrictive visa regime does not allow for *impromptu* visits of non-EU and non-Western citizens, such as Libyans. Furthermore, it was Italy's close relationship with Qaddafi that allowed for the organization of the Libyans' annual visits to Ustica. Now that the colonial dispute has lost its geopolitical relevance, the gates of Fortress Europe remain closed. As I have argued previously, Italy's outsourcing of the memory work in relation to colonial deportations also implies a missed

opportunity to interrogate the postcolonial present and thus question persistent dynamics of power in Europe that exclude the constructed Other. These very same dynamics clearly threaten the transnational reach of Ustica's memory work. As Balibar (2003: 41) has observed, it is 'the extreme ambivalence of its relationship with the colonial past which makes Europe, in a sense, the postcolonial locus par excellence'. In the present time, Europe is defined 'in terms of "frontier" or "border"' (Balibar, 2003: 40). However, 'migrants demand to be able to move about between different parts of the world (...) contributing both at home and abroad to a real "decolonization"' (Balibar, 2003: 42). As long as debates over Europe's relationship with its colonial past remain inward-looking and, therefore, dominated by Eurocentric perspectives, memory will not suffice to recognize and redress injustice. Yet, the encounter between local actors – who are not driven by geopolitical and economic interests – and the postcolonial subject can disrupt Eurocentric considerations of the colonial past and enable the creation of shared spaces of remembrance that bypass national and supra-national patterns of colonial aphasia.

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Interviews

- Interview with Ailara V 26 July 2021. Interview by Galadriel Ravelli.
- Interview with Longo N 29 July 2021. Interview by Galadriel Ravelli.
- Interview with Licciardi A 30 July 2021. Interview by Galadriel Ravelli.
- Interview with Messina A 30 July 2021. Interview by Galadriel Ravelli.

Notes

¹ All translations from Italian are mine.

² There are no certain data about the exact number of people deported to Italy. According to as-Sa'idi, around 9000 people were deported from Libya (2001). For an overview of the debate on data, see Di Pasquale (2018, 215).

³ About 2234 Libyans were deported to Ponza, according to Ibrahim (2005: 61)

⁴ The *domicilio coatto* policy was, therefore, an extremely arbitrary policy that the state used to repress any form of political dissent (Garofalo et al., 2019: 46–47).

⁵ *Cameroni* literally means 'big rooms'. These one-level buildings were used as dormitories by inmates, scattered across the town of Ustica. They were either state property or rented out by the state (which generated income for the residents). The *cameroni* had no toilet services and natural light was filtered through small barred windows (Ailara and Caserta, 2012: 45).

⁶ Ailara is a former mayor of Ustica and one of the founders of the Centro Studi e Documentazione Isola di Ustica, which I will discuss further ahead.

⁷ Antonio Gramsci spent 44 days in Ustica. Famous anti-fascists who were confined to Ustica include Amedeo Bordiga, among the founders of the Italian Communist Party, and the Rosselli brothers, who were later killed by French Fascist forces following the Italian mandate.

⁸ Focardi (2014: 26) has argued that Italy conveniently covered the crimes committed by Italians in the Western Balkans.

⁹ See Labanca (2010), De Cesari (2012) and Tere Powell (2015).

¹⁰ The Libyan Studies Centre is a research centre set up by Qaddafi in 1978 to promote the decolonization of Libyan history (Baldinetti, 2010: 21).

¹¹ Messina agreed to take the test, which came back negative.

¹² A research institute affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The institute closed in 2012.

¹³ An unintended outcome of Libyan visits to the island was the crystallization of the hierarchy of memories underpinning the perception that only Libyan deportees are buried in the 'Cemetery of the Arabs'. Such a dynamic overshadows the presence of other deceased and reveals Italy's inability to confront its war crimes in the Balkans.

¹⁴ Thanks to Vito Ailara for providing a copy of the original speech.

¹⁵ See Rossi et al. (2000: 279).

¹⁶ It is nonetheless worth mentioning that monuments commemorating Libyan deportees deceased on the islands were erected in both the local cemeteries of Ponza and Favignana in the early 2000s. Furthermore, a mausoleum commemorating Libyans deceased on the Tremiti island was erected on the island of San Nicola (Tremiti) in 2006.