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## Royal Army, Fascist Empire: The Regio Esercito on Occupation Duty, 1936–1943

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Graduate Program in History  
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy  
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## Abstract

Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 ushered in a new imperial phase that aimed to radicalize Italian Fascism at home and abroad. But the military commanders entrusted with conquering and pacifying Fascism's imperial dominion, and moulding the Fascist "new man" through war, belonged to a conservative monarchist institution with ambiguous ties to Mussolini's regime. This dissertation explores the relationship between the Royal Italian Army and Fascist empire-building in Africa and Europe, focusing on the Italian military occupation of Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941 and of Yugoslavia from 1941 to 1943. Drawing on ministerial, gubernatorial, division, corps, and army-level archival material, it examines the behaviour, attitudes, and decisions of Italian senior officers through three analytical lenses: political-legal; ideological-cultural; and, military-strategic. The result is a portrait of a military institution that, despite misgivings about Fascist style and bombast, functionally "worked towards the *Duce*."

Although the army's involvement in uniquely Fascist policies was restricted by the regime's expectations that civil authorities would predominate in imperial administration, indigenous resistance to Italian rule ensured that military officers remained involved in most aspects of imperial politics. Yet, despite frequent jurisdictional or tactical conflicts between military authorities and Fascist functionaries, Italian generals never challenged Rome's principal objectives. Rather, the themes and rhetoric employed by Italian military commanders and propagandists reflected the regime's official line, from racialized representations of local populations to claims of a "civilizing mission" on the Roman model. Military propaganda aimed to brutalize Italian conscripts on occupation duty by delegitimizing resistance and presenting enemy insurgents and populations in subhuman terms. The army's counterinsurgency strategies relied on mass repression and violence. Confronted by effective resistance movements, Italian generals resorted to draconian methods that — while rooted in military culture and colonial doctrine dating back to Italy's nineteenth-century unification — coalesced with Fascism's exaltation of violence and obsession with the prestige of force. Equating imperial expansion with the status of their nation and institution, and facing military circumstances that elicited a harsh response, a relatively unexceptional group of Italian generals easily found common ground with Fascism.

## Keywords

Italian Fascism, Royal Italian Army, Fascistization, Military culture, Colonialism, Italo-Ethiopian War, Second World War, Counterinsurgency, Mass violence, Propaganda.

*To Nanny (1927–2014)*

## Acknowledgments

This dissertation was a long time in the making, and there are many people that played a role — professionally and personally — in bringing it to fruition. The research questions and methodologies developed in this project build upon undergraduate and graduate work conducted at the University of Lethbridge and University of Calgary under the guidance of professors Christopher Burton, John Ferris, and Alexander Hill. Their encouragement strongly influenced my decision to pursue the topic further at the doctoral level.

In London, Ontario, Robert Ventresca proved the ideal supervisor and mentor. His advice and suggestions were always insightful, and his enthusiasm and compassion boosted my confidence in times of doubt. Professor Frank Schumacher read several drafts of this work and his suggestions provided valuable new historiographic dimensions to the project. Professors Eli Nathans and Brock Millman made comprehensive exams a stimulating experience, and I am grateful for their willingness to tailor our reading lists towards the topics and themes of my dissertation.

Research abroad was funded by a Doctoral Fellowship awarded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). I would like to thank the directors, archivists, librarians, and staff at the Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (AUSSME), the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), the Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAE), and the Biblioteca Universitaria Alessandrina in Rome, the Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino in Trento, the Biblioteca delle Civiche Raccolte Storiche in Milan, and the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, MD. All were eminently professional and eager to help. Alessandro Gionfrida at the AUSSME and Caterina Tomasi at the Museo Storico del Trentino rendered particular assistance.

Special thanks must go as well to the staff of the D. B. Weldon and Cardinal Carter Libraries at Western University and King's University College in London, Ontario. They managed to track down hundreds of sources via interlibrary loan. In a few cases where no lending library could be located, Elizabeth Mantz and Linda Whidden went so far as to acquire copies for the collection at Western and King's.

Colleagues from Canada, the United States, and Europe provided valuable conversations, paper drafts, sources, even office space. They include Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Patrick Bernhard, Damjana Bratuz, Graham Broad, Cindy Brown, Oliver Charbonneau, Adrian

Ciani, Tim Compeau, Brandon Dimmel, Rachael Griffin, Pericle Karavis, Chuck Melson, Maria Laura Mosco, Pietro Pirani, Sanela Schmid, Nassisse Solomon, and Lee Windsor.

My family — especially my parents, George and Carole Virtue, and my parents in-law, Baldassare and Girolama Gucciardo — remained supportive, understanding, and remarkably patient throughout the entire process. I also very much appreciated the offers of writing space from relatives. Portions of this dissertation were written in homes or offices ranging from Lethbridge and Canmore, Alberta, to North Pender Island, British Columbia, to Bradford, Ontario.

My grandmother, Irene Virtue (aka “Nanny”) was perhaps the most genuinely interested non-specialist in my work. Our telephone conversations always ended up with her asking me what I had been researching or writing about lately; I would always reply with far too much detail. It is to her memory that this work is dedicated.

Finally, I owe a most important debt of gratitude to my wife and colleague, Dorotea. We met shortly after I moved to London and she has supported me every step of the way. This included giving me a couple research days in Rome during our honeymoon, as well as putting up with my frequent inside jokes and references to obscure Italian generals. Her own academic experience, patience, and sense of humour made her the perfect sounding board and crutch whenever I stumbled.

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## List of Abbreviations and Terms

ACS	<i>Archivio Centrale dello Stato</i> (Central State Archives, Rome)
AISS	<i>Ambasciata italiana presso la Santa Sede</i> (Italian Embassy to the Holy See)
allegati	attachments; appended documents
AOI	<i>Africa Orientale Italiana</i> (Italian East Africa)
ASMAE	<i>Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri</i> (Italian Foreign Ministry Archives, Rome)
AUSSME	<i>Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito</i> (Italian Army Archives, Rome)
CC.NN.	<i>Camicie Nere</i> (Blackshirts; Fascist Militia)
CC.RR.	<i>Carabinieri Reali</i> (Royal Carabinieri; military police)
Comando Supremo	Italian Armed Forces High Command
DDI	<i>Documenti Diplomatici Italiani</i>
DIWC	Documents on Italian War Crimes
DS	<i>Diario Storico</i> (unit war diary)
DSCS	<i>Diario storico del Comando Supremo</i>
FG	<i>Fondo Graziani</i> (Graziani papers)
Gab	<i>Gabinetto</i> (Ministerial cabinet)
Gab-AS	<i>Gabinetto – Archivio Segreto</i> (Ministerial secret archive)
MAI	<i>Ministero dell'Africa Italiana</i> (Ministry of Italian Africa)
MCP/Minculpop	<i>Ministero della Cultura Popolare</i> (Ministry of Popular Culture)
MVAC	<i>Milizia Volontaria Anticomunista</i> (Volunteer Anti-Communist Militia)
MVSN	<i>Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale</i> (Fascist Militia)
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD
OKW	<i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i> (German Armed Forces High Command)
PNF	<i>Partito Nazionale Fascista</i> (National Fascist Party)
SMRE	<i>Stato Maggiore del Regio Esercito</i> (Royal Army General Staff)
SPDCR	<i>Segreteria Particolare del Duce – Carteggio Riservato</i> (Mussolini's papers, confidential correspondence)

Supersloda	<i>Comando Superiore Forze Armate di Slovenia e Dalmazia (Supreme Command for Armed Forces in Slovenia and Dalmatia; Second Army)</i>
USSME	<i>Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (Italian Army Historical Office)</i>
VCSMG	<i>Verballi delle riunioni tenute dal capo di SM generale</i>

## Note on Language

There is no standard system for transliterating Amharic words into English using the Latin alphabet. For Ethiopian names and places, I have sought to use spelling that will be familiar to English readers. Ethiopian and Eritrean names consist of two parts: a person's given name followed by his or her father's name. The latter is not a family surname; it is not accurate or useful to refer to an individual only by their last name. Thus, Ethiopian and Eritrean names are recorded in full both in the text and footnotes.

Diacritics have been retained for all Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian terms, names, and places. Frequently used terms, such as Ustaša and Četnik are not italicized. For plural forms, I have followed common practice, referring to Ustaše (rather than Ustašas), but to Četniks (as opposed to Četnici). Where possible, I have used interwar Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian spellings of place names, which often differed dramatically from those used in Italian maps and correspondence at the time (for example, Dubrovnik versus Ragusa). Italian spelling has been retained for localities and provinces that were part of the Kingdom of Italy before 1941 (for example, Fiume [Rijeka] and Zara [Zadar]).

To distinguish between South Slavic nations, I have adapted the system laid out in Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 17–18. The words Slovene, Croat, and Serb are used as nouns and adjectives referring to people. The adjectives Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian refer to language, geography, historical concepts, and state entities.

## Introduction

The soldiers of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division's 51st Infantry Regiment were exhausted when they reached the village of Zapotok in central Slovenia. It was nearing the end of July 1942; to the veterans in the unit it seemed that they had not enjoyed a moment's rest during the past nineteen months. They referred to themselves as "the wandering division."<sup>1</sup> The Cacciatori — who took their name from Giuseppe Garibaldi's patriotic brigade of volunteers and were known for the red ties they wore in his honour — were sent to the Balkans in January of the previous year. Deployed to the Greek front in the mountains of Albania, the division lost half its strength to combat, frostbite, and illness.<sup>2</sup> The campaign concluded in April and the Cacciatori were sent to occupy Montenegro, where they faced a general insurrection that kept them engaged in operations until their transfer to Dalmatia in September. No sooner had they established their winter quarters when high command ordered the Cacciatori to relocate to the interior of Herzegovina at the beginning of December. Here, they confronted a burgeoning insurgency before being sent back to the Adriatic coast at the end of January 1942. Between April and May, the division took part in a series of major anti-partisan operations that criss-crossed eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. Finally, in June the Cacciatori delle Alpi were transferred by train to Slovenia, as reinforcements for yet another cycle of operations.

For the past week they had scoured the densely forested hills of central Slovenia on the heels of the notoriously elusive partisans of the Liberation Front. Apart from a few minor skirmishes the regiment had not managed to come to grips with its adversary. There was plenty of evidence that partisans had indeed occupied the area in some force;

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Casanuova, *I°/51* (Florence: Fauno, 1965), 48.

<sup>2</sup> According to a later report, the division arrived in Albania with only 70 percent of its complement. In fighting against the Greeks, the Cacciatori lost 532 dead, 1,875 wounded, and 246 missing, with another 2,545 hospitalized due to frostbite and illness. "Attività addestrativa," 13 October 1941, Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Rome [AUSSME], N1-11, b. 381, Diario storico [DS] 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, October 1941, allegati. The Cacciatori delle Alpi Division shared the nickname *cravatte rosse* ["red ties"] with the Re Division, whose troops wore red ties representing the primary colour in the coat of arms of the House of Savoy.

the Italians discovered abandoned outposts, supply dumps, infirmaries, bicycles, typewriters, and documents, but very few actual rebels. Despite the pleasant weather and picturesque scenery, frustration mounted. The officers of the division were under pressure to achieve results, which — higher commands made clear — meant body counts. Among the documents captured in the previous days, the Italians had found lists which they took to be registries of members belonging to the communist partisan organization. Now, they searched Zapotok and its sparsely populated environs for the individuals named on the list. The villagers claimed that armed guerrillas had forced nearly the entire population to sign the registry. Italian officers selected fourteen men, including the village headman, and escorted them a kilometre out of town.

Only when they were told to line up on their knees in a ditch did the villagers realize the true nature of their plight. This was not a work detail, but an execution. According to the medical officer that accompanied the firing squad, the thirty soldiers assigned to the task were “reluctant” to pull their triggers. Too many missed their targets; it took three rounds of shooting before the firing squad was ordered away, leaving the medical officer to dispatch the wounded with his pistol. The division’s war diary for the two days at Zapotok recorded nineteen men “shot by firing squad.”<sup>3</sup> According to Slovene researchers, the final death toll from the operation in Zapotok was thirty-six.<sup>4</sup> Seeking to impress his superiors, the corps commander in charge of the whole operation reported the victims as “rebels” killed.<sup>5</sup> But the Italians uncovered no weapons or direct evidence of subversive activity in the village, which now mourned the loss of fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons who may or may not have offered active resistance to the occupation of their country by a foreign power.

The episode at Zapotok was not exceptional. An ever growing body of case studies has shed a broader light on Italian behaviour in military occupations during the

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<sup>3</sup> The details of the action in Zapotok have been reconstructed from Casanuova, *I°51*, 127–31, and the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division Command war diary, 22–23 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Tone Ferenc, *‘There is Not Enough Killing’: Condemned to Death, Hostages, Shot in the Ljubljana Province, 1941–1943; Documents* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 1999), 262–62.

<sup>5</sup> Robotti to Roatta, 23 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

Fascist years. Scholarship on Italian occupation regimes in the Balkan countries has grown exponentially since the 1990s, thanks to the opening of Italian archives and to the interest prompted by the Yugoslavian wars.<sup>6</sup> Less has been written on Italian military policies and repression in Africa, a field dominated by a small but active group of scholars.<sup>7</sup>

Together, these studies have thoroughly debunked the myth of Italians as *brava gente* [good people]. At the end of the Second World War, the Italian government and anti-fascist political forces officially fostered the notion that Italians and their institutions had remained fundamentally humane, despite the violent tendencies of Mussolini's Fascist regime. This "master narrative" — reinforced by Allied wartime propaganda, the experience of German occupation after September 1943, limited postwar purging, and the failure to prosecute Italians for war crimes — dominated public memory of the war for decades.<sup>8</sup> Today, the myth remains stubbornly persistent in Italian collective memory

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<sup>6</sup> Francesco Caccamo and Luciano Monzali, eds., *L'occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia (1941–43)* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2008), 6. Alongside Caccamo and Monzali's volume, which includes case studies on Croatia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Kosovo, see H. James Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia, 1941–1943* (New York: Enigma, 2005), Marco Cuzzi, *L'occupazione italiana della Slovenia* (Rome: USSME, 1998), Eric Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra: Gli italiani in Jugoslavia (1941–1943)* (Rome: Carocci, 2007), Eric Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico: L'occupazione italiana in Jugoslavia (1941–1943)* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2013), Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia 1941–1943: Strategie di repressione antipartigiana* (Rome: Viella, 2011), and Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War*, trans. Adrian Belton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Angelo Del Boca's multivolume works on Italian colonialism in Libya and East Africa remain essential. The volumes most relevant to Fascist counterinsurgency are *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, vol. 2, *La conquista dell'Impero* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1979), *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, vol. 3, *La caduta dell'Impero* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1986), and *Gli italiani in Libia*, vol. 2, *Dal fascismo a Gheddafi* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1988). See also the essays in Del Boca's edited work, *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1991) and Giorgio Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia: Studi militari 1921–39* (Treviso: Pagus, 1991). In English, see Alberto Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini: Fascism and the Colonial Experience* (London: Zed, 1985). More recent additions to this body of work are Eric Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia: Le atrocità nascoste dell'avventura coloniale italiana (1911–1931)* (Rome: Manifesto, 2005) and Matteo Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero: Gli italiani in Etiopia 1936–1941* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2013). The ability of Italian war criminals to avoid extradition and the lack of an "Italian Nuremberg" largely was the result of Cold War politics and a lack of will on the part of the victorious Allied powers. Filippo Focardi and Lutz Klinkhammer, "The Question of Fascist Italy's War Crimes: The Construction of a Self-Acquitting Myth, 1943–1948," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 330–48. Costantino Di Sante, *Italiani senza onore: I crimini in Jugoslavia e i processi negate (1941–1951)* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2005). Although a large number of Italian army officers were purged,



and subject to partisan politics between the right and left in Italy. However, with evidence of Italian brutality as well as detailed narratives of specific cases now widely available, historians have begun to shift their emphasis from *exposing* to *explaining* Italian behaviour.

What motivating factors lay behind the shooting of civilians at Zapotok? It is clear that the executions were ordered from above; they were part of a broader military policy. The present study focuses on the senior officers and the institutional culture from which those orders and policies stemmed. The questions that can be asked of events at Zapotok can be asked of Italian commanders and commands at a more general level. Was the behaviour displayed at Zapotok a legitimate response to the difficult conditions posed by guerrilla warfare, as Italian generals claimed? In Africa and Europe, the Italian army confronted well-organized and effective insurgencies against which conventional forces and doctrine often proved inadequate. How typical was the case of Zapotok? Was Italian behaviour uniform and consistent between units, commanders, and theatres? To what extent did higher authorities tolerate variation, and to what degree did they seek to balance harshness with restraint? An officer of the 51st Regiment later claimed that high command wanted all 130 villagers named on the list executed, but that the division and battalion commanders conspired to reduce the final tally.<sup>9</sup>

What role did Fascism play in the army's behaviour? How fully did military authorities conform to directives from Mussolini's regime in Rome and to a Fascist ideology that exalted violence? While acknowledging the fallacy of the *brava gente* myth, historians nonetheless have argued that the lack of ideological preparation within the Italian army prevented its episodes of violence from matching the "massacres and

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demoted, or forced into retirement after the Second World War, the main criteria in this process was the extent of their collaboration with the pro-German Italian Social Republic after September 1943. Behaviour in occupied territory was not taken into consideration. Andrea Argenio, "L'epurazione e la discriminazione degli alti gradi dell'esercito italiano (1943-1948)," *Clio* 41, no. 4 (2005): 617-51.

<sup>9</sup> Casanuova, *I°51*, 127.

brutality” committed by their German allies in eastern and southeastern Europe.<sup>10</sup> The commander of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division was described as “far from fascist [...] a humane man.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, if true, this did not translate into meaningful resistance. Finally, was Italian violence at Zapotok the result of a perceived “colonial” or “imperial” mission in the Balkans, shared by Fascists and traditional nationalists alike during Mussolini’s bid to re-establish an empire for Rome? Were the methods adopted in Zapotok imported from the army’s colonial doctrine in Africa where such executions, at times, had been commonplace?

These questions on the relationship between the Italian army, Fascism, and Mussolini’s imperial programme are of particular importance. Not only can they help to understand the decisions and policies of Italian generals conducting counterinsurgency, they also can reveal much about the dynamics of Italian Fascism and, more broadly, of traditional state institutions within a self-styled totalitarian dictatorship. The Italian army’s role as an occupying force overlapped with Fascist programmes for territorial expansion and national transformation. The potential for the army’s involvement in the Fascist revolutionary project was greatest in the occupied territories. Furthermore, because Fascism’s imperial vision spanned two continents — Africa and Europe — these questions can identify linkages between colonial rule and totalitarian domination.

The present study seeks to understand the Italian army’s behaviour within the context of Fascist empire-building. Its focus is on the way that Fascist objectives, intentions, and plans were perceived, interpreted, and implemented by the generals of the Italian army during Fascism’s imperial phase from the mid-1930s through the Second World War. To identify areas of consistency and continuity, ambiguity and departure, as well as institutional learning and knowledge transfer, this study adopts a comparative approach. By comparing the Italian army’s occupation policies in Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941 to those in Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1943 — the two most significant occupations of Fascism’s imperial phase — it is possible to evaluate trends, continuities,

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<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane, 1935–1943: Dall’Impero d’Etiopia alla disfatta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), 368–70. Gianni Oliva, *Soldati e ufficiali: L’esercito italiano dal Risorgimento a oggi* (Milan: Mondadori, 2009), 232–33.

<sup>11</sup> Casanuova, *I°51*, 124.

and divergences of behaviour in a way that single narrative case studies cannot. Within this seven-year period, Italian army officers on occupation duty in these two regions found themselves at the forefront of Mussolini's Fascist Empire. Examining its activity in these two geographically and culturally diverse territories allows for broader conclusions on the army's role as an institution within the context of Fascist imperialism.

The picture that emerges of the Italian army's approach to occupation is complex and nuanced, but this study reveals significant patterns. Italian officers demonstrated a mentality that was compatible with Fascist expectations. This was dominated by social Darwinian concepts of imperialism and racism. They also shared with Fascism a notion of racial hierarchy that permitted different forms of political and military behaviour in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia. Similarities in the army's conduct in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia stemmed partly from the army's colonial mentality but, more tangibly, from military culture — from an institutional approach to irregular warfare in general. In functional terms, the Italian army occupying Fascism's empire did “work towards the *Duce*.” It sought as best it could to further Rome's often vaguely defined interests, sometimes quite effectively. But it did not do so primarily out of an attraction to Mussolini and Italian Fascism. The army's relationship to Fascism was based on overlapping worldviews, national objectives, and military priorities rather than enthusiastic dogmatic devotion. What is remarkable is how sturdy and enduring this basis of collaboration proved in Italy's occupied territories.

## Royal Army

The *Regio Esercito* — the Royal Italian Army — had its roots in the unification of Italy under the Savoy dynasty in 1861. The new institution largely adopted the shape, form, and customs of the *Armata Sarda*, the army of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. While it absorbed the armed forces of the other Italian states, the persistence of Piedmontese traditions and its central role in nation-building ensured that the *Regio Esercito* remained closely connected to the House of Savoy. Italian monarchs donned the uniform of the army, shared a military education, and surrounded themselves with officers. In its role of uniting conscript soldiers and professional officers from various regions and — to

paraphrase Massimo D’Azeglio — making them Italians, the army instilled a strong sense of institutional loyalty closely connected to the cult of the monarchy. Through the nineteenth century, the *Regio Esercito* remained generally conservative, aloof, and apolitical, its relations with the parliamentary government characterized by mutual apathy.<sup>12</sup>

The First World War had a transformative impact on the Italian officer corps. Especially after the disastrous defeat at Caporetto — when the Italian government and high command sought to bridge the divide between the “legal” Italy of the state and the “real” Italy of its largely peasant population — officers became propagandists and were themselves radicalized by their patriotic cause.<sup>13</sup> The politicization of the *Regio Esercito* continued after the war, connected to a broader “failure to demobilize wartime culture” in Italy, and in much of Europe, after 1918.<sup>14</sup> Brutalized by the war and expecting great rewards for the victory that the army claimed to have achieved for Italy, many officers reacted sharply against the government’s failure to achieve larger gains at the Paris peace talks or to clamp down against socialist revolutionaries during the *biennio rosso* [the “two red years” of 1919–20]. As military discipline broke down, officers and soldiers openly collaborated with nationalist and Fascist paramilitary groups committing anti-socialist and, on the eastern frontier, anti-Slavic violence. The Liberal government’s mistrust of the army combined with postwar budget reductions to further alienate the officer corps, driving it into an “alliance” with Fascism in hope that the protection offered by a Fascist government would allow a return to the army’s traditional apolitical

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<sup>12</sup> John Whittam, *The Politics of the Italian Army, 1861–1918* (London: Croom Helm, 1977). Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 163–66. On the role of the army and monarchy as tools for establishing a national identity in Italy following unification, see Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy since 1796* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 283–90, 305–309.

<sup>13</sup> Whittam, *Politics of the Italian Army*, 205.

<sup>14</sup> Marco Mondini, “Between Subversion and Coup d’Etat: Military Power and Politics after the Great War (1919–1922),” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 11, no. 4 (2006): 447. In their broader study of the First World War, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker conclude that “the culture of war did not die with the armistice.” See their work, *14–18, Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 166.

disposition.<sup>15</sup> This context influenced the decision of King Vittorio Emanuele III not to oppose the Fascist March on Rome at the end of October 1922, and to instead appoint Mussolini as prime minister. Although his generals agreed that the army could crush the Blackshirts without significant loss, they also warned the king that “it would be best not to put it to the test.”<sup>16</sup>

After the March on Rome, the army’s support for Mussolini’s government was “clear and decisive.” Similar to Fascist relations with other pre-existing structures and institutions in Italy, the “alliance” between the *Regio Esercito* and Mussolini’s regime allowed the army to retain its organizational autonomy so long as it did not involve itself in political affairs.<sup>17</sup> Despite growing scholarly consensus on this marriage of convenience between the army and Fascism in the 1920s, the level to which the *Regio Esercito* truly was or became “Fascistized” is open to debate. Evaluating the ideological and political impact of Fascism on the Italian army and its strategy has proven a difficult task. There is no systematic structural analysis of the relationship between the army and the regime.<sup>18</sup> This study seeks to fill that void, at least in part, by examining the army’s role as an institution within Fascist ideological, political, and legal frameworks of imperial administration and occupation.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the *Regio Esercito* made a series of “concessions” [*cedimenti*] to the regime, which introduced a new Fascist “style” to the army. These “external manifestations” of Fascistization included the adoption of the *passo romano* [the “Roman Step,” or Goose step], the Fascist salute, Fascist songs and anthems, and the use of Fascist mottos stenciled onto barracks walls. The army collaborated with Achille Starace’s campaign to replace the supposedly bourgeois and foreign third person singular formal address *lei* with *voi*, and military correspondence usually included the Fascist

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<sup>15</sup> Marco Mondini, *La politica delle armi: Il ruolo dell’esercito nell’avvento del fascismo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2006), and Mondini, “Between Subversion and Coup d’Etat.”

<sup>16</sup> Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 145. Denis Mack Smith, *Italy and its Monarchy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 249–50.

<sup>17</sup> Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 146–47.

<sup>18</sup> Osti Guerrazzi identifies this as a gap in the historiography. Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *Noi non sappiamo odiare: L’Esercito Italiano tra fascismo e democrazia* (Turin: UTET, 2010), 50.

calendar year alongside the conventional date. In 1938, the army accepted Mussolini's newly created rank of "first marshal of the empire," at the expense of the monarchy's prestige and of military procedure, since the *Duce* had actually served in the armed forces only as a corporal.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the aesthetic impact on the army of two decades of Fascist rule, most accounts emphasize continuity with the nineteenth-century image of the Italian officer corps. The ideal Italian officer held onto a "caste mentality" based on privilege and he espoused paternalistic or bourgeois codes of honour at odds with the Fascist vision of the "new man."<sup>20</sup> So as not to lose personal control over the armed forces to his party, Mussolini opposed the complete Fascistization of the army. Like Hitler, Mussolini refused to subordinate the armed forces to his party's paramilitary wing, the black-shirted *squadristi* who lived on after the March on Rome as the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* [MVSN]. Instead, he allowed the army to gain dominance over the MVSN.<sup>21</sup> It has thus been argued that, with few exceptions, the army retained its institutional independence under Fascism.<sup>22</sup> While small groups of officers became either militant supporters of Fascism or devoted anti-Fascists, the majority adopted a reserved consensus that weakened over the course of the Second World War, a conflict which exposed the regime's inability to prepare or mobilize for total war.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 191–96. Osti Guerrazzi, *Noi non sappiamo odiare*, 59–61. On the Fascist calendar, the *passo romano*, the Fascist salute, the campaign against *lei*, and the political significance of aesthetics and rituals for the Fascist regime, see Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, "The Politics of Symbols," chap. 3 in *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 147–48. Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 150–52.

<sup>21</sup> John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 72. MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 84.

<sup>22</sup> The most noteworthy examples of Fascist interference in the army's internal affairs involved the introduction of chaplains as part of the regime's agreements with the Vatican, and the purging of Jewish officers. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 158–62, 169–70.

<sup>23</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *Noi non sappiamo di odiare*, 64–82.

Most debate on the loyalty of the army to Fascism focuses on the latter half of the 1930s — a period during which Mussolini adopted an increasingly aggressive and risky foreign policy while the Fascist Party stepped up attacks on the middle classes that made up the officer corps — through the Second World War.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, leading Fascists perceived a widening breach between themselves and the generals of the *Regio Esercito*. Galeazzo Ciano and Giuseppe Bottai, among the many Fascist hierarchs that participated directly in the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, complained that “the generals [...] have taken the revolution prisoner,” and that Mussolini “listens to them too much.”<sup>25</sup> Fascists complained of the elitism of “career” officers, their contempt for the MVSN, their bourgeois mentality, and their loyalty to the king.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Fascism always had to compete with the monarchy as the primary focus of loyalty for the officer corps.<sup>27</sup> Despite the long-lasting marriage of convenience between Fascism and the monarchy, Mussolini privately considered the king “an irreducible enemy of the regime” and promised eventually to eliminate the monarchy altogether.<sup>28</sup> Disgusted by the army’s “backward mentality,” Mussolini blamed monarchism for the moral and spiritual “disorder that reigns in the army.”<sup>29</sup> It is clear that Mussolini and the Fascist leadership did not perceive of the army as a Fascist or particularly Fascistized institution.

In practice, the attitudes of Italian generals towards the Second World War were ambiguous, open to a variety of interpretations. The army was among the most reluctant groups of the Italian ruling classes to enter the war in 1940. Whereas Fascists, industrialists, and the middle classes largely backed Mussolini’s decision to intervene against Britain and France, Italy’s military leadership adopted a pessimistic view towards

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<sup>24</sup> Knox credits Starace’s anti-bourgeois campaign and the arrogance of local Fascist functionaries for the rise of dissident groups within army circles by 1940. MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939–1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy’s Last War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 264–65.

<sup>25</sup> Bottai diary, 24 November 1935.

<sup>26</sup> Bottai diary, 8, 10, and 14 December 1935, 16 May 1936, and 26 October 1939. Alberto Pirelli, *Taccuini, 1922/1943*, ed. Donato Barbone (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), 296–97.

<sup>27</sup> Knox, *Common Destiny*, 232.

<sup>28</sup> Ciano diary, 10 May 1939.

<sup>29</sup> Bottai diary, 26 October 1939. Ciano diary, 30 April 1939.

general war and requested more time to prepare.<sup>30</sup> However, when push came to shove, Mussolini's generals did not resist the *Duce's* decision to declare war on 10 June 1940. As in the Ethiopian campaign of 1935, Italian generals willingly entered war despite incomplete plans and a lack of intelligence. As John Gooch concludes, through 1940 "there is no substantive evidence to suggest that the pull of the monarchy ever significantly affected the strategic postures or military policies of any of the services, and in moments of tension for Italy their members seem to have managed to link the security of the state with the well-being of the realm."<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, Italy's military leadership and monarchy played a role in the downfall of Mussolini and the Fascist regime in July 1943.<sup>32</sup> But the fact that the army remained loyal for as long as it did — following the abject failure of Mussolini's "short war" [*guerra breve*] at the end of 1940 — suggests that its relationship with the regime was more than superficial. Fortunato Minniti argues that career officers and Fascists continued to share an affinity between mentalities, if not ideologies, centred on similar Great War myths and beliefs of sacrifice, pragmatism, and a dominant state.<sup>33</sup>

To better understand the army's commitment to Mussolini and to Fascism, historians have extended their gaze beyond considering the activity of the high commands in Rome and the fighting spirit of frontline units to examining the behaviour of the *Regio Esercito* in occupied territories. Because occupation duty required generals to play political roles, and because certain occupied territories carried great ideological

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<sup>30</sup> H. James Burgwyn, *Mussolini Warlord: Failed Dreams of Empire, 1940–1943* (New York: Enigma, 2012), 8–11.

<sup>31</sup> Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 310, 519.

<sup>32</sup> At the beginning of July 1943, *Comando Supremo* chief Vittorio Ambrosio proposed establishing a military dictatorship under Marshal Pietro Badoglio. After the Fascist Grand Council called for Mussolini to relinquish control of the armed forces to the king, Victor Emmanuel ordered Mussolini's arrest and appointed Badoglio prime minister. Puntoni diary, 5, 15, 20, and 24–25 July 1943. Aga Rossi considers Ambrosio's efforts at subversion prior to Allied landings in Sicily half-hearted. Elena Aga Rossi, *A Nation Collapses: The Italian Surrender of September 1943*, trans. Harvey Fergusson II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 42–44. For an account of the fall of Fascism that emphasizes the role of the army and monarchy, see Gianfranco Bianchi, *Perché e come cadde il fascismo: 25 luglio crollo di un regime*, 2nd ed. (Milan: Mursia, 1972).

<sup>33</sup> Fortunato Minniti, "Gli ufficiali di carriera dell'Esercito nella crisi del regime," in *Sulla crisi del regime fascista, 1938–1943: La società italiana dal consenso alla Resistenza*, ed. A. Ventura (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), 75–76, 89–90.



significance for Fascism, the army's policies in these regions can shed much light on broader issues of Fascistization. Indeed, the most polemical arguments regarding the army's loyalty to the regime focus on occupation forces in the Balkans. Jonathan Steinberg bases his argument that Italian generals "conspired" to protect Jews in the Balkans partly on the assumption that they belonged to a "traditional, monarchist, liberal, gentlemanly, masonic, philo-semitic and anti-fascist service."<sup>34</sup> According to Luciano Monzali, the army's ambivalence turned into genuine anti-Fascist dissent during the Second World War. This was especially prevalent in the Balkans, where generals "criticized and contested" the regime's monopoly on policy, eventually adopting autonomous policies of their own in defence of what they saw to be Italian national interests.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, Davide Rodogno argues that the Italian military leadership in the Balkans effectively was Fascistized. Rodogno borrows Ian Kershaw's concept of "working towards the *Führer*" and applies it to Italian civil and military functionaries in occupied Europe. He argues that the chaotic system of Fascist government in the occupied territories fostered internal rivalries in which the various power centres, including the army, sought to obtain the objectives defined by the charismatic leader, Mussolini, who remained the final arbiter.<sup>36</sup> Between these interpretations of the Italian army as either fundamentally anti-Fascist or devotedly loyal to Mussolini lies a large middle ground, best exemplified by the work of James Burgwyn. Rejecting the notion that Italian generals actively "worked towards the Duce," he presents them as reluctant empire-builders who nonetheless conducted their duties out of loyalty to the king and

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<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust, 1941–1943*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 231.

<sup>35</sup> Luciano Monzali, "La difficile alleanza con la Croazia ustascia," in Caccamo and Monzali, *L'occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia*, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 138. Eric Gobetti largely adopts Rodogno's view. Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 66. Eric Gobetti, "The Royal Army's Betrayal? Two Different Italian Policies in Yugoslavia (1941–1943)," in *In the Society of Fascists: Acclamation, Acquiescence, and Agency in Mussolini's Italy*, ed. Giulia Albanese and Roberta Pergher (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 192–93.

traditional romantic nationalistic pride, and whose often violent policies were based more on pragmatism than upon Fascist aims or values.<sup>37</sup>

## Fascist Empire

Central to the debate on the behaviour, motivations, and relative Fascistization of the Italian army in the Balkans is the imperial context of occupation. Officers of the Royal Army administered and pacified an avowedly “Fascist Empire,” whose existence Mussolini had announced to the world on 9 May 1936 following the Italian conquest of Addis Ababa.<sup>38</sup> The anniversary of that date entered the regime’s calendar as Army Day [*festa dell’Esercito*], symbolizing the close relationship between the army and Fascist empire-building.<sup>39</sup> The invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935 ushered in what Alexander De Grand refers to as Fascism’s “imperial-colonialist phase.” This was a period marked by heightened imperialist rhetoric, an increasingly aggressive foreign policy, massive colonial expenditure, and racist legislation that pushed Fascism towards a more “Nazi-like orientation.”<sup>40</sup> The dynamism of Mussolini’s imperial turn was largely spent by the end of 1940 with Italy’s failed invasion of Greece, but the Italian occupation of Balkan territories after 1941 represents the true dénouement of the imperial phase, even if the Fascist regime’s freedom of action was sharply limited by Nazi dominance within the Axis. In order to situate the Italian army within the context of Fascist imperial designs, this study examines episodes of occupation at either end of Fascism’s imperial phase, the period in which the Fascist regime most closely identified itself with imperial expansion and colonialism.

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<sup>37</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire in the Adriatic*, 255–56, 280–81.

<sup>38</sup> “Il Duce annunzia all’Italia ed al mondo la costituzione dell’Impero fascista,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 10 May 1936, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Maurizio Ridolfi, *Le feste nazionali* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003), 89–90.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander De Grand, “Mussolini’s Follies: Fascism in its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935–1940,” *Contemporary European History* 13, no. 2 (2004): 127, 133. Similarly, Gentile refers to a Fascist phase of “imperial civilization” between 1936 and the early years of the Second World War. Emilio Gentile, *La Grande Italia: The Myth of the Nation in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Suzanne Dingee and Jennifer Pudney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 146.

Precisely what made the post-1935 Fascist Empire “fascist” is open to question. Certainly, the idea of empire among Italians was not a Fascist creation. Imperial aspirations developed hand-in-hand with the Risorgimento. The seizure of Rome from the papacy in 1870 brought with it expectations of regaining the glory of the ancient Roman Empire. Most realists focused on achieving civic greatness, but many Italian nationalists nurtured hopes of an eventual territorial re-creation of empire under favourable circumstances. Allusions to the Roman Empire, and disappointment that a united Italy had not yet regained its greatness, became common dialogue in Italian literature.<sup>41</sup> Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, whose brand of nationalism was in many ways a Fascist prelude, was driven by images of a new Rome. Proclaiming it to be Italy’s historic destiny and demographic necessity, Crispi presided over the first expansionistic phase of Italian imperialism, only to see it end in disaster with military defeat at Adwa in 1896.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, through its “discovery of imperialism” at the turn of the century, Italian political culture connected might, expansion, and conquest to nation-building and modernization.<sup>43</sup> The Liberal state had fostered a colonial mentality among Italians prior to the advent of Fascism.<sup>44</sup>

While notions of a reborn Roman Empire were already well-advanced after the Risorgimento, Angelo Del Boca has argued, “only with Fascism did this hypothesis transform itself into promise, and finally into a solemn commitment of the regime.”<sup>45</sup> Nicola Labanca agrees that, despite continuity with the Liberal era, Fascism brought a

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<sup>41</sup> Federico Chabod, *Italian Foreign Policy: The Statecraft of the Founders*, trans. William McCuaig (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 235–261.

<sup>42</sup> Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), 70–83. Like Mussolini, Crispi touted the potentially regenerative power of armed conflict. Unable to foment a war in Europe, he turned his attention towards Africa. Duggan, *Force of Destiny*, 323–32, 336–37, 345–47.

<sup>43</sup> Gentile, *La Grande Italia*, 94. See also Giuseppe Maria Finaldi, *Italian National Identity in the Scramble for Africa: Italy’s African Wars in the Era of Nation-building, 1870–1900* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009); and, Laura Cerasi, “Empires Ancient and Modern: Strength, Modernity and Power in Imperial Ideology from the Liberal Period to Fascism,” trans. Stuart Oglethorpe, *Modern Italy* 19, no. 4 (2014): 421–38.

<sup>44</sup> Nicola Labanca, “L’Africa italiana,” in *I luoghi della memoria: Simboli e miti dell’Italia unita*, ed. Mario Isnenghi (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1996), 256–289. The colonial mentality of politicians and writers from northern Italy coloured their views of southerners. Aliza S. Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861–1911: Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 21.

<sup>45</sup> Angelo Del Boca, “L’impero,” in Isnenghi, *I luoghi della memoria*, 419.

new style and substance to Italian imperialism and colonialism at least a decade before invading Ethiopia. The consolidation of dictatorship in 1925 permitted the regime to stifle anti-colonial discourse — a growing problem faced by other colonial powers during the interwar period — and to focus its propaganda instruments towards establishing a “colonial consciousness” among Italians.<sup>46</sup> The regime launched periodicals, funded lectures, and built a museum devoted to colonialism, which gained new exposure in the Italian education system.<sup>47</sup> Various professional groups, including archaeologists, classicists, and geographers, were mobilized or co-opted to justify expansionism and prove the links between Fascism and Imperial Roman civilization.<sup>48</sup>

A colonial mentality — that of the disciplined, civilized, paternalistic, war-like conqueror and ruler, confident of his superiority, authority, and status — was an essential component of the Fascist “new man” that was intended to restore Italy’s dominance in the modern world. The national image remade by Fascism used nostalgia for an idealized Roman past to present an avowedly revolutionary model for modernity as an alternative to Western capitalism or Soviet communism.<sup>49</sup> Colonial rule and imperial expansion were central to Fascism’s drive towards cultural revolution. Like Nazism, Italian Fascism tied open-ended expansionism to the objective of national rebirth and the quest for an “ideal Fatherland.”<sup>50</sup> Recent scholarship has also highlighted the role of racism in Fascism’s

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<sup>46</sup> Labanca, *Oltremare*, 130, 143–46.

<sup>47</sup> Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, 2:18–19. On the increased promotion of “Colonial Sciences” in the Italian higher education system after 1925, see Valeria Deplano, “Making Italians: Colonial History and the Graduate Education System from the Liberal Era to Fascism,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, no. 5 (2013): 580–98. On colonial themes in primary school textbooks, see Alessandro Pes, “Becoming Imperialist: Italian Colonies in Fascist Textbooks for Primary Schools,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, no. 5 (2013): 599–614.

<sup>48</sup> Mariella Cagnetta, *Antichisti e impero fascista* (Bari: Dedalo, 1979). David Atkinson, “Constructing Italian Africa: Geography and Geopolitics,” in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15–26.

<sup>49</sup> Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Modernity is Just over There: Colonialism and Italian National Identity,” *Interventions* 8, no. 3 (2006): 380–93. Pes, “Becoming Imperialist,” 608. On the connection between *romanità*, national rebirth, and cultural revolution under Fascism, see also Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> Aristotle Kallis, “To Expand or not to Expand? Territory, Generic Fascism and the Quest for an ‘Ideal Fatherland’,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 2 (2003): 239. Stanley Payne includes “the goal of empire, expansion, or a radical change in the nation’s relationship with other powers” in his typological

“anthropological revolution” to remake Italians. Through violence and legally defined hierarchies, the regime used cultural and biological racism — in its colonies against subject populations and at home against foreigners and Jews — to establish its idealized harder and more severe “new man.”<sup>51</sup>

As De Grand argues, expansionistic desire and colonial visions grew more radical in Fascist Italy during the mid-1930s, partly in response to domestic pressures. The failure of the corporative experiment to transform Italians, the persistence of bourgeois values among Italian elites, and the population’s growing disaffection with a provincial Fascism riddled by corruption indicated that the Fascist revolution had stalled. Mussolini intended to “relaunch” his totalitarian revolution through war, conquest, and imperial rule, beginning with the invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>52</sup> The Italo-Ethiopian War was intended to complete “the militarization of society and the fascistization of the army.”<sup>53</sup>

The timing of the regime’s imperial and racist turn was also influenced by changes in the international balance of power. The heightened Japanese threat to the British Empire in Asia combined with a resurgent, revisionist, and rearmed Germany gave Mussolini the opportunity to act more assertively than he had in the 1920s, with less risk of British and French intervention.<sup>54</sup> Claiming that the British Empire was in crisis,

description of generic fascism. Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>51</sup> The term is Gentile’s, *La Grande Italia*, 164–68. See also Franklin Hugh Adler, “Why Mussolini Turned on the Jews,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 39 (2005): 285–300. Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, “D’une persécution l’autre: Racisme colonial et antisémitisme dans l’Italie fasciste,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 55, no. 3 (2008): 116–37. Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, “Un popolo imperiale: Documenti su antisemitismo e razzismo a Roma tra il 1938 ed il 1941,” *Roma moderna e contemporanea* 19, no. 1 (2011): 121–39.

<sup>52</sup> De Grand, “Mussolini’s Follies,” 135–38. On the role of provincial Fascism in the regime’s ideological decline, see Paul Corner, “Everyday Fascism in the 1930s: Centre and Periphery in the Decline of Mussolini’s Dictatorship,” *Contemporary European History* 15, no. 2 (2006): 195–222.

<sup>53</sup> Giulia Brogini Künzi, “Total Colonial Warfare: Ethiopia,” in *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919–1939*, ed. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 325.

<sup>54</sup> Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 189. Reynolds M. Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935–1940* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 7.

resentful Fascists sought to replace Britain as the “epitome of modern imperial power.”<sup>55</sup> Fascist aggression challenged the status quo in Africa and Europe, and Mussolini gradually aligned his foreign and military policies with those of Hitler’s. The invasion of Ethiopia was followed by massive intervention in the Spanish Civil War, the announcement of a Rome-Berlin Axis, the dispatch of troops to Libya, diplomatic efforts to achieve hegemony in the Balkans, the invasion and occupation of Albania, and finally the signing of the Pact of Steel, an offensive alliance with Nazi Germany.<sup>56</sup> Forced to admit that his armed forces were not ready for war when Hitler’s armies invaded Poland in September 1939, Mussolini kept out of the conflict with Britain and France until June 1940. Then, “unleashed” by German successes against France, Mussolini’s ambitions during the Second World War saw Italian troops take the offensive in the Western Alps, East Africa, North Africa, Greece, and Yugoslavia.<sup>57</sup>

While it is clear that Mussolini’s foreign policy escalated in relation to Hitler’s, scholars disagree over the extent to which this was the result of Fascism’s ideological programme and Mussolini’s long-term imperial objectives. One school of thought emphasizes the continuity between Liberal and Fascist foreign policies, and portrays Mussolini as an opportunist acting without a clearly defined vision. According to Denis Mack Smith, Mussolini’s rule was based solely on propaganda and was reliant on bluff to achieve its recklessly devised objectives. While Mussolini desired colonies for their propaganda value, he had no idea how to develop them and provided little guidance in colonial affairs.<sup>58</sup> Though taking a different vein, Richard Bosworth also argues that, as the “least of the great powers,” Italy was concerned primarily with prestige and appearances. Weakness had forced Liberal-era diplomats to use trickery, deceit, and opportunism to achieve limited gains, and these conditions had not changed under

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<sup>55</sup> Cerasi, “Empires Ancient and Modern,” 426.

<sup>56</sup> These crisis points — signaling the evolving and escalating nature of Mussolini’s Mediterranean agenda — are ably narrated in Salerno, *Vital Crossroads*.

<sup>57</sup> See Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*.

<sup>58</sup> Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire* (New York: Viking, 1976), 21, 120.

Fascism.<sup>59</sup> Bosworth cautions that Fascism's "words rarely meant exactly what they said," and that Mussolini's regime was inconsistent, vague, and uncertain in its application of policy.<sup>60</sup>

Following the lead of MacGregor Knox, a second school counters that "Mussolini had a genuine foreign policy program: the creation of an Italian *spazio vitale* [living space] in the Mediterranean and Middle East" intended to cement Italy's great power status and to transform Italians through cultural revolution.<sup>61</sup> Recent scholarship on Fascist foreign policy tends to support this view. Robert Mallett has extended Knox's analysis, which originally focused on the period 1939–41, back to 1933, including the conquest of Ethiopia as part of a larger imperial project aimed against British and French possessions in Africa and the Mediterranean.<sup>62</sup> Like Knox and Mallett, Bruce Strang emphasizes the central role played by Mussolini as ideologue and policy maker. Strang argues that Mussolini's ultranationalist and social Darwinian *mentalité* led him to consider territorial expansion essential for national survival, and contributed to his decision to ally with a like-minded Hitler.<sup>63</sup> Focusing on Italian military archives, John Gooch outlines Mussolini's persistent but flawed efforts to prepare his armed forces for the war against Britain and France which his imperial policy necessarily entailed.<sup>64</sup> According to these interpretations, the empire envisioned by Mussolini would have

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<sup>59</sup> R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Burgwyn similarly argues that, up to 1940, Mussolini continued the traditional Italian policy of equidistance from the other great powers, hoping to earn concessions by threatening to tip the balance of power in any European conflict. H. James Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918–1940* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

<sup>60</sup> Richard Bosworth, "War, Totalitarianism and 'Deep Belief' in Fascist Italy, 1935–43," *European History Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2004): 497.

<sup>61</sup> Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 286.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933–40* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>63</sup> G. Bruce Strang, *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

<sup>64</sup> Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*.

included most of the Mediterranean coastline and islands, southeast Europe, and northeast Africa.<sup>65</sup>

These debates over the ideological nature and novelty of Fascist imperialism and foreign policy have important ramifications on the present study, which focuses on the point of view of Italian senior officers in the context of Fascist plans and ideology. Drawing from the present historiography, this study makes several basic assumptions about Fascist concepts of empire. First, while most aspects of Fascist colonialism had antecedents in the Liberal past, their extent and scale after 1935 were unprecedented; empire had become the central element of Italian Fascism in a way that would have been inconceivable before the March on Rome. Second, the specific territories to be included in the empire were not clearly defined by the regime; Fascist ideology and policy emphasized an open-ended expansionism in the Mediterranean and Africa, whether connected to the palingenetic aims of Fascism, Mussolini's social Darwinism, or to his own personal quest for glory. Third, Mussolini wielded strong personal control over foreign, military, and colonial affairs, but he did not always employ that control directly; this contributed to the seemingly vague nature of his aims and policies. Fourth, the chauvinism and totalitarian intentions of the Fascist regime meant that it preferred, at least in theory, "total" solutions that eschewed negotiation and exalted violence.<sup>66</sup>

## Colonial Violence

This study concerns itself less with continuity between the Liberal and Fascist eras of Italian history than with continuity within the Fascist period, and specifically within Fascism's imperial phase after 1935. The empire imagined by the Fascist regime

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<sup>65</sup> Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 43–44.

<sup>66</sup> Historians have debated the applicability of the concept and term "totalitarianism" to the case of Italian Fascism, whose level of control and fanaticism arguably paled in comparison to regimes in Germany and the Soviet Union. Fascism's failure to contest the cultural influence of the Catholic Church provides the classic example of the regime's weakness. R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998), 9–10, 21–22, 28–29. Here, we find the term useful to sum up Fascism's ambition to transform Italian culture and behaviour through unprecedented levels of control over public and private life, even if the regime proved unable or unwilling to fully act upon its intentions during its lifetime.



straddled both sides of the Mediterranean, with one foot in Africa and another in Europe. The period examined here saw Italian expansion first in Ethiopia and later across the Adriatic. Did the Italian army — which spearheaded both invasions and dominated both occupations — export a colonial mentality from Africa to Europe? Given the close relationship between “colonial consciousness” and Fascism’s vision of its “new man,” this question is directly pertinent to understanding the Italian army’s ideological role within the Fascist empire. It also intersects with a recent trend in genocide studies that examines similarities between European genocides and the violence of colonial wars and counterinsurgencies, which arguably were inherently genocidal in nature.<sup>67</sup>

A growing, but still contentious, school of thought has searched for the roots of German brutality during the Second World War and the Holocaust in the colonial past. There are two main aspects to this interpretation. One focuses narrowly on German concepts of a continental empire in eastern Europe, which predated Nazism.<sup>68</sup> The other focuses more broadly on European colonialism in Africa and Asia as providing precedent and legitimacy for genocidal violence elsewhere. This has involved the re-evaluation of arguments made by Rafael Lemkin and Hannah Arendt in the 1940s and 1950s that genocide, totalitarianism, and the Holocaust were all rooted partly in European

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<sup>67</sup> For an overview of colonial genocide studies, see A. Dirk Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide: Keywords and the Philosophy of History,” in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York: Berghahn, 2008), 3–54. Moses argues that colonial wars usually targeted entire populations due to the difficulty distinguishing between civilians and combatants, and that colonial warfare thus meant “total war on a local scale.” He also credits a “security syndrome” shared by many counterinsurgents, obsessed with creating conditions in which resistance would never recur, for promoting genocidal violence. On this, see also Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: New Press, 2003), 64, and H. L. Wesseling, “Colonial Wars: An Introduction,” in *Imperialism and War: Essays on Colonial Wars in Asia and Africa*, ed. J. A. de Moor and H. L. Wesseling (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 3.

<sup>68</sup> This has involved the partial rehabilitation of the *Sonderweg* [special path] thesis in German historiography and a reappraisal of Fritz Fischer’s controversial work that highlighted similarities between the eastern objectives of the Second and Third Reichs. On this perspective, see Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967); Shelley Baranowski, *Nazi Empire: German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 20–24; and, Mark Mazower, “Germans and Slavs: 1848–1918,” chap. 1 in *Hitler’s Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

colonialism and imperialism.<sup>69</sup> Studies focusing on the “Nazi imagination” have argued that Hitler, Himmler, and other leading Nazis drew their “colonialist fantasies” in the east from a broader European colonial past, and that they sought to instill a racial and colonial consciousness among Nazi functionaries by equating Slavs with Africans and Asians. The Nazis justified criminal policies in part by defining the east as a colonial arena, within which international law had no application. Moreover, by demonstrating that “wiping out peoples was a possibility,” the colonial past made the killing and expulsion of Jews and Slavs “thinkable” for ordinary Germans.<sup>70</sup>

Within this field, a heated debate has evolved over the connection between Wilhelmine colonial rule and warfare in German Southwest Africa, or Namibia, and later Nazi practices in eastern Europe. After laying claim to Namibia in the 1880s, the Germans established a “genocidal administration” intended to establish “direct and unrestricted German rule” through the complete political dissolution of indigenous societies. When the Herero and Nama tribes revolted against German rule in 1904, they were met with a brutal counterinsurgency that reduced their populations by more than half over the course of four years.<sup>71</sup> Benjamin Madley argues that Wilhelmine rule in Southwest Africa “contributed ideas, methods, and a lexicon that Nazi leaders borrowed and expanded.” These borrowings included the concept of *Lebensraum* — which may have been rooted in Namibia’s status as a settler colony — and the criminalization of miscegenation, as well as the genocidal rhetoric and policies adopted during the campaign against the Herero and Nama, defined by German military commanders as a “race war” of “annihilation.” Madley argues that the Namibian experience was transmitted to German society through personal connections, colonial literature, and

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<sup>69</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951). On Lemkin, see Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide,” 8–9, 17–18.

<sup>70</sup> Lower, *Nazi Empire-building*, 18–20, 24–27. David Furber and Wendy Lower, “Colonialism and Genocide in Nazi-occupied Poland and Ukraine,” in Moses, *Empire, Colony, Genocide*, 373–76. Jürgen Zimmerer, “Colonialism and the Holocaust: Towards an Archaeology of Genocide,” trans. Andrew H. Beattie, in *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York: Berghahn, 2004), 68. Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 11–12.

<sup>71</sup> Dominik J. Schaller, “From Conquest to Genocide: Colonial Rule in German Southwest Africa and German East Africa,” in Moses, *Empire, Colony, Genocide*, 298–306.

public debates.<sup>72</sup> Others have countered that, while the exploitation of indigenous labour, apartheid policies, and military brutality in Namibia provided a “bed of experiences” for the Third Reich, these experiences were not unique to Germany and did not parallel exactly what was to come.<sup>73</sup> Critics have argued that “phenomenological similarities” between Nazi and colonial violence do not necessarily indicate “direct personal and structural continuities” between men and institutions operating forty years apart.<sup>74</sup>

Widely held ideas on race, security, and ethnic cleansing could persist over time even without structural continuities. Nonetheless, the time gap between 1904 and 1941 — during which period the First World War stripped Germany of its colonies and transformed its politics and society — remains the fundamental obstacle to demonstrating direct tangible links between overseas colonialism and Nazi violence in occupied Europe. In response to this dilemma, Enzo Traverso has argued that the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 “bridged the gap between nineteenth-century European imperialism and the Nazi war for Lebensraum.”<sup>75</sup> Likewise, Patrick Bernhard has demonstrated that Mussolini’s colonial ventures inspired enthusiasm for colonial expansion in Germany, gave legitimacy to Hitler’s plans for eastern Europe, and provided a model for Nazi colonialism, at least as envisioned for *Mittelafrika*.<sup>76</sup> If the Italian experience in Ethiopia can throw light upon Nazi expansionism and rule, can it not also illuminate Fascist Italian practices in Europe during the Second World War? Indeed, the connection between behaviour in Africa and Europe is more direct and testable for Fascist Italy than it is for Nazi Germany. Italy maintained a colonial presence in East Africa from the 1880s until 1941; its counterinsurgency in Yugoslavia followed immediately on the heels of its colonial war in Ethiopia and involved some of the same personalities.

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<sup>72</sup> Benjamin Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe,” *European History Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (July 2005): 429–64. Madley builds upon the arguments of German historian Jürgen Zimmerer.

<sup>73</sup> Baranowski, *Nazi Empire*, 49–50.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Gerwath and Stephan Malinowski, “Hannah Arendt’s Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz,” *Central European History* 42, no. 2 (June 2009): 279–300.

<sup>75</sup> Traverso, *Origins of Nazi Violence*, 67.

<sup>76</sup> Patrick Bernhard, “Borrowing from Mussolini: Nazi Germany’s Colonial Aspirations in the Shadow of Italian Expansionism,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41, no. 4 (2013): 617–43.

Possible links between Italian colonial practice in East Africa and occupation in the Balkans have been suggested before. In a short synthetic essay on the Italian occupation of Yugoslavia, Teodoro Sala noted several similarities to colonial rule. Beyond some of the high-ranking officers involved, these included citizenship laws, systems of economic exploitation, the use of irregular auxiliary bands, and the adoption of colonial phraseology in counterinsurgency directives.<sup>77</sup> Relying on a handful of secondary sources, Eric Gobetti and Davide Rodogno have also argued that past colonial experience, especially in Ethiopia, was one of the most important factors that determined Italian behaviour in Yugoslavia.<sup>78</sup> While the hypothesis of such links has been apparent for some time, a systematic attempt to compare Italian conduct in Africa to that in Europe has been lacking. With the exception of general surveys, works either focus on Italian occupation and counterinsurgency in Africa or Europe, not both.<sup>79</sup> Yet, as the debate over the colonial origins of Nazi violence indicates, drawing useful and accurate links between the events of the Second World War and their colonial antecedents requires detailed comparative analysis.

This task is more practicable for the Italian example, not only because of the much smaller time gap between the cases to be analyzed, but also because it is less hampered by the looming issue of the Holocaust, which is generally regarded as unique among genocides.<sup>80</sup> The objectives of this study are more narrowly focused; it intends to

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<sup>77</sup> Teodoro Sala, “Guerra e amministrazione in Jugoslavia, 1941–1943: Un’ipotesi coloniale,” *Annali della Fondazione Micheletti*, no. 5 (1990–91): 83–94. The essay is reprinted in Teodoro Sala, *Il fascismo italiano e gli Slavi del sud* (Trieste: Istituto regionale per la storia del movimento di liberazione nel Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2008), 295–311.

<sup>78</sup> Gobetti, “The Royal Army’s Betrayal,” 190. Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 92–93. Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 333–35.

<sup>79</sup> The best survey that discusses both the Ethiopian campaign and the Second World War is Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*.

<sup>80</sup> Moses identifies the thesis of the Holocaust’s singularity as one of the main “conceptual blockages” preventing agreement on comparisons between colonial and Nazi genocides. A. Dirk Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the ‘Racial Century’: Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (2002): 7–36. Elsewhere, Moses has argued that the Holocaust was unique precisely because it combined two contradictory forms of colonial genocide, one stemming from traditional colonial rule over the eastern territories and a second “subaltern genocide” directed against European Jews, who the Nazis perceived to be colonizers threatening Germany’s existence. Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide,” 37–40. See also Furber and Lower, “Colonialism and Genocide.”

use evidence of institutional knowledge transfers between Africa and Europe as a tool to evaluate the Italian army's assimilation of Fascist values. By seeking to imbue Italians with a colonial mentality and by using East Africa as a testing ground for more radical policies, the Fascist regime explicitly desired such knowledge transfers. This study also imposes limits on itself by focusing on the senior officers of the *Regio Esercito* and that institution's "military culture."<sup>81</sup> Rather than comparing the policies of General Lothar von Trotha — commander of German forces in Namibia in 1904 — to those of *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler, this study compares the likes of General Rodolfo Graziani to General Mario Roatta, contemporaries of the same institution operating at similar levels within the same political system. The present work seeks first and foremost to understand the behaviour of the army as an institution. Its findings have important ramifications on our understanding of Italian Fascism, its level of control and influence over state institutions in Italy, the application of its imperial practices in different contexts, and how these practices compared to those of its Nazi ally.

## An Italian Way to Counterinsurgency?

An examination of the Italian army's approach to occupation and counterinsurgency between 1936 and 1943 requires some understanding of the way it undertook such operations prior to that. To address the broader question of the army's relationship to Fascism, we must also ask whether the Italian army had a traditional approach to counterinsurgency in the first place, and whether it then adopted a peculiarly Fascist style by the time of the Second World War. The nature of counterinsurgency — characterized by the primacy of local conditions — makes it difficult to discern patterns of action that clearly resemble a programmatic institutional approach or doctrine.<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, Isabel

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<sup>81</sup> One of the more widely accepted efforts to draw links between German practices in Namibia and those in Europe is Isabel V. Hull's *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005). Hull's analysis succeeds because her argument is more limited to linking Imperial German "military culture" from France in 1870 to Namibia in 1904 to Belgium in 1914. Gerwath and Malinowski, "Hannah Arendt's Ghosts," 295.

<sup>82</sup> David French challenges the commonly held notion that the British paradigm from Malaya provides the model way to counterinsurgency, pointing out that the British approached other insurgencies uniquely and

Hull and Ben Shepherd have convincingly argued that the German army's dim view towards insurgency and its obsession with achieving total victories of annihilation provided a recipe for brutality towards occupied populations that replicated itself in various contexts.<sup>83</sup> How did the Italian tradition compare? During Italy's recent participation in operations in Afghanistan, the Italian General Staff promoted a supposedly "Italian way" to counterinsurgency, based on limited security operations and dialogue with locals. The term was rooted largely in domestic Italian politics at the time, with the need to redefine unpopular combat missions as "operations of peace" conducted according to humanitarian methods and aims.<sup>84</sup> Partly resurrecting the myth of *italiani brava gente*, this definition had little resemblance to other Italian counterinsurgencies conducted since unification.

Like the Imperial German Army, the Royal Italian Army developed a traditional contempt for irregular warfare from its birth. While the German abhorrence for guerrillas was rooted in its experience fighting against *francs-tireurs* in France during 1870–71, Italian perceptions drew from the Brigands' War [*brigantaggio*] that ravaged the South of Italy through the 1860s. Following their incorporation into the Kingdom of Italy, a broad range of southern Italians rejected the new order and formed guerrilla bands with various political, social, and ideological dimensions. Their ranks included former bandits, Bourbon legitimists, Papal loyalists, Neapolitan soldiers trying to avoid penal camps, and peasants seeking to avoid conscription, taxes, or domination by the urban middle class.<sup>85</sup> The Italian army perceived these combatants with ignorance and contempt. Giuseppe

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often quite brutally. David French, *The British Way in Counter-insurgency, 1945–1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*. Ben Shepherd, "'Success Comes Only through Terror': The German Experience of Antiguerrilla Warfare," chap. 1 in *War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>84</sup> Fabrizio Castagnetti, "Lebanon and Afghanistan: The Italian Way to Peacekeeping," keynote address, Seminar on International Peace Operations and International Humanitarian Law, Rome, 27 March 2008. Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, "Peace Operations. The Humanitarian Dimension. The Italian Commitment," paper presented at the Seminar on International Peace Operations and International Humanitarian Law, Rome, 27 March 2008. Gianandrea Gaiani, *Iraq, Afghanistan, guerre di pace italiane* (Venice: Studio LT2, 2007).

<sup>85</sup> Duggan, *Force of Destiny*, 217–28.

Garibaldi, the most famous guerrilla of his time, had gained hero status through the *Risorgimento*, and the writings of Giuseppe Mazzini and officers of the *Garibaldini* were widely published in Italy.<sup>86</sup> But, while the Italian army adopted guerrilla-style doctrine for its nascent alpine units in the 1870s, it wholly rejected the Garibaldian model of a “people in arms,” opting instead for a traditional, conventional, professional force.<sup>87</sup> The Italian army responded to brigandage in the South with an influx of heavy weapons and equipment and with escalating brutality, including mass reprisals and the burning of villages. This was an institution with a “fanatical hatred of partisan movements.”<sup>88</sup>

Studying the writings and reports of Italian officers from the 1860s, John Dickie has demonstrated that the army conceptualized brigands as a primitive “Other,” irreconcilable to its view of Italy as a modern European nation. Italian officers portrayed the Brigands’ War as a conflict between civilization and barbarism, and they deployed racist imagery against their hidden and unknown enemy. Considering anti-guerrilla warfare to be “an inglorious and even dishonourable task,” they accepted that the rules of war could not be applied to enemies that did not fight by conventional means.<sup>89</sup> Northern newspapers justified the destruction of southern villages and the execution of civilians as necessary acts against barbaric brigands that enjoyed the support of local populations.<sup>90</sup>

That these views remained widely held by Italian elites on the eve of the invasion of Ethiopia is demonstrated by an entry on “brigandage” in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* of 1930. Three quarters of the 4,000-word article were dedicated to the Brigands’ War in the

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<sup>86</sup> See, for example, Giuseppe Mazzini, “Rules for the Conduct of Guerrilla Bands (1832),” in *A Cosmopolitanism of Nations: Giuseppe Mazzini’s Writings on Democracy, Nation Building, and International Relations*, ed. Stefano Recchia and Nadia Urbinati (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 111–16; and, Giovanni Battista Zafferoni, *L’insurrezione armata ed il volontario italiano: Nozioni generali per ben condurre una guerra irregolare* (Milan: De Giorgi, 1868). On Garibaldi’s hero status, see Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>87</sup> Whittam, *Politics of the Italian Army*, 12. On the use of guerrilla doctrine in the *alpini*, inspired more by the example of the *francs-tireurs* in France than by southern Italian brigands, see Piero Del Negro, “Guerra partigiana e guerra di popolo nel Risorgimento,” *Memorie storiche militari* (1982): 75.

<sup>88</sup> Whittam, *Politics of the Italian Army*, 77–80.

<sup>89</sup> John Dickie, “A Word at War: The Italian Army and Brigandage, 1860–1870,” *History Workshop Journal* 33, no. 1 (1992): 1–24.

<sup>90</sup> Claudia Petraccone, *Le due civiltà: Settentrionali e meridionali nella storia d’Italia dal 1860 al 1914* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2000), 57–58.

Italian South. Brigandage, the authors explained, was a phenomenon endemic to backwards cultures, and that appealed to the basest groups of society who resisted the power of the state. The article described the southern Italian brigands as “draft evaders, deserters, soldiers of the former Bourbon army, escaped convicts and, finally, all those who, with blind generosity, had been pardoned in the early days of the insurrectional movement in 1860.” Papal or Bourbon propaganda merely took advantage of the gullibility of southern peasants. On the other hand, the entry praised the “sacrifice” and “valour” of the counterinsurgents, even if they “failed to prevent the plague from becoming even more widespread in the *Mezzogiorno*.” The article credited the strong-handed Pica law of 1863 and the tactical innovations of General Pallavicino — based on the “prompt, intense, tireless persecution of the brigands” by large but mobile forces — for finally defeating the insurgents. The state then consolidated the military victory by “punishing the guilty without mercy and rewarding those who provided information or fruitful labour,” so that “the entire South in fact gave a sigh of relief, when public order and respect for law was established and firmly maintained.”<sup>91</sup> In short, the encyclopedia article presented irregular warfare as a characteristic of primitive societies that needed to be ruthlessly suppressed in pursuit of modernity. King Vittorio Emanuele III himself reiterated this view when he brushed aside initial reports of Ustaša excesses against Serbs in 1941 as part of a necessary phase in the process of consolidating a modern nation-state in Croatia, similar to Italy’s own war against “brigandage.”<sup>92</sup>

Despite the long-lasting legacy of the Brigands’ War, it was in Africa where the Italian army most frequently encountered guerrilla warfare in the twentieth century and developed a doctrine to counter it. Shortly before its invasion of Ethiopia, the Italian army had concluded a decade-long campaign to “reconquer” Libya from indigenous bands employing guerrilla techniques. Angelo Del Boca, Giorgio Rochat, and John Gooch all have described the Libyan campaign of 1922–31 as a distinctly “fascist” example of counterinsurgency. Unconcerned with international and public opinion, the

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<sup>91</sup> *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1930), s.v. “Brigantaggio,” accessed 24 August 2016, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/brigantaggio\\_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/brigantaggio_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/).

<sup>92</sup> Puntoni diary, 23 June 1941.



Fascist regime favoured violence over compromise and confiscated land from “rebels” to be settled by Italian colonizers.<sup>93</sup> The Libyan campaign provided the most immediate point of reference for Italian generals confronting the tasks of occupation duty and counterinsurgency as they entered Fascism’s imperial phase.

Did the experience in Libya establish a clear doctrine to follow in East Africa and, later, the Balkans? Doctrine can be understood as “institutionalised beliefs about what works in war.”<sup>94</sup> Such beliefs are not necessarily enshrined in theoretical texts. Although educational literature can reveal what an institution codified as “official” doctrine, Italian officers published few serious works on counterinsurgency or colonial warfare.<sup>95</sup> This is not surprising given the degree of local variation associated with such operations and the lack of prestige granted them by most European armies, whose theorists preferred to focus on conventional warfare and the integration of new technologies.<sup>96</sup> If the Italian army had an official doctrine for occupation policy, it came from the practical experience gained in Libya and was espoused through a small corpus of educational literature based on that experience. Despite the Fascist emphasis on violent means, this doctrine recognized the primacy of politics alongside the application of pure military force in colonial pacification operations.

The closest thing to an official doctrinal manuscript on the Italian army’s approach to asymmetrical warfare came in the form of a war college text on “colonial operations” written by Guglielmo Nasi. Nasi’s work drew lessons from the army’s experience in Libya during the Liberal era and the early stages of the Fascist reconquest to present an ideal method of conducting colonial warfare. While Nasi specified that his precepts could not apply to warfare against an independent African state like Ethiopia, he

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<sup>93</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia*, 2:5–7, 14–15, 51–53. Giorgio Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 13, 25–26. John Gooch, “Re-conquest and Suppression: Fascist Italy’s Pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922–39,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 6 (2005): 1005–32.

<sup>94</sup> Harald Høiback, “What is Doctrine?,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 6 (December 2011): 880, 897.

<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Guglielmo Nasi, “La guerra in Libia,” *Rivista militare italiana* 1, no. 1 (1927): 67–94; and, Ottorino Mezzetti, *Guerra in Libia: Esperienze e ricordi* (Rome: Paolo Cremonese, 1933).

<sup>96</sup> Even at the height of European imperialism, colonial officers in most Western armies generally were regarded as quasi-professional social pariahs. Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 42–43, 47–48.

foresaw that such a campaign would likely be followed by a period of guerrilla warfare. For Nasi, colonial warfare mainly involved combating guerrilla activity and large-scale rebellions. Nasi's main thesis emphasized the centrality of politics to colonial warfare and the need for flexibility in geographically, ethnically, and socially diverse areas. The objective of colonial operations was not to destroy the enemy, but to permanently occupy a region, bringing order, peace, and material development. "The enemy of today," Nasi reasoned, "will therefore be our collaborator of tomorrow." He favoured occupation policies that focused on co-opting populations by respecting religion and local customs, including local elites in the administration of territory, and using indigenous labour in public works to develop clients for the regime.<sup>97</sup> Nasi's doctrine borrowed from the nuanced approach of the famous French colonial general Louis-Hubert Lyautey, referring directly to the latter's "oil-spot" [*macchia d'olio*] method of pacification.<sup>98</sup>

Rodolfo Graziani, who played a central role throughout the entire period of reconquest in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, also penned a series of monographs on the subject.<sup>99</sup> Graziani's writings were more self-serving than Nasi's, directed to a popular audience to boost his own popularity. Still, they summarized Graziani's philosophy and techniques of colonial warfare. Coming from a man who claimed to have brought the rebellion in Libya to a definitive end, they contributed to Italian doctrine. Like Nasi, Graziani believed that colonial operations made up a specialized type of warfare where success depended on a careful balance of military and political measures. Without showing signs of weakness towards the local populations — which Graziani believed the Liberal government had done by conceding statutes and special citizenship status to Libyans in 1919 — the colonial soldier must act justly and respect local traditions and religions in order to establish a "political bloc in favour of the government" among local

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<sup>97</sup> Guglielmo Nasi, "Operazioni coloniali," AUSSME, L-3, b. 79, fasc. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Nasi, "Operazioni coloniali," 156. On Lyautey, see Max Boot, "Mission Civilisatrice: Lyautey in Morocco, 1912–1925," chap. 26 in *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Liveright, 2013); and, William A. Hoisington Jr., *Lyautey and the French Conquest of Morocco* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>99</sup> Graziani's works, *Verso il Fezzan* (1929), *Cirenaica pacificata* (1932), and *La riconquista del Fezzan* (1934), were compiled and republished together as Rodolfo Graziani, *Pace romana in Libia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1937).

chiefs and their followers.<sup>100</sup> In his assessment of Graziani's generalship in Libya, John Gooch concludes that Graziani developed "a strong sense of the political dimensions of colonial warfare which more than matched his operational virtuosity."<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Lyautey had praised Graziani for adopting similar principles and techniques to his own.<sup>102</sup>

Nasi and Graziani each recognized that in colonial occupations military commanders must be both soldiers and politicians. They stressed the use of political means to help establish security and facilitate the exploitation of occupied territories. However, their definition of "political" was limited. "Essentially," Cristiana Pipitone has argued, "the term politics is, in the colonial lexicon, a synonym for control [*dominio*]."<sup>103</sup> This paralleled the Fascist regime's own equation of the "politics of prestige" with the ability and willingness to use force.<sup>104</sup> Graziani's strategic precepts from his final campaign in Cyrenaica demonstrate how his concept of political means was still based on force, terror, and — a watchword of Italian generals and Fascist hierarchs alike — prestige. Alongside military measures to disarm the population and strike rebel forces, Graziani applied legal measures (public executions of rebel supporters after trial by "flying" courts to give the impression of immediate and inexorable justice), economic measures (the building of roads "to assert our prestige"), and political measures (to remove the population from rebel influence and achieve "total control" over indigenous subjects). The latter took fruition in the near complete internment of the nomad population of the Jebel Akhdar in Cyrenaica. At the same time, Graziani stressed the importance of respecting local customs, religion, and women in order to maintain prestige and respect in the eyes of the native populations.<sup>105</sup> It is clear that, for Italian colonial officers, prestige ultimately was based on military might and the ability to wield it.

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<sup>100</sup> Graziani, *Pace romana in Libia*, 83, 121–22, 200–203, 49.

<sup>101</sup> Gooch, "Re-conquest and Suppression," 1017.

<sup>102</sup> Giuseppe Mayda, *Graziani, l'africano: Da Neghelli a Salò* (Scandicci: Nuova Italia, 1992), 4.

<sup>103</sup> Cristiana Pipitone, "Le operazioni di polizia coloniale," in *L'Impero fascista: Italia ed Etiopia (1935–1941)*, ed. Riccardo Bottoni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), 476.

<sup>104</sup> Eileen Ryan, "Violence and the Politics of Prestige: The Fascist Turn in Colonial Libya," *Modern Italy* 20, no. 2 (2015): 124–25.

<sup>105</sup> Graziani, *Pace romana in Libia*, 250–51, 257–58.

Before the occupation of Ethiopia, then, the Italian army had developed a doctrine for colonial warfare that at least paid lip service to political means of attraction and that recognized the importance of the political and administrative roles of officers in occupied territory. The degree to which this doctrine was in fact assimilated by the officers of the *Regio Esercito* is unclear. Giorgio Rochat argues that the experience gained in Libya was underutilized in Ethiopia. Despite Fascism's reinvigorated drive towards empire, years of neglect for African affairs prevented the formation of a corps of qualified colonial officers as in France; nor was colonial service normally useful to a career in the Italian army.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, one of Graziani's biographers credits him for heading a group of "colonial experts," including Nasi, Ottorino Mezzetti, Pietro Maletti, Sebastiano Gallina, Orlando Lorenzini, and Giuseppe Malta, all of whom went on to serve in East Africa.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, Angelo Del Boca refers to a "Graziani school," but mainly as a group of ambitious senior officers without scruples, whose military training and ideological mindset made them perfect functionaries of the Fascist regime.<sup>108</sup>

Given the continuity in personnel between the Libyan and Ethiopian campaigns and the fame accrued by Graziani during the reconquest — thanks in part to the patronage of Giuseppe Volpi, Governor of Tripolitania from 1922 to 1925, and the Fascist Party, along with his own self-promotional writings — there is little doubt that Libya was considered a possible model to emulate and build upon in Ethiopia.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, as governor general of Italian East Africa between 1936 and 1937, Graziani recognized that conditions in that country differed greatly from those in Libya. Although his directives and telegrams did make explicit references to Libyan examples from time

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<sup>106</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 19–21. French officers were divided permanently between metropolitan and colonial service, whereas Italian officers all belonged to the metropolitan army and were temporarily assigned to colonial duties. Bruce Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa, 1830–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 44–45. Nasi suggested that this was in fact to the benefit of Italian officers, who all had the opportunity to develop their "character" in the colonies. Guglielmo Nasi, "Operazioni coloniali," AUSSME, L-3, b. 79, fasc. 5.

<sup>107</sup> Mayda, *Graziani, l'africano*, 3–4. Mayda refers to these officers as Graziani's *poulains* [offspring], but this is perhaps unfair to senior figures like Nasi and Mezzetti.

<sup>108</sup> Angelo Del Boca, "I crimini del colonialismo fascista," in Del Boca, *Le guerre coloniali*, 236.

<sup>109</sup> Romano Canosa, *Graziani: Il maresciallo d'Italia, dalla guerra d'Etiopia alla Repubblica di Salò* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), 26.

to time, Graziani also voiced the need to avoid any “automatic process of analogical extrapolation.”<sup>110</sup> The governor of Galla Sidamo, Carlo Geloso, agreed that there was a “difference, sometimes profound, between the mentality, traditions, customs, [and] level of civilization of the native populations of Mediterranean Africa and those of East Africa.”<sup>111</sup>

Entering the very different atmosphere of Ethiopia — larger, more populous, and more diverse than Libya — Italian generals were reluctant to bring with them more than general precepts from their previous colonial ventures. For the junior officers that commanded Italian and colonial troops in the field, and made daily contact with the local populations, their understanding of colonial doctrine was even vaguer. Arriving in East Africa as a 24-year-old subaltern in 1936, Ettore Formento confided his assumptions about colonial warfare.

Here is what I knew:

- Colonial war is a lower [*elementare*] form of warfare and has no rules [*norme*]. Great examples or teachings of history are of no use.
- Barbarians and rebels have no impediment, they do not understand lines of operations, they are not vulnerable at particular points.
- It is necessary to operate according to clear, simple concepts according to the situation as it presents itself case by case.
- No to the defensive. Our troops are tactically superior, logistically inferior, [and] so must seek battle.
- Manoeuvre with many columns to converge on the point of battle.
- Any march can result in an engagement.
- Marching formations must be able to transform quickly into those of battle.<sup>112</sup>

The Italian army entered Fascism’s imperial phase with a set of preconceptions about colonial and irregular warfare, but the unprecedented scale of occupation in Ethiopia and during the Second World War would render the period after 1935 unique.

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<sup>110</sup> “Ordinamento di P.S. per l’A.O.I.,” 17 July 1937, Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome [ASMAE], Ministero dell’Africa Italiana [MAI], pos. 181/55, fasc. 256.

<sup>111</sup> “Progetto di ordinamento di polizia per l’A.O.I.,” 10 November 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 256.

<sup>112</sup> Ettore Formento, *Kai Bandera: Etiopia, 1936–1941: Una banda irregolare* (Milan: Mursia, 2000), 9.

## Case Studies

The Fascist regime intended the Ethiopian campaign to have a transformative effect on Italians in general, and in its scope it potentially was transformative for the Italian army as an institution. The principal assumption underlying the present study is that a comparative approach is necessary to understand the behaviour and mindset of an institution. Comparative analysis can help isolate knowledge transfers and discern an institutional “way” of behaviour. The debate over whether or not Italian generals in occupied territories “worked towards the *Duce*” is best addressed by a comparative approach. To look for patterns and to see beyond the impact of local conditions — particularly influential when speaking of counterinsurgency — it is necessary to compare similar source bases from widely divergent cases. This study compares the Italian army’s behaviour in two areas of primary importance to Fascist imperialism: Ethiopia and Yugoslavia.

Because the geographic, cultural, and political conditions in both cases were so different from one another, they must be dealt with separately as individual case studies, while applying the same methodology and similar standards of evidence to each case. Within each episode, the actions of different units and levels of command must also be compared in order to balance breadth of scope with depth of analysis. Institutional behaviour involves more than the directives emanating from high commands. Units and personalities at the middle level of the military organization — division and corps commands — played an important role in forming and demonstrating military culture. As Ben Shepherd has shown, this is especially true in the context of military occupations, where division commands exercised considerable autonomy and acted as filters, passing along what they felt was most important to their units given the circumstances they confronted.<sup>113</sup> This is largely a “history from the middle,” examining how “mid-level

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<sup>113</sup> Ben Shepherd’s work uses German infantry and security divisions as its base for analysis. See *War in the Wild East*; and, *Terror in the Balkans: German Armies and Partisan Warfare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7.

managers of war” responded to political directives and tried to solve local problems.<sup>114</sup> Only by taking into consideration the policies and behaviour of commanders and staffs of divisions, corps, and armies, along with the directives from higher commands, is it possible to identify and analyze an institutional approach to counterinsurgency.

The commands selected for the two case studies here represent potentially diverse experiences; they confronted different conditions from one another, even within the same theatre of occupation. Because the organization and command structure in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia were fundamentally different, a direct unit-to-unit comparison is not possible. Italian forces in East Africa were organized along colonial lines, answering to a governor general in Addis Ababa — Rodolfo Graziani until he was replaced by Amedeo di Savoia in 1938 — who in turn reported to the Ministry of Colonies, later the Ministry of Italian Africa, in Rome. Military operations and administrative tasks were overseen largely by regional governors. Like the governor general, the governors tended to be military men; together, their communications provide the bulk of the evidence for the Ethiopian case study. Specifically examined are the Governorate of Amhara and the Governorate of Harar. Amhara, under the successive governorships of Alessandro Pirzio Biroli, Ottorino Mezzetti, and Luigi Frusci was the centre of much of the guerrilla warfare that plagued Ethiopia after 1936. Harar, on the other hand, enjoyed a comparatively less violent occupation, under the direction of Guglielmo Nasi until his transfer to Addis Ababa in 1939, at which point the civil official Enrico Cerulli took over.

In Yugoslavia, a more straightforward military organization prevailed. Most of the Italian occupation zone — with the exception of Montenegro, not included in this study — was assigned to the command of the Second Army, later renamed the *Comando Superiore Forze Armate di Slovenia e Dalmazia* [Supersloda]. Vittorio Ambrosio commanded Second Army in 1941, Mario Roatta in 1942, and Mario Robotti in 1943. Here, material for analysis has been drawn primarily from their commands, as well as those of two Italian infantry divisions that formed part of Second Army, and the corps commands under which those divisions served. The selected divisions are the 12th

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<sup>114</sup> On the relative neglect of the middle level among historians of the Second World War, see Paul Kennedy, “History from the Middle: The Case of the Second World War,” *Journal of Military History* 74, no. 1 (January 2010): 35–51.

Sassari Division and the 22nd Cacciatori delle Alpi Division. As already discussed, the Cacciatori were employed repeatedly in anti-partisan operations throughout Yugoslavia. Under the command first of Giovanni Angelo Pivano and later of Vittorio Ruggero, the division served with Renzo Dalmazzo's VI Corps in Dalmatia and Herzegovina before joining Mario Robotti and Gastone Gambarà's XI Corps in Slovenia. Unlike the Cacciatori, the Sassari Division spent most of the occupation in the same general area, Lika and Bosanska Krajina in the Independent State of Croatia, with its command based out of Knin.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, the war diaries of the Sassari Division have been described as "one of the most interesting items in the archives of the Army General Staff."<sup>116</sup> The hand-written entries of the chiefs of staff of the division provide information and analysis that is often lacking at this level of command. The Sassari Division formed part of VI Corps until early 1942, when Quirino Armellini's XVIII Corps took over jurisdiction of its zone. Furio Monticelli commanded the division until May 1942, until he was replaced by Paolo Berardi, the future chief of the army general staff in the Badoglio government.<sup>117</sup> At the end of 1942 the division was pulled back to Dalmatia for eventual repatriation to Italy. This was delayed due to operations in January 1943, but the division war diary ends in December 1942.<sup>118</sup>

Communications between the multiple levels of command reveal much through their tone and use of language. A study of military culture must be a study of language. Therefore, I quote liberally from the directives, orders, telegrams, and reports of the various commanders. It is important to note that, while quotations within this work are usually attributed to the commanding officer who signed the original document in

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<sup>115</sup> The division's intelligence services considered this to be an area with few economic resources inhabited by an Orthodox Serb majority and a Croat minority largely dedicated to sheep-farming. "Premessa al Diario storico militare, bimestre: giugno-luglio," AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June-July 1941.

<sup>116</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 188. Rodogno refers to the insight the division's war diaries provide on the Ustaša genocide against Serbs in 1941 and on the course of Italo-Croatian relations, but they also include descriptions of anti-partisan operations and reprisals unrivalled in detail.

<sup>117</sup> *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (1966), s.v. "Berardi Paolo," accessed 24 August 2016, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/paolo-berardi\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/paolo-berardi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/). On Berardi's role after the collapse of Fascism in 1943, see Osti Guerrazzi, *Noi non sappiamo odiare*, 3-5.

<sup>118</sup> On the delayed repatriation of the Sassari Division, see Cavallero diary, 5 January 1943.



question, in many cases the documents themselves were authored by staff officers. The choice of language in their writing thus reflects upon more than a handful of elite personalities, but broadly upon entire command staffs and, taken together, upon career officers of the Italian army in general.

## Levels of Analysis

I examine each case study according to three overarching themes or levels of analysis: political-legal; ideological-cultural; and, military-strategic. These themes have been drawn from the vast body of scholarship on German occupation policy and behaviour during the Second World War, especially on the eastern front. If Mussolini's vision of empire spanned northeast Africa and the Balkans, Hitler's major imperial objectives were in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Scholarship on the eastern front has grappled with the issue of a regular army's involvement in ideologically driven expansion and occupation policies, debunking the myth that the *Wehrmacht* was an apolitical institution that adhered to international law and emerged from the war with "clean hands."<sup>119</sup> At the same time, scholars have highlighted the nuanced behaviour and motivations within the *Wehrmacht*. Even in the east, there was considerable room for regional variation. For example, compared to the overbearing Nazi civil administration further to the rear, the military administration in Ukraine proved more lenient in its approach, at least towards Ukrainians.<sup>120</sup> In northwest Russia, where the Soviet partisan movement was slow to develop and where relatively few Jews were present, German security divisions tended to

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<sup>119</sup> Wette and Shepherd provide excellent summaries of German scholarship on the *Wehrmacht*'s involvement in war crimes in the east. Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Ben Shepherd, "The Clean Wehrmacht, the War of Extermination, and Beyond," *Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (2009): 455–473.

<sup>120</sup> On the behaviour of German authorities in *Reichskommissariat* Ukraine, see Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2004), 37; and, Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia, 1941–1945: A Study of Occupation Policies*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: 1981), 140. On the *Wehrmacht*'s more lenient policy in 1941, see Truman Anderson, "Incident at Baranivka: German Reprisals and the Soviet Partisan Movement in Ukraine, October–December 1941," *Journal of Modern History* 71, no. 3 (1999): 592, 604–605. The army's soft approach towards Ukrainians did nothing to mitigate violence towards Jews. Bernd Boll and Hans Safrian, "On the Way to Stalingrad: The 6th Army in 1941–42," trans. Roy Shelton, in *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941–1944*, ed. Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 245–56.

balance their use of the carrot and the stick.<sup>121</sup> Local conditions and the personal views of commanders and their staffs also resulted in variation between units on occupation duty.<sup>122</sup> At the lowest level of analysis, individual officers and soldiers reflected different motivations and frames of reference that influenced their behaviour.<sup>123</sup>

The overall picture that has emerged of the *Wehrmacht* in the east is complex and hardly black-and-white. This is worth bearing in mind when drawing the inevitable comparisons between Italian and German policies and behaviour. One must avoid the temptation to stretch evidence to show that the Italian army matched up to supposedly monolithic German levels of brutality. Nor should Italian violence be dismissed as benign — quantitatively and ideologically — in comparison. Nonetheless, there is broad agreement in the German case that the room for nuance and variation in the *Wehrmacht*'s practices ultimately was restricted by higher-level Nazi policy, which — through the interference of Nazi Party agencies and the SS, vying for power in their colonial dream world, and through Hitler's personal role as final arbiter in policy debates — favoured radicalization. Whether Italian occupation functioned in a similar way in Fascism's imagined colonial space is at the heart of the “working towards the *Duce*” debate.

The first level of analysis adopted here, then, deals with the political and legal framework within which military field commands functioned. In the German case, directives from Berlin undoubtedly steered occupation in the east towards mass murder. Hitler's anti-Semitism and quest for *Lebensraum* were at the heart of his motives for invading the Soviet Union. The “criminal orders” issued by *Wehrmacht* chief Wilhelm Keitel on Hitler's behalf prior to the invasion reflected these objectives, bestowing the campaign and occupation with an ideological character from the outset. They demanded the immediate execution of Communist commissars and they unshackled German

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<sup>121</sup> Alexander Hill, *The War Behind the Eastern Front: The Soviet Partisan Movement in North-West Russia, 1941–44* (London: Frank Cass, 2005). Shepherd, “Clean Wehrmacht,” 467.

<sup>122</sup> Shepherd compares the relatively restrained 221st Security Division to others in Army Group Centre. Ben Shepherd, “The Continuum of Brutality: *Wehrmacht* Security Divisions in Central Russia, 1942,” *German History* 21, no. 1 (2003): 49–81. See also Shepherd, *War in the Wild East*, and Jeff Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front: The German Infantry's War, 1941–1944* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>123</sup> Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying; The Secret World War II Transcripts of German POWs*, trans. Jefferson Chase (Toronto: Signal, 2011).

personnel from the bonds of international law. Higher-level directives immediately defined the campaign as a “war of extermination” [*Vernichtungskrieg*] against Judeo-Bolshevism.<sup>124</sup> However, there was no preordained blueprint for the implementation of policy or for the organization and administration of occupied territory. Hitler lacked a coherent vision in these practical respects and permitted the chaotic coexistence of multiple and sometimes contradictory practices throughout occupied Europe. The Nazi Party, the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, the Foreign Ministry, economic agencies, the various branches of the SS, and the armed forces all had different opinions on occupation policy, for personal, institutional, jurisdictional, and tactical reasons.<sup>125</sup>

It is necessary to ask several questions in order to come to grips with the political and legal context of a military occupation undertaken by a totalitarian regime. First, what direct orders or policy guidelines did local military commanders receive from central political and military authorities? Second, how much autonomy did military authorities enjoy in the territories under their jurisdiction, and to what extent were they allowed to develop their own policies? Third, what impact did relations between military authorities and local political functionaries have upon occupation policy, and to what degree did these relations reflect the level of affinity between the military institution and the central political leadership?

The second level of analysis draws from scholarly efforts to provide a bottom-up approach to understanding the motivation of German troops on the eastern front. Led by the work of Omer Bartov, these studies have evaluated the extent to which the rank-and-file shared or became indoctrinated with the same ideologies that influenced higher-level policy in the east. Therefore, they have focused in part on the propaganda disseminated

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<sup>124</sup> The literature on Nazi planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union and on Hitler’s “criminal orders” is vast. See especially Dallin, *German Rule in Russia*; Jürgen Förster, “Securing ‘Living-Space’,” in *Germany and the Second World War*, ed. Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, trans. Dean S. McMurry, Ewald Osers, and Louise Willmot, vol. 4, *The Attack on the Soviet Union*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 1189–1244; Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, introduction to *War of Extermination*, 1–12; Geoffrey P. Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); Gerd R. Ueberschär, “The Ideologically Motivated War of Annihilation in the East,” in *Hitler’s War in the East: A Critical Assessment*, 3rd ed., ed. Rolf-Dieter Müller and Gerd R. Ueberschär (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 207–80; and, Wette, *Wehrmacht*, 90–100.

<sup>125</sup> Dallin, *German Rule in Russia*, 20. On the struggle for power between the Nazi Party and the SS in occupied territory, see Mark Mazower, “Organizing Disorder: 1941–2,” chap. 8 in *Hitler’s Empire*.

by the state and military to the common soldier, testing its impact based on official reports, memoir literature, diaries, and personal correspondence.<sup>126</sup> For the purposes of the present study, interested in the military culture of career officers, the selection and distribution of propaganda are of primary importance. To what extent was the army involved in the production of propaganda, and to what extent did the messages promulgated by military authorities reinforce those emanating from the political leadership? Did the army employ ideological themes in an attempt to indoctrinate its soldiers, and how did its propaganda portray their mission, their enemies, and the civilian populations in occupied territory? In this latter respect, propaganda for the troops played an integral part of occupation policy; but literature on Italian occupation policies has largely neglected the field of propaganda.<sup>127</sup> A rigorous study of the army's propaganda — taking into account the instruments of propaganda available to the military, as well as the content, form, and reception of the propaganda itself — can break new ground in the debate over the Fascistization of the Italian armed forces.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> See Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941–45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986); Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and, Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995). Claudia Koonz examines SA and SS propaganda leading up to the Second World War as well as anti-Semitic propaganda in the Wehrmacht during the war. Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003), 221–52, 259–60.

<sup>127</sup> The Italian army published an official history of wartime propaganda, but it focuses mainly on the organization of the propaganda apparatus. Nicola Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale (1940–1943)* (Rome: USSME, 1998). The only study that closely examines the themes of Italian military propaganda during the Second World War was written without the methodological and conceptual benefit of Bartov's work and subsequent German scholarship. Teodoro Sala, "Guerriglia e controguerriglia in Jugoslavia nella propaganda per le truppe occupanti italiane (1941–1943)," *Il Movimento di liberazione in Italia* 24, no. 108 (1972): 91–114; republished in Sala, *Il fascismo italiano e gli Slavi del sud*, 45–68. Recent case studies of Italian zones of occupation have incorporated propaganda sources effectively but not thoroughly. See, for example, Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, and Thomas Schlemmer, *Invasori, non vittime: La campagna italiana in Russia, 1941–43*, trans. Ines Fratti and Gerhard Kuck (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2009). The lack of more systematic attempts to weave troop propaganda into narratives of occupation is likely due to the difficulty locating suitable sources. There is no central archival repository in Italy for military propaganda. Although the Italian army and its units published material of their own — including leaflets, pamphlets, and field newspapers — this has not generally been preserved in military archives. However, collections of field newspapers are available in local archives and libraries throughout Italy.

<sup>128</sup> This four-part model for analyzing propaganda is drawn from Tommaso Dell'Era, "La propaganda nel regime fascista," *Passato e Presente* 25, no. 71 (May 2007): 136.

In evaluating the German army's behaviour in the east, "history from below" has focused not only upon the ideological indoctrination of the officers and troops, but upon the impact that local conditions had on their behaviour. Bartov argues that the *Wehrmacht* became increasingly reliant on ideological themes in its propaganda as conditions in the east worsened. German soldiers grew more susceptible to such propaganda as they became brutalized by heavy casualties, primitive conditions, and the perversion of discipline on the eastern front.<sup>129</sup> But an analysis of local conditions — environmental, logistical, and military — has led others to downplay the role of ideology, pointing to other factors that led mid-level commands and their troops to conform to harsh Nazi policies. Chief among these factors, at least in rear areas, was the level of partisan resistance perceived and encountered by security forces in their zones of occupation.<sup>130</sup>

The third theme for analysis, then, focuses on the military response to resistance; that is, on counterinsurgency strategy. Alexander Statiev's study of Soviet anti-guerrilla warfare in the immediate postwar period provides five elements of strategy that can be analyzed to evaluate any counterinsurgency: the use of intelligence to identify causes of unrest; the use of political-social incentives and propaganda to win over elements of the population; the use of local auxiliaries to free up resources and gain collaboration; the use of conventional forces, their adjustment to guerrilla warfare, and their level of discipline; and, the treatment of captured insurgents and the application of collective reprisals to force the submission of further hostile groups.<sup>131</sup> A thematic focus on these five aspects of strategy provides a means to discern between local exceptions and institutional norms in behaviour. Did the military follow a doctrine in its repression of revolt, and to what extent did its strategy converge with political and ideological interests from above? Working within a self-proclaimed totalitarian system that exalted violence, how reliant

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<sup>129</sup> Bartov, *Hitler's Army*.

<sup>130</sup> See Theo J. Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia* (Oxford: Berg, 1989); Theo J. Schulte, "Korück 582," in Heer and Naumann, *War of Extermination*, 314–28; Shepherd, *War in the Wild East*; Shepherd, "Continuum of Brutality"; and, Hill, *War Behind the Eastern Front*.

<sup>131</sup> Alexander Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

was the army on the use of violence and terror to achieve its objectives? To what extent did military units adhere to higher-level policies governing the application of violence?

It is difficult to evaluate, in quantitative or qualitative terms, the level of violence actually meted out against civilians in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia. Italian statistics rarely included figures for “civilian” deaths, but it is clear that civilians were targeted by Italian forces. International law at the time vaguely permitted hostage-taking and reprisals against civilians that resisted occupying forces.<sup>132</sup> There are numerous cases where the numbers of “rebels” reported killed by the Italians during anti-partisan operations were disproportionately greater than Italian casualties or the number of weapons recovered afterwards. This tendency exists in German documentation as well, and has been taken as an indication that civilians were included in the overall figures, with the caveat that other factors also contributed to statistical discrepancies. These included the intentional or unintentional exaggeration of casualty reports, the practice of insurgents to retrieve or bury weapons before retreating, and the often poor level of armament of the partisans.<sup>133</sup> Finally, in order to identify the motives behind violent excesses, it is useful to distinguish between “hot” violence, arising as an immediate response to the brutality of combat, and “cold” violence, or “atrocities by policy,” in accordance with calculated directives from above.<sup>134</sup> While instances of the former may provide indications of troop discipline and morale, the latter can shed light upon institutional attitudes towards repression.

Each case study is organized around these three distinct levels of analysis. The first chapter of each case study examines the legal and political framework of the occupation. In Ethiopia, this framework was overtly colonial in nature and it reflected the ideological importance granted by the Fascist regime to its East African enterprise. The Fascist regime imposed a hastily conceived but strictly defined model of administration that theoretically limited the freedom of the military authorities. However, the rise of guerrilla

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<sup>132</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 4–5.

<sup>133</sup> Schulte, *German Army and Nazi Policies*, 119. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 6, 109, 130, 252. See also Shepherd, *War in the Wild East*, 240–41.

<sup>134</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 9. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 160–61.

resistance, the failure of Fascist colonization, and events in Europe gave the military greater authority in Ethiopia than the Fascist regime intended. Mussolini eventually accepted this state of affairs and permitted the administration in East Africa to diverge in part from his initial precepts. The situation in Yugoslavia was similarly ambiguous. The context of global war meant that strategic and military interests predominated, yet the power of the occupying military authorities was challenged by their German and Croatian allies, and by Italian civil functionaries with conflicting objectives. Again, military circumstances ensured that the army played a major political role in the occupation. In both case studies, the Italian army became fully involved in the implementation of policies imbued with ideological connotations. Despite its disputes with Fascist authorities, the army's policies conformed to the broader objectives of the regime.

The second chapter in each case study examines the propaganda apparatus and themes employed by the army to maintain troop morale. In Italian East Africa, military authorities produced little print propaganda of their own, but they ensured that personnel were provided daily newspapers and other periodicals published by private or Fascist agencies. These adopted the language of traditional colonialism, presenting the Italian invasion and occupation as a "civilizing mission." Efforts to spread a colonial mentality among Italian officials in Africa leaned heavily on racist depictions of the local populations, whether friend or foe, that justified oppressive Fascist policies and brutal methods of repression. In Yugoslavia, the Italian army had greater control over the information that reached its troops, eventually producing propaganda literature of its own. Yet, here too, military propaganda conformed more or less completely to the overarching themes prescribed by the Fascist regime. While not exalting the regime to the same extent as Fascist propaganda organs, the army explained the occupation to its troops in ideological terms, emphasizing themes of irredentism, imperialism, racism, and anti-communism. The army's propaganda displayed an obsession with hunting down and killing partisans, a conscious effort to brutalize Italian troops for anti-guerrilla warfare.

The final chapter of each case study focuses on the techniques employed by the Italian armed forces in counterinsurgency. In Ethiopia, military authorities enthusiastically followed Mussolini's initial directives that demanded the harsh treatment of "rebels" and the populations that supported them. The type of operations conducted in

East Africa varied over time, but brutality and terror were hallmarks of Italian policy from the outset. Violence reached a crescendo in the middle part of the occupation, after which Rome permitted a more restrained policy based partly on attracting local populations. However, by this point, it proved difficult to reverse behaviour at lower levels of command. In Yugoslavia, the army initially employed a lenient approach that grew more violent in disproportionate response to the development of Partisan resistance. In both cases, the army tended to rely on overwhelming force in its anti-guerrilla operations, which often proved ineffective and conducive to excesses or collateral damage. In both cases, unsupervised irregular troops — viewed with disdain by most Italian commanders — contributed to the escalation of brutality. Italian intelligence and propaganda for the local populations were clouded by colonial and racist stereotypes.



# PART I. THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE: ETHIOPIA

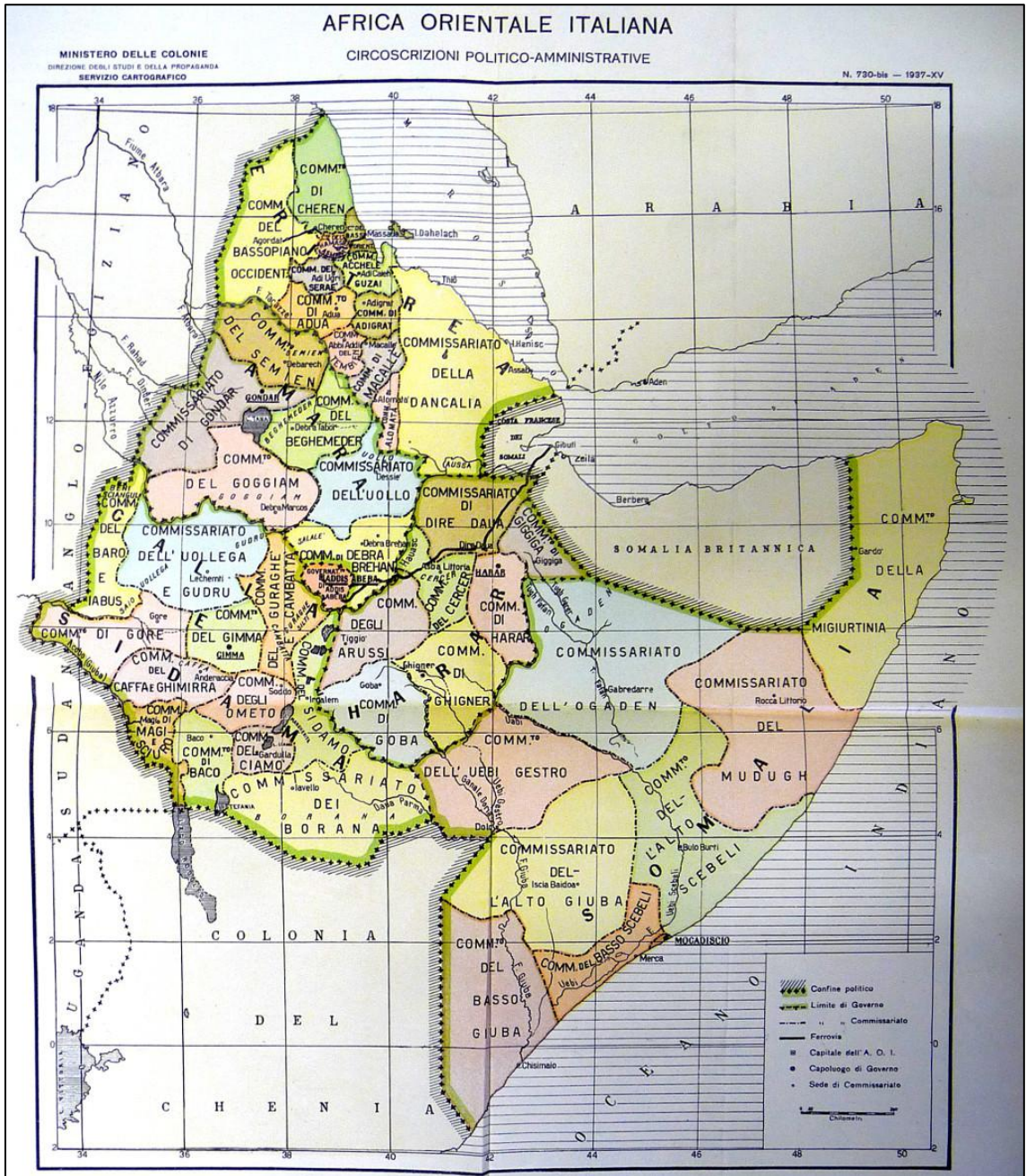


Figure 1. Italian East Africa, 1937 (Governorates and Commissariats)

Source: ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 209.

# 1 An Ambiguous Precedent

The invasion of Ethiopia on 2 October 1935 marked a turning point for Italian Fascism, ushering in its “imperial-colonialist phase” which ended in disaster with the Second World War. Ethiopia became the focal point of Mussolini’s “relaunched” cultural revolution. Experience in Ethiopia was intended to transform Italians into a brutal warrior race conscious of its dominion over others and fully integrated into the Fascist state.<sup>1</sup> For the Fascist regime, the conquest and colonization of Ethiopia was supposed to form the precedent for future behaviour, not just in Africa but in Europe as well.

The Italian army by necessity was at the forefront of this revolution. Its generals directed the invasion and commanded the troops who were to be transformed by battle.<sup>2</sup> After the “conquest,” the army maintained a strong presence in East Africa. For the next five years, its officers filled many of the posts in the civil administration of the empire and were constantly employed in operations to occupy the realm and quell resistance. The Italian failure to pacify the territory of the new empire and the subsequent need to maintain between 200,000 and 400,000 metropolitan and colonial troops in East Africa meant that the Italian presence there in many ways resembled a conventional military occupation more than a typical colonial one.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, Italian military authorities operated within a complex legal and political framework designed to limit their freedom of action. The *Regio Esercito* did not function in East Africa as an institution. Rather, all personnel in East Africa, whether civilian or military, answered to the Ministry of Colonies — in 1937 renamed the Ministry of Italian Africa — in Rome.<sup>4</sup> The intended purpose of this arrangement was to

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<sup>1</sup> De Grand, “Mussolini’s Follies,” 133, 147.

<sup>2</sup> This included four of the seven Blackshirt [CC.NN.] divisions that participated in the invasion of Ethiopia. The other three were under the nominal command of Fascist hierarchs, all retired senior officers. Gian Luigi Gatti, “Camicie nere al sole etiopico,” in Bottoni, *L’Impero fascista*, 190–93.

<sup>3</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the army as an institution took no interest in the methods of occupation in East Africa. Colonial governors sent monthly reports to the Army General Staff in Rome. See, for example, “Sintesi relazione politica del mese di febbraio 1939 XVII del Governo dell’Amara,” 8 April 1939, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 1; and, “Notiziari,” 16 January 1939, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

provide the Fascist regime a greater level of control over colonial occupation policy. Consequently, as governors and district administrators, army personnel found themselves fully involved in the implementation of Fascist political, socio-economic, and racial measures.

Higher-level directives set the tone for the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. They defined the living conditions in the empire and undoubtedly fuelled Ethiopian resistance against the colonizers. To an extent, direction from Rome limited the independence of command of the military authorities, but for the most part Italian officers had few problems conforming to Fascist styles of rule based largely on a racist mentality. The frequent disputes between military officials and Fascist civil functionaries were jurisdictional, tactical, or personal in nature and tended not to involve policy objectives or ideology.

At the same time, an examination of higher-level policies and the relationship between military governors in Ethiopia and the regime in Rome reveals a considerable lack of clarity regarding precisely what defined the Fascist style of rule. The inconsistency and uncertainty that typified Italian Fascism extended to the imperial context. The hasty implementation of a legal framework for the empire, the high degree of local variation in East Africa, and the vast distance separating Addis Ababa from Rome meant that actual policy on the ground most frequently represented a combination of Fascist direction and local improvisation. Furthermore, Mussolini himself apparently reversed course in 1938, when he replaced Rodolfo Graziani as viceroy with the far more liberal Duke of Aosta. If the colonization of Ethiopia was meant to establish a precedent for future behaviour, in practice it set a remarkably ambiguous precedent.

## Haste and Improvisation

The legal framework within which Italian commanders operated in East Africa was the result of hasty decision-making in Rome. In large part this was due to Mussolini's impatience to kick-start the stagnant Fascist cultural revolution through imperialism, to bolster Italian national prestige in the face of hostile foreign opinion, and to glean immediate economic and strategic benefits from his conquests. The legislation that

established the Fascist empire proved dysfunctional and unrealistic. The regime's impatience effectively saddled Italian military authorities on the ground with the political responsibilities of building an empire well before military pacification, or even occupation, had been achieved.

Alongside ideological imperatives, the most immediate cause for Mussolini's declaration of empire was international relations. When Italian troops entered Addis Ababa on 5 May 1936, two-thirds of the country remained unoccupied and several Ethiopian armies continued to resist. Nonetheless, Mussolini rushed to announce an end to hostilities and to declare the annexation of Ethiopia and the formation of an Italian empire in East Africa. With Britain expected to extend economic sanctions against Italy on 11 May, Mussolini hoped to confront the League of Nations with a *fait accompli* and gain an end to sanctions by declaring the war over.<sup>5</sup> On 9 May, a royal decree affirmed Italian sovereignty over Ethiopia which, along with Eritrea and Somalia, was placed under the charge of a governor general with the title "Viceroy of Ethiopia." King Vittorio Emanuele III assumed the title "King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia."<sup>6</sup> It was further hoped that the sudden formal declaration of an empire would prompt the international community to officially recognize the Italian conquest, again via *fait accompli*. Foreign powers would effectively recognize Italian control over Ethiopia as soon as they signed multilateral agreements or accepted the credentials of Italian ambassadors naming the Italian king Emperor of Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup>

The League of Nations repealed its economic sanctions against Italy on 15 July, but the formal recognition of the Italian empire was not so readily forthcoming.<sup>8</sup> Rome's need to escape diplomatic isolation had a direct impact on its directives to military authorities in East Africa during the first year of empire. The army had to make the

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<sup>5</sup> Pignatti to Mussolini, 28 April 1936, ASMAE, Ambasciata italiana presso la Santa Sede [AISS], b. 56, sf. 1g. Cerruti to Mussolini, 25 April 1936, and Aloisi to Mussolini, 28 April 1936, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* [DDI] 8, III, 756, 785 (cited as series, volume, document number[s]).

<sup>6</sup> The Ministry of Colonies forwarded the text of Royal Decree n. 754 to Badoglio and Graziani on 10 May 1936, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome [ACS], Fondo Graziani [FG], b. 45, fasc. 41, sf. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Cerruti to Ciano, 15 June 1936, DDI 8, IV, 269.

<sup>8</sup> Bova Scoppa to Ciano, 6 July 1936, DDI 8, IV, 457.

empire, at this point existing only on paper, a reality. Officially, the Italian Foreign Ministry assured foreign ambassadors that the situation in Ethiopia was calm and pacified.<sup>9</sup> In reality, the Ministry of Colonies bombarded the viceroy in Addis Ababa with orders to accelerate the physical occupation of the rest of the empire, specifically in order to obtain recognition from foreign states. The Colonial Minister also asked the viceroy to provide public statements on the tranquility of life in the empire.<sup>10</sup>

The increasing likelihood of Italian participation in a war against France or Britain also urged haste upon colonial authorities. As Mussolini's programme for domination of the Mediterranean made headway, Britain became Italy's most likely enemy in a future war.<sup>11</sup> Relations between the two countries were strained even more by Mussolini's intervention in the Spanish civil war and the creation of the Rome-Berlin Axis in October 1936. Since Ethiopia was bordered on three sides by British colonies, this was of particular concern to Italian military planners. In the event of a European war, the Italian Supreme Commission for Defence expected East Africa to be self-sufficient, capable of defending itself, taking the offensive, and even contributing to operations in Europe.<sup>12</sup> As the viceroy pointed out, self-sufficiency required the rapid development of communications, industry, and agriculture in Ethiopia.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Mussolini called for the formation of a "black army" of 300,000 men — seven times Italy's peacetime complement of colonial troops — by 1940 to challenge other colonial powers.<sup>14</sup> Strategic considerations and objectives added further impetus for the swift military, economic, and racial organization of the Italian empire.

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<sup>9</sup> Meeting between Ciano and De Chambrun, 29 July 1936, DDI 8, IV, 648.

<sup>10</sup> Lessona to Graziani, 15, 19, and 24 June 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32; see also ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 220.

<sup>11</sup> Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals*, 316.

<sup>12</sup> Lessona to Graziani, 10 December 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Graziani to Lessona, January 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Due to a lack of funds, no organizational progress had been made towards Mussolini's "black army" by November 1937, although colonial troops recruited for counterinsurgency amounted to 116,000. "Appunti e dati orientativi sulla situazione militare in A.O.I. a fine novembre 1937," December 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 209.

Italian East Africa thus was formed with immediate diplomatic and strategic objectives in mind, without first having occupied all the territory of the realm and without having properly studied its cultural, political, and economic makeup. On 1 June 1936, less than one month after the annexation of Ethiopia, a second royal decree formalized more fully the legal foundations and territorial organization of the new empire. Known as the *legge organica*, historians blame it for much of Italy's woes in East Africa. Because the Colonial Ministry did not know until the final stages of the war whether Italy would rule Ethiopia directly or as a mandate, it had no plans for administering the new territory. Once direct rule became a given, Alberto Sbacchi argues, "the *Legge Organica* was framed in Italy by people who could theorize over the organization of Ethiopia but did not grasp the practical problems."<sup>15</sup> For Giorgio Rochat, the administrative system imposed in East Africa was the end result of Mussolini's irrational pursuit of prestige. Prestige demanded that boundaries and legislation be drawn up immediately, that Italian authorities refuse to collaborate or compromise with traditional elites, and that Mussolini appear to direct colonial policy personally.<sup>16</sup> Matteo Dominiononi agrees that the *legge organica* was not based on learned studies, but on the ideological whims of Mussolini and his undersecretary at the Colonial Ministry, Alessandro Lessona, who knew nothing of Ethiopia. Dominiononi contends that the Fascist legislation had a major impact on subsequent events and on rebellion in Ethiopia in that it alienated Ethiopian elites and failed to respect local traditions.<sup>17</sup>

The *legge organica* divided Italian East Africa into six provinces or governorates. The original Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia were enlarged and made up two of the governorates. The remnants of the Abyssinian empire were divided between four new governorates: Amhara in the north, with its capital at Gondar; Harar in the southeast; Galla Sidamo in the west; and the miniscule Governorate of Addis Ababa — enlarged and renamed the Governorate of Shewa in November 1938 — which formed a distinct

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<sup>15</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 44, 86.

<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Rochat, "La guerra italiana in Etiopia: Modernità e limiti," in Bottoni, *L'Impero fascista*, 112–15.

<sup>17</sup> Dominiononi, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 54–55.

municipal administration around the capital of the empire. Governorates were further divided into commissariats, which were subdivided into districts known as residencies [*residenze*] and vice-residencies.<sup>18</sup>

The hasty organization of the empire resulted in territorial boundaries that did not always correspond to ethnic, economic, or political realities. The region was so vast and diverse that a rational distribution of territory required a level of study and consideration for which the impatient Fascist regime did not allow. The culturally and politically dominant Amhara inhabited the northern and central plateaus of Ethiopia, whereas southern regions were populated by Somali, Danakil, Sidamo, and Oromo — who the Italians referred to as Galla, now considered derogatory — peoples. Linguistic diversity was even greater, with populations speaking Semitic languages (such as Amharic, Tigrinya, Harari, and Arabic), Cushitic tongues (including Beja, Agau, Saho, Afar, Somali, Oromo, and Sidamo), as well as some Nilotic languages. The two dominant religions were Coptic Orthodox Christianity and Islam.<sup>19</sup> The Italians were aware of the heterogeneous nature of their empire, but were unable to address it effectively.

Governors of Amhara repeatedly deemed it necessary to reorganize the territory of their governorate. In October 1936, General Alessandro Pirzio Biroli attempted to redraw political boundaries along historical, geographic, and economic lines. He divided Amhara into five commissariats with a total of twenty-five residencies and sixty-three vice-residencies between them. However, since Pirzio Biroli lacked any proper cartographic studies of Amhara, he avoided defining any boundaries in absolute terms.<sup>20</sup> By the time Ottorino Mezzetti replaced Pirzio Biroli as governor in 1938, jurisdictional boundaries had still not been mapped. Mezzetti proposed another territorial reorganization to split up unwieldy large commissariats that his predecessor had

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<sup>18</sup> Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 55, 69–70.

<sup>19</sup> “Politica delle popolazioni indigene,” n.d., ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255. This four-page section was excerpted from a larger report of unknown provenance, but almost certainly dating to 1936.

<sup>20</sup> “Ripartizione territoriale dei Commissariati di Governo dell’Amara,” 15 December 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 221. The lack of precise maps or well-defined borders could result in costly errors. In July 1937, when the Italian air force mistakenly bombed five villages in Amhara and killed thirty villagers, imprecise boundaries were found to blame. “Notiziario politico relazione mensile del mese di luglio 1937,” 10 October 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

created.<sup>21</sup> According to Mezzetti, “the political evil from which Amhara suffers is the insufficient political organization of the periphery.” Italian centres of government were too far from the population — sometimes beyond 150 kilometres distant — and political boundaries did not coincide with local economic needs. Mezzetti’s solution was a costly programme of re-staffing and road building that failed to resolve the problem.<sup>22</sup> By 1939, the five commissariats that Pirzio Biroli started with had become thirteen. Nonetheless, a third governor, Luigi Frusci, complained that Amhara’s territorial boundaries had been drawn up along ethnic lines instead of economic and political ones, so that local needs could not be met. Frusci created a new level of command by distributing the commissariats into four sectors, but the advent of the Second World War interrupted his efforts.<sup>23</sup>

As the Amhara border question demonstrates, the rapid formation of Italian East Africa burdened governors with structural problems that could not easily be overcome. Perhaps the most serious consequence of the regime’s haste involved administrative personnel. Italian administration was plagued at once by too strong an effort of centralization by the Fascist regime and a shortage of qualified personnel to carry out Rome’s orders. Combined with the constant state of rebellion in Ethiopia, the practical result was that the military played a larger role than envisioned by Fascist planners.

According to the *legge organica*, the governor general, or viceroy, was the highest political and military authority in Italian East Africa. He answered exclusively to the Ministry of Colonies and was responsible for overseeing the execution of ministerial orders as well as coordinating Italian armed forces in the theatre. The three viceroys between 1936 and 1940 were all military men. Pietro Badoglio was Chief of the Armed Forces’ General Staff and, like his successor, Rodolfo Graziani, had commanded and governed in Libya. Like all Italian royals, Graziani’s replacement, the Duke of Aosta, had

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<sup>21</sup> “Modifica delle circoscrizioni politico-amministrative del Governo dell’Amara,” 4 July 1938, and “Funzione di Residenti e Comandanti di Presidio,” 21 September 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 221.

<sup>22</sup> “Relazione politica del mese di giugno 1938,” 2 July 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>23</sup> “Verbale in data 15 giugno c.a. delle conversazioni tenute fra S.E. Nasi e S.E. Frusci,” 18 July 1939, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 1.



a military background. After participating in the reconquest of Libya, he transferred from the artillery to the air force and commanded an air division before his appointment as governor general.<sup>24</sup> Each governorate was ruled by a governor nominated by the Colonial Ministry. Governors also tended to be military men who represented the ethos of the *Regio Esercito*. All three governors of Amhara were army generals. The more peaceful Governorate of Harar was under the command of General Guglielmo Nasi until May 1939, followed by a civilian, Enrico Cerulli, until the outbreak of the Second World War. The governors applied the general political, administrative, and military directives issued by the viceroy and Ministry of Colonies. In theory, this system required all decisions to be made in Rome, with the viceroy and governors acting as mere functionaries.<sup>25</sup>

With 4,500 kilometres separating Rome from Addis Ababa, such an arrangement was not practical. Experienced governors had to conform to sweeping directives from Rome that did not always appreciate local conditions. On the other hand, more junior and inexperienced personnel had a great deal of autonomy and political responsibility as local administrators. It was impossible for individual governors, let alone the Minister of Colonies in Rome, to centralize control over the vast territorial network of commissariats and residencies. As the face of Italian dominion over Ethiopia, local administrators — commissioners, residents, and vice-residents — had important responsibilities. For Nasi, the resident was akin to an “apostle,” preaching on his feet by visiting villages in his jurisdiction and making personal contact with the populations. It was a position that demanded a keen ability to take the “pulse” of the indigenous population, to juggle Italian imperatives and local customs so as to avoid misunderstandings, and to be firm without being threatening.<sup>26</sup> It was a position for which most functionaries were not prepared.

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<sup>24</sup> A glowing but factually accurate account of the Duke of Aosta’s military career can be found in Alfio Berretta, *Amedeo d’Aosta* (Milan: ELI, 1956).

<sup>25</sup> Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 60–61. Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 66–68. The contents of the royal decree, as it pertained to military authorities, are summarized in “Appunti e dati orientativi sulla situazione militare in A.O.I. a fine novembre 1937,” December 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 209.

<sup>26</sup> “Apostolato dei Residenti,” 1 October 1937, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4. On the difficult nature of work of the colonial administrator, see Gianni Dore, “Amministrare l’esotico: Un caso di etnologia applicata nell’Africa Orientale Italiana (1936–1941),” *Quaderni storici* 37, no. 1 (2002): 189–220.

The hasty formation of a massive colonial bureaucratic apparatus left qualified civilian personnel stretched thin. Despite the steady growth of the colonial bureaucracy under Fascism, the number of functionaries needed to exercise direct rule over a territory as large and as populous as Ethiopia dwarfed the Colonial Ministry's previous allocations for Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia. Thanks to the Liberal legacy of empire on the cheap and to Fascist disinterest in rational planning, there was no suitable training programme in place to bridge the gap.<sup>27</sup> A 1938 report to the Duke of Aosta commented that lower levels of the colonial administration were staffed by "incompetents" [*incapaci*], inexpert in African matters and too frequently concerned more with lining their own pockets than performing public duties.<sup>28</sup> Pirzio Biroli had recognized this deficiency in Amhara at the end of 1936. He therefore tried to assign his best officers to residencies, admitting that vice-residencies were staffed by personnel who were "not entirely prepared for independent commands."<sup>29</sup>

Considerations of competence aside, Pirzio Biroli did not have enough civilian functionaries to fill all the posts in his governorate. As a result, he had to appoint many army officers, mostly reservists, as district administrators.<sup>30</sup> From the outset, government organs in Amhara were made up largely of army officers from the disbanded Eritrean Corps that had taken part in the invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>31</sup> The lack of personnel and the spread of rebellion prompted governors of Amhara at times to combine military and civil powers in the hands of the same person. For example, the military zone commander might also be a civil commissioner, or a garrison commander could administer a

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<sup>27</sup> Nicola Labanca, "L'amministrazione coloniale fascista: Stato, politica e società," in *Il regime fascista: Storia e storiografia*, ed. Angelo Del Boca, Massimo Legnani, and Mario G. Rossi (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2005), 352–95. Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 78–81; Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 82–84. Only in 1938 were steps taken towards establishing an academy for the training of colonial personnel. Meregazzi to Teruzzi, June 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>28</sup> Cusmano and Corvo to Amedeo di Savoia, 7 April 1938, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 19

<sup>29</sup> "Ripartizione territoriale dei Commissariati di Governo dell'Amara," 15 December 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 221.

<sup>30</sup> "Notiziario politico mese di maggio 1937," 14 August 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>31</sup> Amhara Armed Forces Command war diary, 15 June 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171.

residency.<sup>32</sup> The preponderance of military personnel among colonial functionaries typified Italian colonial practices since the Liberal era.<sup>33</sup> Colonial administration thus represented a military occupation as much as a civil Fascist enterprise.

Administration in the relatively tranquil Governorate of Harar was also heavily militarized. Hampered by tight budgets, Nasi had to suspend recruitment of civilian officials, instead plucking officers from military commands. Even so, by the end of June 1937, ten vice-residencies in Harar remained vacant.<sup>34</sup> Statistics from October 1938 are even more revealing: of 8 commissioners, only 3 were civilian functionaries; of 23 residents, 5 were civilians; and, of 33 vice-residents, 8 were civilians. Residencies were normally held by captains; vice-residences usually by lieutenants or even second lieutenants.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the empire, military personnel played a disproportionately large role in the civil administration without receiving any special linguistic, cultural, or political training for their new tasks. Nasi feared that the deficiency in personnel combined with the constant growth of the administrative apparatus “risks compromising, or, at the least, setting back the good results that one has reason to expect in the political and economic field.”<sup>36</sup>

Not surprisingly, given the high degree of local autonomy and the haphazard way by which colonial officials came upon their charges, corruption was rampant. The situation in Amhara was particularly bad. The frequent misuse of government positions and resources compelled incoming Governor Mezzetti to launch a widespread purge through the governorate, part of a broader purge ordered by the Duke of Aosta to rid the

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<sup>32</sup> “Modifica delle circoscrizioni politico-amministrative del Governo dell’Amara,” 4 July 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 221. The Ministry of Italian Africa complained about this state of affairs, but the Duke of Aosta argued that there was little alternative in areas which were in full revolt. “Funzione di Residenti e Comandanti di Presidio,” 21 September 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 221.

<sup>33</sup> Labanca, “L’amministrazione coloniale,” 363–64, 372, 375.

<sup>34</sup> “Relazione sull’attività del mese di giugno,” 11 July 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>35</sup> “Elenco dei Commissariati, Residenze, Vice-Residenze e rispettivi titolari alla data del 1° ottobre 1938,” 1 October 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 221.

<sup>36</sup> “Relazione politico-amministrativa del mese di maggio,” 30 May 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

empire of corruption.<sup>37</sup> In Harar, Nasi repeatedly found it necessary to issue missives against corruption. These included gentle reminders that Italian functionaries were not permitted to conduct business, speculation, or to accept bribes. Nasi was convinced that colonial officials were skimming from public funds and exploiting the illiteracy of their African clientele by doling out less in subsidies than they recorded in their ledgers. Given the delicate security situation in East Africa, Nasi considered corruption a serious threat to the prestige of government representatives, who risked being seen by the indigenous population as no different from their old masters.<sup>38</sup> He publicized the court martial of two officers for corruption and, later, the repatriation of a vice-resident for misappropriation of public funds.<sup>39</sup> Nasi also tried to lead by example and gained a reputation for being overly thrifty.<sup>40</sup> Despite his efforts, by September 1938 Nasi still complained of “gold fever” within Harar’s administrative apparatus and of his need to punish far too many officials for corruption and misconduct.<sup>41</sup>

Corruption and lack of training were closely related to a tendency among lower-level administrators towards arbitrary behaviour. *Carabiniere* Colonel Angelo Cerica deemed this combination of factors partly responsible for the outbreak of revolt in Shewa and Amhara in 1937. Commissioners and residents either lacked the training or the “cultural basis” to conduct government functions, they were too young, or they were “inclined, simply, to make ends meet, taking as much advantage as possible from their position.” The result, according to Cerica, was an array of weak, autocratic, or morally compromised officials who treated their isolated posts as personal fiefdoms.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Mezzetti memorandum, n.d. [1939?], ASMAE, MAI, Gabinetto – Archivio Segreto [Gab-AS], b. 267, fasc. 220; Meregazzi to Teruzzi, n.d. [June 1938], ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>38</sup> “Prestigio del grado e delle funzioni,” 7 May 1937, and “Fondi neri,” 17 July 1938, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>39</sup> “Avviso al lettore,” 27 February 1938, and “Intangibilità fondi delle entrate,” 26 December 1938, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Invited to breakfast with Nasi, the journalist Ciro Poggiali noted that Nasi was “very cordial but has a reputation for imposing on his guests a regime of excessive parsimony.” Poggiali diary, 15 June 1937.

<sup>41</sup> “Febbre dell’oro,” 5 September 1938, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Cerica report to Graziani, 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c.

The most infamous example of this latter type of official was Captain Gioacchino Corvo, whom Cerica singled out for sparking revolt in the Commissariat of Gojam in Amhara. Corvo was resident of Bahir Dar from March 1937 to January 1938, during which time he became subject to a long list of accusations. These included: miscegenation; the excessive taxation of the population; the arbitrary administration of justice; the personal administration of public floggings and beatings; administrative improprieties; unwarranted mass executions; brutal methods of execution, including the drowning of victims in Lake Tana; the burning of villages and the execution of their inhabitants; the execution of loyal collaborators; and, the execution of elites and their followers, including a twelve-year-old boy. Perhaps most telling, however, is that the results of the official inquiry into Corvo's actions were inconclusive. The inquiry confirmed that most of the accusations were real, but also that there were mitigating factors at play. Chief among these was that Corvo was not unique among colonial functionaries. The report found that Corvo did not bear sole responsibility within his residency and that he largely conformed to higher-level policy.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Cerica considered displays of weakness to be equally damaging.<sup>44</sup> Neither the autonomy of local administrators nor their provenance from the *Regio Esercito* prevented them from functioning in a typically arrogant and violent "fascist" style, and the colonial military leadership was reluctant to restrict the application of fear and terror altogether.

The frequent conflicts of interest that occurred between Italian military officers and civil authorities from the Ministry of Colonies or the Fascist Party must be understood in this light and should not automatically be conflated with a fundamental ideological divide between them. Animosity between rival agencies characterized other totalitarian regimes and Mussolini's was no different. During the invasion of Ethiopia, relations between the leadership of the Italian army on one hand and Fascist party officials and militia commanders on the other were strained. Mussolini considered the participation of MVSN divisions necessary for propaganda reasons, depicting the war as

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<sup>43</sup> "Risultato delle indagini sull'attività del residente di Bahar Dar," 25 February 1938, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 213.

<sup>44</sup> Cerica report to Graziani, 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c.

a popular and voluntary one fought with Fascist spirit. The army opposed their deployment as a dispersal of resources — the *Regio Esercito* had to outfit the seven Blackshirt divisions with both equipment and officers — and a threat to the army's autonomy. In the end, political meddling won out, but Badoglio kept a tight leash on MVSN units. Army officers and soldiers despised the militia as volunteers who never had to experience the deprivations of barrack life, who received favourable treatment from the press, and who supposedly received better pay whilst being spared from heavy fighting.<sup>45</sup>

The period of occupation after the conquest was characterized by animosity between military authorities and civilian or Fascist party officials. Army officers jokingly referred to functionaries of the Ministry of Italian Africa as members of the “Swiss navy” — based on their white uniforms and the notion that they were about as useful as a navy was to a land-locked country — an epithet which Nasi hoped to purge from the colonial vocabulary.<sup>46</sup> The situation eventually forced Graziani to issue a directive on the matter, defining more clearly the jurisdictions of regional political and military authorities. Forwarding the directive to his commands, Pirzio Biroli urged his military and civil officials to work “with a spirit of understanding, consciousness, and collaboration.”<sup>47</sup> No doubt, one reason for jurisdictional quibbles was that many of the civil authorities were also military men that felt competent to handle military affairs. In 1938, Nasi punished a garrison commander and a vice-resident, also an army officer, with repatriation and ten days arrest for not being able to get along on the job.<sup>48</sup> The fact that fellow army officers also failed to get along suggests that disputes were not primarily ideological in nature.

Higher-level disagreements too were based on jurisdictional conflict. In 1938, the Court of Auditors [*Corte dei conti*] in Rome tried to impose the *legge organica* in Harar,

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<sup>45</sup> For one of the few studies focusing on relations between the army and militia in Ethiopia, see Gatti, “Camicie nere al sole etiopico,” 187–213.

<sup>46</sup> Aldo Milioni, *Non avevamo neanche la bandiera: Africa Orientale Italiana, 1937–1941* (Rome: IBN, 2010), 31; Silvano Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè: ‘Con le aquile sulle ambe’* (Milan: Cavallotti, 1989), 87; Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 84; “Relazioni coi funzionari,” 21 May 1938, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Pirzio Biroli to zone commanders, 19 February 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

<sup>48</sup> “Dissidi fra autorità politica e autorità militare,” 20 May 1938, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

declaring that commissioners and residents should all be civilian officials. Nasi responded that such an order lacked any “adherence to reality”; military officers took up four-fifths of those positions and without them “the entire state machinery would come to a halt.” Nasi pointed out that the first phase of any colonial occupation was military; he warned against rushing to normalization.<sup>49</sup> The latter comment was clearly opposed to Rome’s demands for the rapid establishment of a colonial apparatus in Ethiopia, but the conflict stemmed from concerns in Rome that the army wielded too much influence in East Africa.

On the other hand, the army complained when civilian administrators overstepped their bounds and encroached upon military prerogatives. General Quirino Armellini — the commander of troops in Amhara who three years later would find himself embroiled in a bitter jurisdictional dispute with a Fascist governor in Yugoslavia — cast much of the blame for a military disaster on the resident of Bichena for not observing proper jurisdictional channels. Displaying “either an excessive and condemnable spirit of authority or a lack of regard for what were his duties,” the resident ordered the garrison commander of Debre Werk to go to the aid of a village besieged by rebels. The resident, who according to Armellini should have limited himself to informing the garrison of the threat and signalling the commissariat and sector commanders for instructions, neglected to share vital intelligence on the whereabouts and size of the rebel forces. In an act of imprudent generosity, the garrison heeded the resident’s orders and quickly found itself surrounded by rebels. Five Italian officers, one Italian non-commissioned officer, and thirty-seven colonial troops were killed in the ensuing battle, which also resulted in the loss of the battalion’s standard.<sup>50</sup>

Personal matters could exacerbate jurisdictional disputes, at times culminating in charges against an official’s Fascist credentials. For example, the head of the Fascist Party office in Gondar accused Governor Mezzetti of “animosity towards the Blackshirts,” which he denied vehemently, pointing out that his wife had been dubbed

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<sup>49</sup> “Relazione politico-amministrativa del mese di maggio,” 30 May 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>50</sup> “Relazione sul fatto d’arme di Debra Uork,” 29 September 1939, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 4.

“Mother of the Blackshirts.” According to Mezzetti, the feud stemmed instead from his decision to fix Gondar as the capital of Amhara — whereas certain civilian personnel had vested economic interests in its transfer to a new location — and to his recent purges. Mezzetti admitted to treating severely any functionaries, whether belonging to the regular army or to the militia, whom he deemed “pusillanimous, dishonest, or altogether incompetent.” Indeed, Mezzetti had personal clashes with other army generals, including Pietro Maletti, one of Graziani’s close collaborators.<sup>51</sup>

Jurisdictional and personal considerations also lay behind the well-documented series of disputes between Viceroy Graziani and Minister Lessona between 1936 and 1937. Graziani’s biographers portray him, first and foremost, as a careerist and *arriviste* who enjoyed an ambiguous relationship with Italian Fascism. More than to the party or ideology — but also more than to the King — Graziani was personally loyal to Mussolini, primarily because the *Duce*’s position made him the arbiter of Graziani’s destiny. Nonetheless, his Fascist credentials could not be disputed. In his speeches and writings during the early 1930s, Graziani praised the regime’s imperial programme and declared his principles “clearly fascist.”<sup>52</sup> As Rochat argues, Graziani was a true Fascist in that he was not part of the monarchist “establishment” in the *Regio Esercito*.<sup>53</sup> He remained loyal to Mussolini after 1943 and became Minister of Defence in the Salò Republic. After the war, he was the honorary president of the neo-fascist *Movimento sociale italiano*.<sup>54</sup>

In Ethiopia, Graziani enjoyed a strong relationship with the civilian governor of Addis Ababa, Alfredo Siniscalchi, who referred to Graziani as “our beloved viceroy.” He also lauded the viceroy’s role in establishing a Fascist Party branch in the capital, for

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<sup>51</sup> Mezzetti memoranda, n.d. and 13 January 1939, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 220.

<sup>52</sup> Canosa, *Graziani*, 75, 376; Mayda, *Graziani, l’africano*, 8, 16–18. In his writings on the Libyan campaign, Graziani praised Fascist imperialism for regaining Italian prestige and exalted Mussolini’s role in the process, comparing Fascism’s “coherent” colonial policy to the failed Liberal version. “Luckily for us,” Graziani commented, “in October ’22 Fascism assumed power.” Graziani, *Pace romana in Libia*, 57–58, 92, 122, 204.

<sup>53</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e Etiopia*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> Canosa, *Graziani*, 290–92, 366.



which Graziani earned the sobriquet of “first Fascist of the Empire.”<sup>55</sup> But, whereas Graziani got along well with most civilian and party officials in East Africa, his relationship with Lessona in Rome was a rocky one. Despite both being avowed Fascists, Lessona and Graziani disagreed on many aspects of policy. Angelo Del Boca attributes their conflict to the differing conditions under which they worked — Graziani, after all, found himself in Addis Ababa surrounded by 20,000 rebels — and to a clash of personalities.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, both were confrontational figures. Graziani was particularly sensitive to personal slights and apt to hold a grudge. He rejected Lessona’s proposal to appoint Ugo Cavallero as his second in command, primarily on the grounds that the two generals hated one another.<sup>57</sup> Graziani also had a spat with General Ettore Bastico in October 1936, when the latter published an article in *Il Popolo d’Italia* which failed to mention Graziani’s role in the conquest of Ethiopia.<sup>58</sup> The seeds of his personal dislike for Lessona may have been sown by the Colonial Minister’s opposition to Graziani’s candidacy to command the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. According to Lessona, Graziani sent his wife to lobby on his behalf, but Lessona told her that Graziani’s lack of training or experience as a commander of large conventional military units made him unsuited to the task.<sup>59</sup> Lessona later tried to prevent Graziani from succeeding Badoglio as supreme commander in Ethiopia.<sup>60</sup> For his part, Lessona gained a reputation among other Fascist leaders, including the Foreign Minister, Galeazzo Ciano, as a troublemaker and ingrate.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> “La capitale dell’Impero,” 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41.

<sup>56</sup> Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, 3:38–39.

<sup>57</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 15 June 1936, ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 40, sf. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Canosa, *Graziani*, 123.

<sup>59</sup> Alessandro Lessona, *Memorie* (Florence: Sansoni, 1958), 223. Graziani’s wife, Ines, looked after his public relations in Italy and Africa, maintaining close relationships with leading Fascists and army generals. Mayda, *Graziani, l’africano*, 79.

<sup>60</sup> Bottai diary, 24 April 1936.

<sup>61</sup> Ciano diary, 19 November 1938.

His own memoirs are replete with episodes of internal rivalries and power struggles between himself, the army, and other Fascist leaders and ministries.<sup>62</sup>

The chief debates between Graziani and Lessona largely boiled down to disagreements over jurisdictional competencies. Graziani complained to Mussolini that Lessona had effectively decentralized the empire by creating “five republics [governorates] under the Ministry of Colonies.” Graziani hoped to remove some of the limitations imposed by the *legge organica* on his powers as viceroy and gain control over communication between Rome and the provincial governors. However, Mussolini confirmed his faith in Lessona and sent him on a trip to East Africa in hopes of patching things up. The journey, during which Lessona’s train came under rebel fire, only made matters worse.<sup>63</sup>

In 1937, Lessona sought further to reduce Graziani’s influence and to strengthen that of his Ministry by establishing a special colonial police force. Prior to that year, the *carabinieri reali* — the Italian military police — carried out much of the ordinary police work in East Africa. As a branch of the Italian army, the *carabinieri* in East Africa were under the direction of a high command attached directly to the viceroy’s office in Addis Ababa. This command, and therefore Graziani, was responsible for the recruitment and training of indigenous gendarmes [*zaptié*] as well as the deployment, discipline, and promotion of personnel. The commander of troops in each governorate as well as local garrison commanders could dispose of *carabinieri* detachments like any other military unit. Furthermore, according to Graziani’s reading of the *legge organica*, the *carabinieri* were responsible for ordinary policing functions for the maintenance of public order, an

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<sup>62</sup> For example, during the build up for war in East Africa, Lessona found himself in conflict with Emilio De Bono, a Fascist of the First Hour sent to organize military preparations in Eritrea, as well as with Federico Baistrocchi, army chief of staff and undersecretary. Reflecting his sanctimonious attitude towards jurisdictional squabbles, Lessona remembered the feud with De Bono — which he lost — as an honourable battle “that I consider one of the most beautiful of my life.” Lessona, *Memorie*, 152–54.

<sup>63</sup> Graziani to Mussolini, 4 September 1936, ACS, FG, b. 24; and ACS, FG, b. 42, cited in Canosa, *Graziani*, 120–22; Richard Pankhurst, “The Secret History of the Occupation of Ethiopia, 1935–1941,” *Africa Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1977): 48, 54; Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 51.

interpretation that the Colonial Ministry did not share.<sup>64</sup> During the early stages, when Italian forces were only beginning to occupy the western reaches of Ethiopia where Italian colonial administration had not been established, Graziani entrusted the *carabinieri* with some political functions. Lessona saw himself cut out of the chain of command and Graziani was forced to defend his dispositions on the basis that they were merely temporary and followed a practice commonly applied “in North Africa and elsewhere in the infancy of conquest.”<sup>65</sup>

The language and policies of the commander of the *carabinieri* in East Africa, Colonel Azolino Hazon, fell fully within the realm of Fascist orthodoxy. Hazon established networks of local informants to report on public sentiment, he housed white *carabinieri* in separate barracks from indigenous *zaptié*, and he affirmed his devotion to Fascism’s imperial mission:

It is a duty of honour that we all must feel towards those who bathed this land in their generous blood, it is a duty that we have towards the entire Branch [*carabinieri*] and to ourselves; we who contributed with full passion to the conquest of this Empire, we must defend it, take care of it, strengthen it, draw it closer to us with the assiduous work of penetration and pacification, assuring it security and order; it is only upon our organization that one can and must surely base and develop the political-administrative system.<sup>66</sup>

Lessona’s objections to Hazon’s report — the underlined sections were highlighted in red pencil by someone at the Colonial Ministry — had nothing to do with ideological sentiment. There is no reason to believe that the *carabinieri* behaved any differently in East Africa than the colonial police later did. Lessona’s main concern was that Hazon’s office in Addis Ababa had too much autonomy and responsibility.

Lessona’s colonial police force — later called the *Polizia dell’Africa Italiana* [PAI] — was established by law in June 1937 and was intended to take over the maintenance of public order throughout Italian East Africa by the end of 1938. Granted

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<sup>64</sup> “Compiti – relazioni – dipendenze dell’arma dei CC.RR. del Vicereame d’Etiopia,” 1 July 1936, and “Compati, relazioni, dipendenze dell’arma dei cc.rr. del Vicereame d’Etiopia,” 9 July 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 257.

<sup>65</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 3 October 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 257.

<sup>66</sup> “Disposizioni di massima per il funzionamento dei comandi territoriali,” 23 July 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 257.

“totalitarian functions” by the *Duce*, the colonial police was promised the funding necessary to make it a strong institution “worthy of fascism and the Empire.” The *carabinieri* were to limit themselves to military police work and were to be reduced to a peacetime size of three companies.<sup>67</sup> Hazon protested against this reduction in force size. Since Italian East Africa was made up of six governorates with six troop commands, each of the three *carabinieri* companies would have to be divided into two. The resulting administrative confusion, he claimed, would make the allocation of funds and issuing of orders less efficient. Hazon requested that six companies remain in East Africa, especially given the regime’s plans to raise a “black army” of indigenous forces, which would require twice as many military policemen.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the *carabinieri* and colonial police would continue to operate in parallel, resulting in overlapping jurisdictional responsibilities that were never effectively solved.<sup>69</sup>

The conflict over the establishment of the colonial police is a further example of a jurisdictional dispute between military and civil authorities that sprang from the hasty formation of the empire and the need thereafter to improvise and adjust, both to realities on the ground and to fluctuating institutional objectives. The army generals employed in East Africa as governors or on gubernatorial staffs found themselves constrained by a prematurely conceived legal framework, imposed by the Fascist regime’s haste to accrue political and diplomatic benefits from its conquest. The foundational laws of the empire curtailed their freedom of action in favour of oversight from Rome. In contrast, these laws also required the establishment of a vast bureaucracy with a relatively high degree of local autonomy. This presented Italian commanders with new problems in the form of personnel shortages, incompetence, corruption, and jurisdictional quarrels which posed difficulties for the execution of policy. Such issues plagued Italian leaders in Ethiopia from the outset and never were resolved.

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<sup>67</sup> “Polizia Coloniale,” 22 June 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 256.

<sup>68</sup> “Organico Arma CC.RR. in A.O.I.,” 12 August 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 256.

<sup>69</sup> Documentary evidence on the Police of Italian Africa is scarce, having been divided between several archives or having gone missing. An excellent discussion of the topic can be found in Dominionini, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 96–111.

## Super Direct Rule

The *legge organica* provided for central control from Rome at the expense of the autonomy of Italian governors. It also placed local administration in the hands of Italian functionaries at the expense of traditional Ethiopian elites. Together, these characteristics formed the basis for what Matteo Dominioni has called “super direct rule.” It set Fascist imperialism apart from French and British models of indirect or direct rule, where civil powers were either delegated to indigenous elites or placed in the hands of a powerful and independent governor.<sup>70</sup> The exclusion of native elites from administration stemmed from Fascist racial thinking as well as Mussolini’s totalitarian objective of centralized control.<sup>71</sup> By seeking the complete political dissolution of indigenous societies, the model of super direct rule was inherently genocidal and made violent resistance more likely to occur.<sup>72</sup> Scholars agree that the policy was a primary reason for the failure of Italian colonialism in Ethiopia and that it represented a missed opportunity. The loyalty of the great Ethiopian nobles, the *rases*, to the exiled Emperor Haile Selassie was questionable. His efforts after 1930 to centralize Ethiopia’s government and administration had alienated many traditional feudal elites without eradicating their influence in society.<sup>73</sup> Mussolini could have exploited these sentiments; instead, he insisted on rule by the catchphrase “no power to the *ras*” as the best demonstration of Fascist dynamism, control, and strength.

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<sup>70</sup> Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 61, 297–98.

<sup>71</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 134.

<sup>72</sup> The conditions in Italian East Africa were fundamentally similar to those in German Southwest Africa during the fin-de-siècle, which Dominik Schaller has described as a “genocidal administration.” Colonial authorities envisioned establishing a predominantly white settlement under “direct and unrestricted German rule” by limiting and eventually abolishing the political institution of chiefdoms, dispossessing indigenous land, and creating an economically dependent African population of labourers. These methods echo the techniques listed in the writings of Raphael Lemkin, who created the concept of genocide to describe the systematic “disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion and the economic existence” of a group. Schaller, “From Conquest to Genocide,” 300–301, 312. For an overview of Lemkin’s writings on genocide, see Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide,” 8–21.

<sup>73</sup> Nicola Labanca, “L’Impero del fascismo: Lo stato degli studi,” in Bottoni, *L’Impero fascista*, 45; Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 129. Anthony Mockler, *Haile Selassie’s War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 3–20. Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991*, 2nd ed. (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2001), 137–48, 159.

*“No power to the ras”*

At first, colonial military leaders were skeptical of the *Duce*'s programme. Towards the end of the invasion of Ethiopia, the Italian army had directed propaganda towards local elites and clergy in an attempt to win them over to the postwar administration.<sup>74</sup> Between May and July 1936, the Italian viceroys Badoglio and Graziani presented Mussolini with alternatives to super direct rule. Badoglio provided two options for the political organization of Ethiopia: direct rule or control by local intermediaries. Badoglio conceded the possibility that the general population might respond better to direct rule, but he suggested also that it would alienate traditional elites. On the other hand, co-opting nobles through concessions to the old order would help normalize conditions and achieve stability more rapidly. Rather than adhering rigidly to either model, Badoglio favoured applying one method or the other based on the particular conditions of the various territories. In addition, he believed that Italy could take advantage of the old state institutions in Addis Ababa by incorporating the bureaucracy into the Italian administrative system.<sup>75</sup> Badoglio's model, which would have given the viceroy and governors considerable authority over decision-making and would have involved at least some degree of collaboration with indigenous elites, did not fit Mussolini and Lessona's vision for super direct rule.

Badoglio's plan had the support of Fulvio Suvich in the Foreign Ministry, who thought that co-opting the Ethiopian nobility, possibly through the return of “purely formal authority,” might speed the process of foreign recognition for the Italian empire.<sup>76</sup> However, within a month, both Badoglio and Suvich had vacated their posts. Suvich was sent as ambassador to Washington when Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son in law, became Minister of Foreign Affairs in June.<sup>77</sup> His proposals having been rejected, Badoglio claimed that the high altitude of Addis Ababa caused him respiratory problems, and he

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<sup>74</sup> Propaganda promised reconstruction and indemnities. Brogini Künzi, “Total Colonial Warfare,” 325.

<sup>75</sup> Badoglio to Mussolini, 16 May 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

<sup>76</sup> Suvich to Mussolini, 2 May 1936, DDI 8, III, 817.

<sup>77</sup> Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War*, 81.

returned to a hero's welcome in Rome. Badoglio reportedly took with him crates of stolen artifacts and half the contents of the Bank of Ethiopia.<sup>78</sup>

Marshal Rodolfo Graziani took over the acting role of governor general upon Badoglio's departure on 21 May and he was formally named viceroy on 11 June 1936.<sup>79</sup> Like his predecessor, Graziani initially was ambivalent towards the Colonial Ministry's desire to exclude Africans from administrative duties. Although claiming to have followed similar policies towards elites in Libya, Graziani pointed out that the situation was different in Ethiopia. With its rigidly structured feudal hierarchy, Italian authorities in Ethiopia found themselves dealing with "the sons of kings, nephews of kings, sundry princes, etc." who pulled real weight, especially in the periphery. Graziani assured Lessona that this would not prevent him from dealing with such personalities in "fascist style" but, in response to the minister's peremptory orders regarding the "total exclusion" of former Abyssinian administrators from any charge, he complained that such rigid directives limited his "freedom of action" to "exploit various and particular situations towards the sole end to be reached, and that is pacification, disarmament, affirmation of [our] rule."<sup>80</sup>

The only official outlet for Ethiopian participation in the colonial administration was the "Council of the Empire," which according to the *legge organica* was supposed to include six indigenous leaders — one representing each governorate — and meet at least once a year. Graziani, initially unsure of which notables he could trust, failed to appoint anyone to the council and, with the entrenchment of Rome's policy of "no power to the *ras*," it never met.<sup>81</sup> Although unable to involve former Abyssinian dignitaries and

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<sup>78</sup> Canosa, *Graziani*, 109; Mayda, *Graziani, l'africano*, 31; Gooch, "Re-conquest and Suppression," 1022. Prior to the conquest of Addis Ababa, Badoglio had intimated his intentions to return to Italy. Bottai diary, 1 May 1936. According to Lessona, in March 1937 Badoglio asked for and received a sum of five million lire — the equivalent of half the contents of the Bank of Ethiopia — as a reward for his services rendered to the regime. Lessona, *Memorie*, 259.

<sup>79</sup> "L'insediamento di Graziani a Addis Abeba," *Corriere della Sera*, 22 May 1936, 1; "L'udienza del Duce," *Corriere della Sera*, 12 June 1936, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 15 June 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32; Lessona to Graziani, 17 June 1936, and Graziani to Lessona, 21 June 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 220.

<sup>81</sup> Alberto Sbacchi, "Italy and the Treatment of the Ethiopian Aristocracy," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 10, no. 2 (1977): 223–25.

functionaries in the actual administration of territory, Graziani tried to maintain the loyalty of collaborating notables by offering stipends generous enough to give them the semblance of a “position of privilege.”<sup>82</sup> However, Graziani complained that the men he was able to woo through such means tended to be relative unknowns. The nobles with real influence over the masses were the great feudal lords who were less willing to renounce their old powers and privileges. Graziani blamed this latter group for instigating a sudden revolt in July 1936, which for a time cut off Addis Ababa from the rest of the empire. Graziani responded to the revolt with force, but afterwards he posed Mussolini with two stark choices: “Either hold everywhere with force or collaborate for now in some manner with the Chiefs [*Capi*].”<sup>83</sup>

However, the July revolts only reinforced Mussolini’s belief that Ethiopian elites were not to be trusted. He informed Graziani that he would not modify his directives regarding former *rases* and Abyssinian chiefs, “who simply must obey.” Instead, he offered Graziani reinforcements from Libya.<sup>84</sup> At the end of July, Graziani confirmed that he would carry out the *Duce*’s directives faithfully, but he still asked for the freedom to use alternative means to pacify the notables, pointing out that even Caesar’s conquests had involved a combination of military and political activity. Graziani wrote, “I should not be deprived of all the weapons that allow me to find a favourable solution to the problem.”<sup>85</sup> Regardless, a week later, Lessona — who had been promoted to Minister of Colonies in June — confirmed the policy of “no power to the *ras*” as one of his “fundamental principles.”<sup>86</sup>

Graziani’s resistance to Rome’s policy towards Ethiopian elites must be understood within the context of the Italian army’s doctrine for colonial warfare, jurisdictional disputes between rival agencies within the Fascist regime, and local

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<sup>82</sup> “L’azione politica per il consolidamento della conquista e per l’occupazione dell’ovest,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 22.

<sup>83</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 24 July 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

<sup>84</sup> Mussolini to Graziani, 25 July 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

<sup>85</sup> Graziani to Mussolini, 27 July 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

<sup>86</sup> Lessona to Graziani, 5 August 1936, ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 41, sf. 2.



conditions in East Africa. Graziani's doctrinal thesis coming out of Libya centred on the appreciation and use of political means in colonial operations, even if his definition of political was limited. Experience in Libya also had demonstrated the need — explicated by both Graziani and Nasi — for local initiative and an ability to adjust to conditions as they arose, which demanded a great deal of autonomy for colonial authorities. Combined with Graziani's authoritarian personality, this provided the basis for a jurisdictional dispute between the viceroy and the Ministry of Colonies. Graziani's autonomy was threatened by Lessona's insistence on "no power to the *ras*." Graziani found himself in a difficult military situation: while his troops tried to destroy the remaining Ethiopian field armies and occupy the rest of the country, armed rebellion threatened the supposedly pacified capital of Addis Ababa. Conciliation with powerful elites, whether genuine or temporary, was tactically prudent.

Lessona's absolute refusal to accommodate indigenous elites helped define Rome's concept of super direct rule, based on totalitarian control without compromise. This gave Lessona's colonial policy a distinctly and self-consciously "fascist" tone. In the end, Graziani and other military authorities easily — even wholeheartedly — accommodated themselves to the line coming from Rome. Graziani's vacillation over the policy of exclusion of elites ended with an assassination attempt against him on 19 February 1937. During a public ceremony at the viceroy's palace, two Eritreans in the crowd threw seven hand grenades at the viceroy, severely wounding him. Graziani's biographers agree that the assassination attempt transformed Graziani and his viceroyship.<sup>87</sup> According to Edoardo Borra, the doctor who treated Graziani after the attempt, the viceroy became traumatized and paranoid, transforming his hospital into a small castle [*fortilizio*] protected by machineguns, trenches, armoured cars, and spotlights.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 189; Canosa, *Graziani*, 159; Mayda, *Graziani, l'africano*, 10–11, 112.

<sup>88</sup> Edoardo Borra, *Amedeo di Savoia: Terzo duca d'Aosta e viceré d'Etiopia* (Milan: Mursia, 1985), 65. Four years later, Graziani suffered a nervous breakdown during the successful British offensive against his forces in Libya. Knox, *Common Destiny*, 163.

In addition to paranoia for his own safety, Graziani lost any faith he once had in the Ethiopian nobility. On the basis of scant evidence, Graziani was convinced that indigenous elites and collaborators were involved in the assassination plot. The official report compiled by Judge Advocate General Bernardo Olivieri concluded that notables were not directly involved in the plot but that they must have known about it. They had motive and their passive response to the crisis seemed to prove their complicity.<sup>89</sup> Now, Graziani claimed always to have doubted the loyalty of elites from the old regime and to have desired their “elimination from the local scene” through deportation. He announced that his “patience, generosity, kindness, et cetera, et cetera,” towards Ethiopian notables was at an end. “Nine months of tough experience” led Graziani to conclude that “Amhara chiefs must disappear first of all from Addis Ababa and in the second place gradually from other regions.” Acknowledging the impossibility of half measures with the policy of “no power to the *ras*,” Graziani deemed it pointless to try to win them over. The great chiefs had no reason for loyalty to a system that aimed to destroy them.<sup>90</sup>

Thereafter, Graziani assimilated fully Rome’s desire to persecute rather than co-opt the Ethiopian nobility. He justified the wholesale deportation to Italy of all former high-ranking notables, whose presence in Ethiopia was “damaging to our policy of absolute right to rule.”<sup>91</sup> Graziani also made sure that the various governorates followed the policy. Although he previously gave some leeway to the Governor of Harar, after the assassination attempt Graziani criticized Nasi for continuing to employ former Abyssinian functionaries in his administration. Graziani demanded that they be eliminated to prevent the formation of “centres of Abyssinian intrigue” and to give the indigenous populations the sensation that Abyssinian rule was finished and that no local elite stood as intermediary between them and the Italian government.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> “Relazione riassuntiva circa l’attentato del 19 febbraio,” 19 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1a.

<sup>90</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 28 February 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1b.

<sup>91</sup> “Ras Sejum, ras Ghetacciou, ras Chebbedè e degiac Asserat,” 1 June 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1b.

<sup>92</sup> Lessona to Nasi, 8 March 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 221.

This was echoed by a renewed drive to oust elites in the Governorate of Amhara. One of Pirzio Biroli's founding points upon the formation of the governorate in June 1936 was that former Abyssinian elites and functionaries "must be kept out of any activity or charge."<sup>93</sup> However, like Nasi, the Governor of Amhara found this difficult to accomplish given his own lack of Italian administrative personnel, but also because some of these notables had spontaneously rallied to the Italian side during the invasion. Under pressure from Graziani even before the assassination attempt, in December 1936 Pirzio Biroli reported on his efforts to carry out ministerial orders by "supplanting in full the old leaders and their assistants, replacing them completely [*totalitariamente*] with Italian functionaries, who thus will have immediate and direct political-administrative contact with the populations."<sup>94</sup> By May, again according to Pirzio Biroli, the "weighty Negussite framework of chiefs and notables" in Amhara had been eliminated. The new system granted offices only to *meslenié* (district leaders) or *cicca* (village leaders) with "modest" responsibilities. Many district leaders were not locals at all but were promoted from the veteran ranks of the *askari*, the colonial troops that had helped conquer Ethiopia. Pirzio Biroli claimed that they enjoyed the approval of the population, but his successors considered such appointments to be among the causes of popular dissent in Amhara.<sup>95</sup>

By the end of his tenure as viceroy, Graziani had become a full practitioner of "no power to the *ras*," overseeing the application of the policy in the governorates regardless of local circumstances. In a letter to his replacement, the Duke of Aosta, Graziani warned that "all the *rases* and chiefs, here or in exile, great or small, [dream] of again being granted a command and territorial government." Graziani still believed that the exclusion of Ethiopian notables from government was "the fulcrum of the entire resistance in Amhara and Shewa," but having assimilated Mussolini's policy he pursued it ruthlessly. Graziani's letter of advice concluded that notables could perform a useful role in the

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<sup>93</sup> "Costituzione del Governato di Gondar," 1 June 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171.

<sup>94</sup> "Ripartizione territoriale dei Commissariati di Governo dell'Amara," 15 December 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 221.

<sup>95</sup> "Notiziario politico mese di maggio 1937," 14 August 1937, and "Relazione politica del mese di luglio 1938," 27 July 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

political pacification of rebellious areas, but that ultimately they were not to be trusted due to the “greater temptation of human nature.”<sup>96</sup>

### *Indigenous Policy*

Rome provided rigid guidelines not only for the treatment of elites in East Africa, but for the general indigenous population as well. Alongside the exclusion of elites, Rome’s indigenous policy contributed to dissent and revolt. Scholars disagree as to how Fascist policies towards natives compared to other colonial models. According to Luisa Ruiu, Italian policy was based on collaboration, placing it somewhere between the British system of separate living and working conditions for whites and blacks, and the French system based on assimilation of natives to the customs and institutions of the mother country.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, a score of historians have described Italian indigenous policy as the near equivalent to *apartheid*.<sup>98</sup> While the economic and military exploitation of East Africa required collaboration with the indigenous populations, it was always on the basis of their subjugation to the superior Italian race and civilization. Indeed, the *legge organica* defined Ethiopians as “Italian subjects” rather than citizens, thereby providing the basis for further racial discrimination.<sup>99</sup> Fascist indigenous policy was first and foremost a racist policy, based on segregation and hierarchy, that permitted only rudimentary efforts to gain the loyalty of the masses.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Graziani to Amedeo di Savoia, 3 January 1938, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1a. The document is incorrectly dated to 1937.

<sup>97</sup> Luisa Ruiu, “Sulla legislazione del lavoro in Africa Orientale Italiana (A.O.I.),” *Clio* 33, no. 3 (1997): 552.

<sup>98</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, trans. P. D. Cummins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 229; Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 240; Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*, 112; Rochat, “La guerra italiana in Etiopia,” 114; Nicoletta Poidimani, *Difendere la ‘razza’: Identità razziale e politiche sessuali nel progetto imperiale di Mussolini* (Dogliani: Sensibili alle Foglie, 2009), 85, 178.

<sup>99</sup> Dominion, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 59. The definition of “Italian subject” was communicated to Italian diplomatic representatives abroad at the end of June. “Sudditi dell’A.O.I.,” 25 June 1936, ASMAE, AISS, b. 56, sf. 1a.

<sup>100</sup> Notions of Italian Fascism as a non-racist ideology are outdated. Scholarship has made it clear that Mussolini hardly was a “reluctant racist” and that the roots of Fascism’s racist turn after 1936 were present in the movement’s origins. The forms of racism propounded by Fascism built upon inherent racist

As Matteo Dominioni points out, the main individuals behind Italy's racist policy were Lessona and Mussolini, not Graziani.<sup>101</sup> Lessona and other Fascists seem genuinely to have believed that, having liberated the Ethiopian masses from the feudal oppression of the *rases*, they would naturally fall in behind the Italian government, and that demonstrations of Italian military, moral, and cultural superiority would cement these bonds of loyalty.<sup>102</sup> In the list of "fundamental principles" distributed to Graziani in August 1936, Lessona insisted that any political action taken by the governors must conform to the Colonial Ministry's indigenous policy, which was based on establishing and maintaining white prestige. First, in connection to the policy of "no power to the *ras*," the population had to understand that Italy was strong enough to govern without sharing power. Second, the superiority of the white race must be affirmed through a strict system of segregation, whereby whites lived a completely separate life from natives.<sup>103</sup> Graziani dutifully forwarded Lessona's instructions to the governorates.<sup>104</sup>

The most infamous element of Lessona's programme was the battle against *madamismo* which, although directed largely towards the white population, became a cornerstone of Fascist indigenous policy. *Madamismo* referred to common-law partnerships between Italian men and indigenous women. Given their isolation and the paucity of white women in East Africa, it was not uncommon for Italian soldiers, settlers,

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tendencies in Italian science and nationalist thought. Mauro Raspanti, "I razzismi del fascismo," in *La menzogna della razza: Documenti e immagini del razzismo e dell'antisemitismo fascista*, ed. Centro Furio Jesi (Bologna: Grafis, 1994), 73–90. Roberto Maiocchi, *Scienza italiana e razza nell'Italia fascista* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1999). Giorgio Fabre, *Mussolini razzista: Dal socialismo al fascismo; La formazione di un antisemita* (Milan: Garzanti, 2005). Aliza S. Wong, "Civilizing the Southerner, Taming the African: Imperial Endeavor and Discourses of Race," chap. 4 in *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy*.

<sup>101</sup> Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 72. In his memoirs, Lessona took personal credit for developing Italy's policies towards indigenous populations, claiming that "Mussolini was completely in the dark about Abyssinia in terms of native policy." Lessona, *Memorie*, 272.

<sup>102</sup> Lessona to Graziani, 17 June 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 220. The report of a Fascist Party leader from Trieste upon his return from East Africa provides a typical example of the Fascist way of thinking. "Relazione del Segretario federale di Trieste sulla sua permanenza in Africa Orientale," 18 July 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>103</sup> Lessona to Graziani, 5 August 1936, ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 41, sf. 2.

<sup>104</sup> "Direttive Ministeriali di carattere politico-militare," 20 August 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

or functionaries to take a *madama*, even if they had wives and families waiting in Italy. The derogatory term *madama* referred to the keepers of bordellos, revealing how the relationship was in most cases very different from marriage and more similar to concubinage and prostitution.<sup>105</sup> Giulia Barrera argues that *madamismo*, therefore, was not necessarily due to an Italian predisposition towards camaraderie and fraternization; nor was this the primary reason for legislation against *madamismo*. Rather, Italian race laws in the colonies came about as a result of the rapid pace of colonization and Rome's totalitarian intention to shape colonial behaviour. This made Italian East Africa unique compared to other colonies, where shared rules of behaviour, including segregation, were developed over time by the settlers and colonial authorities themselves.<sup>106</sup>

Mussolini's first instructions to Graziani called for a "ruthless fight against any inclination towards miscegenation [*meticismo*]." He ordered that all guilty parties were to be deported immediately to Italy.<sup>107</sup> Indigenous women were not considered agents in the process and therefore were not punished, but the law held Italian men accountable for damaging Italy's racial prestige.<sup>108</sup> Following the occupation of the western half of Ethiopia, Graziani demanded the "rigorous observance" of the *Duce*'s policy against *madamismo*, ordering each governorate to report on the subject directly to him: "The orders of His Excellency the Head of Government relating to connivance with native women are final and I intend that they be fully observed."<sup>109</sup> Governors thereupon issued directives prohibiting common-law relationships between Italian nationals and indigenous women "both for the salvation and prestige of the white race."<sup>110</sup> During

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<sup>105</sup> Poidimani, *Difendere la 'razza'*, 138.

<sup>106</sup> Giulia Barrera, "Mussolini's Colonial Race Laws and State-Settler Relations in Africa Orientale Italiana (1935–41)," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2003): 426–30.

<sup>107</sup> Mussolini to Graziani, 26 May 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

<sup>108</sup> Poidimani, *Difendere la 'razza'*, 139.

<sup>109</sup> Graziani to governors, 15 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 12.

<sup>110</sup> "Ordine di servizio n. 127," 17 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 12.

Graziani's term as viceroy, twenty-nine officers were placed on trial and ninety-seven repatriated for crimes against racial prestige.<sup>111</sup>

Enforcement of the law was not helped by rumours of Pirzio Biroli's conduct in Amhara. According to the *carabiniere* Angelo Cerica,

it is public knowledge that His Excellency the Governor has a particular predilection for pretty native girls; sometimes he visits their huts accompanied by loyal *askari*. Also, when visiting one of his garrisons he does not disdain spending the night with some native women or prostitutes.

Cerica also claimed that Pirzio Biroli's subordinates followed his example. Despite laziness in their official duties, they showed no lack of zeal when it came to tracking down "young native beauties." As a result, Amhara became known throughout the empire as the "jolly governorate."<sup>112</sup> In fact, Pirzio Biroli's own reports lamented that many of his functionaries were either arrogant or excessively familiar towards the population, to the detriment of "racial prestige" and the image of the Italian empire "as the most pure and typical expression of *romanità*, reborn in the Fascist Era."<sup>113</sup> Although Cerica's report may have been coloured with personal antipathy, there was likely an element of truth to it. It demonstrates the lack of quality leadership and the corruption, inconsistency, and poor discipline of Italian functionaries in East Africa, rather than the official attitude of Italian army generals.

Although they found *madamismo* difficult to curtail, Italian generals largely shared Rome's opinion that it threatened their pacification efforts. As Nasi pointed out in a circular distributed to Italian commands in Harar, there were practical reasons to combat *madamismo*. He complained that excessive familiarity with indigenous women, photography of nudes, and "the more or less raunchy forms of dress (let us speak plainly) indicate a progressive going native [*insabbiamento*]" which threatened Italian prestige, especially in Muslim areas. In classic Orientalist fashion, Nasi wrote that "the native woman, in the east, moves but is not seen. These are the ABCs for living and governing in the colonies." Nasi offered his men the grim choice between "either power or

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<sup>111</sup> Mayda, *Graziani, l'africano*, 5–6.

<sup>112</sup> Cerica report to Graziani, 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c.

<sup>113</sup> "Notiziario politico mese di maggio 1937," 14 August 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

pleasure” [*aut imperium aut voluptas*].<sup>114</sup> Italian generals shared the Fascist emphasis on prestige as a key component of colonial rule and they had few qualms over extending this concept to include cultural and racial prestige.

Racial prestige also was a guiding line for Fascist programmes of colonization and urban planning in East Africa. The regime’s main justifications for its invasion of Ethiopia had included the necessity of colonies to absorb Italian emigration — demographic colonialism — and the higher level of civilization that Italian occupation would bring the Ethiopian people through law and public works.<sup>115</sup> As one Fascist Party official noted in a confidential report, demographic colonization required two separate roles for Italian and indigenous populations. The main task of Italian nationals was the exploitation of the new territories through agriculture. Natives, on the other hand, were to be organized for the purpose of exploitation, both as soldiers and manual labourers. Construction and urban planning was necessary to give Italians access to the same infrastructure and services as in the mother country while convincing colonial subjects of Italian superiority.<sup>116</sup> The civilizing mission was pure propaganda; Italian colonization and urban planning aimed at the permanent subjugation and segregation of the indigenous populations. As Sbacchi notes, whereas Italian peasants were to be transformed into landholders, Ethiopians were transformed from landowners to day labourers.<sup>117</sup>

Due to continued resistance in Ethiopia, the bankruptcy of the Italian state, the impending war in Europe, and the hastiness that characterized so much of the regime’s

<sup>114</sup> “Insabbiamento,” 4 January 1938, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4. Underlined in original. Whereas *madamismo* was primarily sexual, *insabbiamento* involved the abandonment of European lifestyles and military discipline and was therefore considered all the worse for the regime. Poidimani, *Difendere la ‘razza’*, 142. On the Orientalist treatment of Muslim women as “sensual, silent, and statuesque” in contrast to the typical image of partially nude and promiscuous women in sub-Saharan Africa, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism’s Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 14.

<sup>115</sup> An Italian memorandum addressed to the League of Nations and forwarded to the Holy See encapsulated the regime’s rationale for aggression. See Talamo to Pizzardo, 2 October 1935, ASMAE, AISS, b. 56, sf. 1a.

<sup>116</sup> “Relazione del Segretario federale di Trieste sulla sua permanenza in Africa Orientale,” 18 July 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>117</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 238. Likewise, the Governor of Addis Ababa, Alfredo Siniscalchi, noted that rural colonization had the “social and political scope” of transforming the indigenous population into labourers working the fields for Italian *aziende*. “La capitale dell’Impero,” 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41.



work in Ethiopia, Fascist schemes for the rural colonization of the empire made little headway between 1936 and 1940. Italian agricultural policy was improvised, incoherent, and conducted without a full understanding of Ethiopian systems of land tenure. Although the Ministry of Italian Africa claimed to have settled 3,550 families on 113,760 hectares of land by April 1940, Haile Larebo estimates that in reality the number amounted to 400 peasants, of whom only 150 had been joined by their families: “As an outlet for emigration, Ethiopia was a total failure.”<sup>118</sup>

In this context, the Italian army took a lead role in the Fascist colonization and agricultural programmes. Since security concerns and a lack of capital prevented private firms from making progress even around Addis Ababa, military units enthusiastically planted fields and orchards in “available” land near their bases.<sup>119</sup> There was also an effort at “military colonization,” whereby the Italian government offered land to demobilized soldiers and Blackshirts who settled in East Africa. Few took the government up on its offer, and those who did tended to drift away from agriculture towards more lucrative commercial pursuits.<sup>120</sup>

Land granted to colonizing agencies often came at the expense of Ethiopian landowners. Anti-Italian propaganda took advantage of this fact, warning locals that the Italians gradually would gather all property into their hands. Italian authorities feared that such propaganda was effective, particularly amongst the Amhara population, who they considered to be especially protective of their property rights.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, changes to the system of land tenure in the Governorate of Amhara were seen as partial causes for revolt in 1937. Until that year, the region had retained its traditional *gulti* system of sharecropping, whereby local chiefs and priests assigned plots of land. When Italian commissioners and residents — acting on their own initiative, but nonetheless working towards higher-level Fascist objectives — absorbed this function for themselves, they

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<sup>118</sup> Haile Larebo, *The Building of an Empire: Italian Land Policy and Practice in Ethiopia, 1935–1941* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 284–85.

<sup>119</sup> “La capitale dell’Impero,” 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41.

<sup>120</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 97–98.

<sup>121</sup> “Indemianamenti e decime,” 7 October 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

effectively stripped notables and clerics of their traditional roles and means of wealth, pushing them into rebellion.<sup>122</sup>

Facing open revolt, Pirzio Biroli set aside most colonization projects for his governorate in summer 1937. He limited any continued Italian settlement and exploitation plans to large centres on main communications lines.<sup>123</sup> His successor, Ottorino Mezzetti, further advocated slowing down the rate at which Ethiopians were being dispossessed of their farmland so as not to give the population an economic motive to join the rebels. He argued that Italian colonists should not be granted the limited amount of easily cultivated land that had to sustain the indigenous population, but rather should be given unclaimed land that they could make productive thanks to their racial and technological superiority.<sup>124</sup> Fearing the spread of revolt to Harar, Nasi followed similar measures in his territory. Many of the land concessions made in Harar had to be revoked after appeals from peasants who wanted their land back. Nasi considered the economic cost a lesser evil to alienating the local population.<sup>125</sup> Agricultural colonization was a central component of Fascist imperialism — and one which saw more significant results in Libya — but in this case for Italian governors in Ethiopia, military and economic realities trumped ideological objectives.<sup>126</sup>

Italian settlement policy had negative repercussions on relations with the indigenous populations and was seen at the time as a cause of revolt. Moreover, in the five years of Italian occupation, it failed to meet any of its economic objectives for self-sufficiency. The economic exploitation of Ethiopia was hampered by a general lack of knowledge of the region and its assets. The first year of occupation in Amhara was purely

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<sup>122</sup> “Sedizione nel Goggiam: cause,” 10 December 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c.

<sup>123</sup> “Notiziario politico e relazione mensile mesi di agosto e settembre 1937,” 21 November 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>124</sup> “Relazione politica del mese di giugno 1938,” 2 July 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>125</sup> “Relazione politico-amministrativa del mese di maggio,” 30 May 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>126</sup> Italo Balbo’s highly publicized mass colonization programme for Libya brought 30,000 new colonists to that colony during 1938 and 1939, but even these results could not justify the vast expenditure required for the project. See Claudio G. Segrè, *Fourth Shore: The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

experimental, as the Italians surveyed for mineral resources — with disappointing results — and tried to determine which crops and livestock were best suited to the climate.<sup>127</sup> Revolt thereafter prevented the successful application of any knowledge the Italian authorities may have gained. Economic exploitation did not run any more smoothly in the relatively peaceful Governorate of Harar. Nasi lamented the “clandestine exodus” of leather to foreign markets and he complained that the production of bricks was plagued by quality issues, due to low-grade clay and poor craftsmanship. In May 1937, Harar imported 7,144,407 lire worth of goods from Italy, while its exports — almost exclusively coffee — amounted to 1,574,590 lire.<sup>128</sup> On the whole, exports from Ethiopia declined in 1937 and ceased altogether in 1938.<sup>129</sup> As the economy stagnated, the cost of living in East Africa spiralled upwards. By 1940, Italian authorities in Harar noted a troubling tendency among colonists to cross illegally into French or British colonies in search of work, something that did not bode well for Italian prestige.<sup>130</sup>

In theory, Ethiopia was supposed to provide an outlet for Italian peasants and working-class families who otherwise would have emigrated abroad. At the same time, racial prestige demanded that Italian settlers not perform the same type of work as natives or, at least, that whites and blacks not be employed in the same roles together. The recruitment and employment of indigenous labour is therefore a topic of critical importance, but it has not been the subject of thorough study. Although official Italian histories denied the presence of forced labour in East Africa, it is unlikely that Italy differed greatly from other colonial powers that requisitioned indigenous labour to varying degrees.<sup>131</sup> An Italian law from 1935 allowed for obligatory labour in the colonies, provided that the work was for public ends, authorized by the Ministry of

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<sup>127</sup> “Notiziario politico mese di maggio 1937,” 14 August 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>128</sup> “Relazione sull’attività del mese di giugno,” 11 July 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>129</sup> Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*, 107–108.

<sup>130</sup> Haile Larebo, *Building of an Empire*, 285. “Relazione sui servizi d’istituto esplicati dalla Questura del Harar durante il mese di gennaio 1940,” 3 February 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>131</sup> Flora Bertizzoli and Silvia Pietrantonio, “A Denied Reality? Forced Labour in Italian Colonies in Northeast Africa,” *Africana Studia*, no. 7 (2004): 231.

Colonies, and reimbursed at local rates of pay.<sup>132</sup> This law was abused by local Italian authorities who sometimes requisitioned labour on behalf of private agricultural and industrial enterprises that had claimed larger plots of land than they could work. Nasi considered such practices detrimental to security and reminded Italian agencies that the government did not participate in the African slave trade [*tratta del negri*]. However, Nasi still allowed forced labour for large-scale public works, which he believed the indigenous masses would understand as necessary and temporary.<sup>133</sup> In fact, even this form of exploitation could become cause for revolt as, for example, when the population of Meketewa rose up against its vice-resident in June 1937 in immediate response to the coercive recruitment of labourers to build roads in Gondar.<sup>134</sup>

For some Italians, the problem with Fascism's native policy was not the over-exploitation of the indigenous population. One report to Graziani, signed only "Cusmano" — possibly an army officer, given his thesis — complained on the other hand that the regime did not exploit indigenous labour fully enough.<sup>135</sup> Despite Fascist demographic policy, it was expensive to employ large numbers of Italian workers in Ethiopia. Cusmano argued that even if white workers were twice as productive as natives, they still cost ten times as much to employ, given the logistics of transporting them from Italy and housing them in a country where the rainy season prevented them from working for half the year. In Cusmano's alternative system, the only whites in East Africa would be soldiers, who he compared to the legionaries of ancient Rome. They would police the colonies, exploit local agricultural resources, and perform technical tasks. This would alleviate problems of "sexual hygiene" and "humiliating promiscuity," since whites and blacks would not perform the same work. East Africa could still act as a demographic

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<sup>132</sup> Ruiu, "Sulla legislazione del lavoro in A.O.I.," 553.

<sup>133</sup> "Mano d'opera indigena," 9 January 1939, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>134</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 5 July 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62. Rumour spread among the local populations that the Italian government intended to kill those selected for forced labour by drowning them in the Red Sea. "Ribellione nel territorio del Governo Amara," 25 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c.

<sup>135</sup> Dominionini mentions a Salvatore Cusmano as one of the longest serving judges in the military courts of Italian East Africa. Matteo Dominionini, "I tribunali militari dell'Africa Orientale Italiana, 1936–1940," *Asti Contemporanea*, no. 12 (2009): 19.

outlet, since unemployed Italians could enlist as soldiers in this expanded colonial army.<sup>136</sup>

Cusmano's report demonstrates that disagreement with Rome's policies did not necessarily stem from ideological disjuncture. The report was highly critical of the handling of colonial affairs by the Ministry of Italian Africa, and its proposed solution would have granted the Italian military complete authority over colonial policy, at least until the security situation had been stabilized. Cusmano considered the superimposition of an Italian civil administrative apparatus on the empire in 1936 as premature. No doubt, such a view reflected friction between military and civilian authorities in East Africa, while trying to deflect blame from the army for the rebellion. However, there was nothing anti-Fascist about Cusmano's critique or proposals. Whether by careful selection of language or genuine belief, the report conformed to Fascist objectives for a racially conscious and segregated society, a militarized colony, and demographic colonization based on the model of ancient Rome. Such criticism was more reflective of the jurisdictional disputes between rival agencies — in this case, the army and the Ministry of Italian Africa — common to totalitarian regimes, and the impossibility of enacting fully Rome's policies in relation to realities on the ground.<sup>137</sup>

The Fascist regime's emphasis on agricultural colonization was paralleled by grandiose urban plans for Ethiopia's cities. Closely supervised by Rome, urban planning also imposed racial segregation upon the empire. As Mia Fuller demonstrates, Italian "planners often wrote as if they were in fact constructing entirely new cities, ones in which the city center would be both new and strictly Italian." They did not see anything of historical value in Ethiopian cities — there had been, after all, no Roman presence there — and they believed that they therefore had a blank slate to work with.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> "Organizzazione economica dell'Impero," 15 May 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 19. Cusmano's thoughts on the inefficiency of Italian labour are echoed in Ciro Poggiali's diary, 18 November 1936.

<sup>137</sup> A year later, Cusmano — this time in a fifty-page letter co-signed by "Corvo" — repeated his arguments for the benefit of the new viceroy. Cusmano and Corvo to Amedeo di Savoia, 7 April 1938, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 19. In his survey of German-occupied Europe, Mazower identifies numerous jurisdictional struggles between German military authorities and various Nazi agencies. See, for example, Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 67, 144–57.

<sup>138</sup> Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 202.

Directives for urban planning in Italian Africa called for large amounts of open space to avoid crowding and for the establishment of native quarters, separated by at least 500 metres from white areas. This would have required the forced transfer of hundreds of thousands of city dwellers throughout East Africa, something that was avoided only with the onset of the Second World War.<sup>139</sup>

As the seat of central government, Addis Ababa saw the greatest amount of Italian construction. The city's governor and career civil colonial official, Alfredo Siniscalchi, praised Graziani's dedication to constructive work in the "Capital of the Empire."<sup>140</sup> The most impressive project was Flavio Dessy's planned *Torre d'Italia* [Appendix A]. Standing taller than the Empire State Building, topped with a gigantic Italian flag, comprising 7,750 offices named after illustrious Italians, and with plans for night-time illumination, the tower would have affirmed Italy's "moral primacy" in the world.<sup>141</sup> Not surprisingly, given the shortage of construction materials, machinery, railway capacity, and time, the tower never became a reality.

In fact, Addis Ababa's "native quarter" came the closest to realization, since it was constructed on relatively virgin land and did not require major demolitions or relocations.<sup>142</sup> The city and its environs were rezoned into five districts: industrial; commercial; residential; central; and, native. This new plan "naturally" involved the expropriation of private property from Ethiopians who were reimbursed and allowed to rebuild in the native quarter, but Siniscalchi admitted that it was not always possible to ascertain the "legitimate proprietors." Buildings in the native quarter were standardized concrete huts with straw roofs. By way of permanently separating blacks from whites, the native quarter had its own police and fire brigades as well as a separate market. Siniscalchi hoped that the rational organization of the native market would "make the native shopkeeper understand that which he had never before comprehended: discipline,

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<sup>139</sup> "Notiziario politico mese di giugno 1937," 13 September 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. Del Boca, "I crimini del colonialismo fascista," 247–48.

<sup>140</sup> "La capitale dell'Impero," 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41.

<sup>141</sup> "Torre d'Italia," ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 40, sf. 3. Mayda, *Graziani, l'africano*, 5.

<sup>142</sup> Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*, 208.

order, and cleanliness.” With racial prestige on the line, only indigenous merchants were allowed to sell wares at the native market. An African could not be seen paying an Italian for services rendered.<sup>143</sup>

The capitals of the governorates were to be transformed as well, applying the same criteria towards racial segregation and domination. Much of the early construction work in Harar focused on public buildings to reinforce the impression of Italian rule. Nasi also tried to clean up neighbourhoods in his city through the destruction of rabid dogs, followed by an operation to “purge” unemployed Africans from urban centres in order to reduce crime rates.<sup>144</sup> Architect Gherardo Bosio’s urban plan for the city of Gondar, the capital of Amhara, called for the city to be centred on the main government building as a “symbol of conquest and power, which must dominate it architecturally.” Bosio deemed it necessary to absorb the current native village, which was to be rebuilt further downhill and downwind in an area “completely separate from the new city.”<sup>145</sup> [Appendix B] However, a series of budget reductions, bureaucratic delays, and baffling decisions — including aborted plans by the governor to relocate the site of the capital twelve kilometres to the southwest — prevented much of Bosio’s scheme from becoming reality.<sup>146</sup> When colonial functionary Aldo Milioni arrived in Gondar in summer 1937, he found that the European quarter “consisted only of shacks and tents. There were no cinemas, theatres nor radio sets, public gardens or parkways.” For public servants like Milioni, there remained little to do but gossip with colleagues or play cards.<sup>147</sup>

Italian urban projects, colonization, and economic exploitation all failed miserably to achieve their desired results. Yet, they all made their impact felt on indigenous policy in East Africa. The colonized were physically segregated from the

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<sup>143</sup> “La capitale dell’Impero,” 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41.

<sup>144</sup> “Relazione sull’attività del mese di giugno,” 11 July 1937, and “Relazione sui servizi d’istituto esplicitati dalla Questura di Polizia Coloniale del Harar durante il mese di aprile 1939,” 1 May 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>145</sup> “Relazione allo schema di piano regolatore per la città di Gondar,” 20 August 1936, ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 41, sf. 6.

<sup>146</sup> David Rifkind, “Gondar: Architecture and Urbanism for Italy’s Fascist Empire,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70, no. 4 (2011): 504–508.

<sup>147</sup> Milioni, *Non avevamo neanche la bandiera*, 32–33.

colonizers, and their economic livelihood was threatened as they became mere tools for exploitation by the colonial regime. Italian military officers did not develop these policies, but as governors and administrators they were responsible for and deeply involved in their execution. Rome's legislation and policies coloured relations with the local populations and undoubtedly contributed to the unpopularity of the Italian regime through much of Ethiopia. Military authorities were constrained by Rome's tight control over indigenous policy, but it did not conflict with their own notions of prestige and racist conceptions of Italy's subject populations.

Nor did Rome necessarily curtail all means of attracting support for the colonial regime. The Fascist leadership at least paid lip service to the potential value of a hearts-and-minds approach. At the same time that he demanded segregation to permanently reduce indigenous populations to a state of servitude, Lessona expected progress towards the establishment of Mussolini's "black army." To this end, he called for the use of all means of propaganda to gain the support of the population.<sup>148</sup> In terms of indigenous policy, the means left available by Fascist directives were limited to welfare and religion.

Italian authorities provided welfare services for impoverished natives, mainly to win their loyalty and affirm Italian dominion and racial prestige. A major aspect of Italian welfare policy was the emancipation of slaves. The Italians placed great propaganda value, domestically and internationally, on the abolition of slavery in Ethiopia, which was officially recognized in the traditional Ethiopian legal code and had not been eradicated by the time of the Italian invasion.<sup>149</sup> This abolitionist policy was not particularly enlightened or novel — imperial powers during the nineteenth-century "scramble for Africa" had justified their expansionism by adopting a stance against slavery.<sup>150</sup> Pirzio

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<sup>148</sup> Lessona to Graziani, 5 August 1936, ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 41, sf. 2.

<sup>149</sup> See Richard Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Slave Trade in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: A Statistical Inquiry," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9, no. 1 (1964): 220–28. Various Ethiopian emperors had sought to curtail the slave trade, but with mixed results through the 1930s, thanks to a lack of imperial control in the periphery. Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century: The Evolution of a Global Pattern* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 239–49; Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War*, 15; Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 134.

<sup>150</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 27–28, 92–93. See also William Mulligan and Maurice J. Bric, *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).



Biroli commented that freed slaves made excellent farmhands [*lavoratori dei campi*], but it is questionable how much this actually improved their quality of life.<sup>151</sup> Ciro Poggiali doubted whether freedom meant much to former slaves: “Probably after the Italian conquest even the slaves will know that they have the right to demand their freedom. But for them this word is devoid of meaning. To be free, that is not to have a master, would mean death by hunger.”<sup>152</sup> In fact, slavery continued to exist in some remote areas of Gojam because slaves looked to their lords as their only means of sustenance.<sup>153</sup>

In Addis Ababa, Siniscalchi admitted that many former slaves remained loyal to their old masters and filled the rebel ranks. To prevent a mass exodus to join the rebel forces, the Italians provided daily food rations and “adequate subsidies” to destitute natives. The policy was supposed to set Italian governance apart from that of the Negus, whose functionaries, Siniscalchi claimed, did little more than dole out a few Thalers here and there. “Instead, our authorities,” he wrote, “immediately placed great impetus on public welfare, for which the native populations had dire need.” One project especially dear to Graziani was an asylum for indigenous mothers and newborns [*Ricovero per la Maternità ed Infanzia Indigena*] named after his mother, Adelia Clementi Graziani. Placed under the charge of the Canossian Sisters, the institution provided care for abandoned infants, delivery rooms for indigenous women, and clinical services.<sup>154</sup> Such institutions paralleled developments in Italy, where greater state interference in family welfare was coupled with renewed Church influence through charitable foundations.<sup>155</sup> But whereas the expansion of welfare in Italy was closely connected to Mussolini’s objective of Italian demographic growth, the system in Ethiopia had distinct motives. As Siniscalchi explained, “Fascism, after having conquered these populations by force of

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<sup>151</sup> “Notiziario politico mese di maggio 1937,” 14 August 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>152</sup> Poggiali diary, 8 December 1936.

<sup>153</sup> “Notiziario politico relazione mensile del mese di luglio 1937,” 10 October 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>154</sup> “La capitale dell’Impero,” 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41. The shelter was officially opened on 28 October 1937, the anniversary of the Fascist March on Rome.

<sup>155</sup> Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 88–94.

arms, conquers them now, not only with the force of labour [*forza del lavoro*] and its civilization, but also with charity.” Because it offered separate care for Africans, Graziani’s facility was touted as “one of the best institutions intended by the regime for the health of the [Italian] race.”<sup>156</sup> Welfare initiatives, like the more negative aspects of Italian policy, served first and foremost to bolster Italian prestige and subjugate the indigenous population.

Another element of positive attraction that the regime allowed colonial authorities to use to their advantage involved policy towards religions. Graziani’s three-part policy conformed “exactly to the directives of the Duce”: the Coptic Church continued to be the official church of Ethiopia; all other religions were tolerated; and, “special consideration” was given to Muslims.<sup>157</sup> Since Coptic Christians made up the majority of the population throughout much of Ethiopia, relations with the Coptic Church became a fundamental element of Italy’s indigenous policy. Formal discussions towards defining the relationship between the Italian government and the Coptic Church were conducted by the Ministry of Colonies, but Graziani immediately opened a direct dialogue with Abuna Kerlos “based on compromises that gave him and the other church leaders the feeling that the government intended to help and respect religion.”<sup>158</sup> However, the Coptic Church lost income through the abolition of feudalism and Italian authorities came to see the clergy — so closely bound to the prewar Ethiopian state — as supporters of revolt, secretly if not openly.<sup>159</sup> The execution of the anti-Italian Bishop of Wollo in July 1936 had aroused considerable indignation among the clergy.<sup>160</sup> The massacre of monks at the Debre Libanos monastery in response to the assassination attempt on Graziani, described in Chapter 3, did little to improve relations.

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<sup>156</sup> “La capitale dell’Impero,” 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41.

<sup>157</sup> Graziani to Nasi, 13 June 1937, ACS, FG, b. 29, fasc. 29, sf. 33c.

<sup>158</sup> “L’azione politica per il consolidamento della conquista e per l’occupazione dell’ovest,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 22. On church-state relations in Ethiopia and resistance among clergy, see Aregawi Berhe, “Revisiting Resistance in Italian-Occupied Ethiopia: The Patriots’ Movement (1936–1941) and the Redefinition of Post-war Ethiopia,” in *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History*, ed. Gerrit Jan Abbink, Mirjam De Bruijn, and Klaas Van Walraven (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 98–99.

<sup>159</sup> “Notiziario politico mese di giugno 1937,” 13 September 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>160</sup> Aregawi Berhe, “Revisiting Resistance in Ethiopia,” 99.

One of Graziani's last major accomplishments in East Africa was overseeing the formation of an autocephalous Ethiopian Coptic Church. In November 1937, the Ethiopian Church severed its ties with Alexandria and proclaimed itself independent from foreign control. This probably had as much to do with Mussolini's totalitarian tendencies for centralized control and his increasingly anti-British stance — the Italians were convinced that Alexandria was under the influence of the British "Intelligence Service" — as it did with winning over the Ethiopian population. Nonetheless, Graziani believed that Coptic clerics wielded enormous influence. Having terrorized the Coptic leaders after the assassination attempt, Graziani now aimed to co-opt and control them through acts of clemency and reform. After months of negotiations between the Italians and Abuna Kerlos, the Coptic Primate fled to Egypt and denounced the Italian occupation. Graziani influenced the bishops tasked with electing Kerlos's replacement, promising to maintain the status quo of church property for a decade, to provide stipends and subsidies to the clergy, and to free priests and monks from concentration camps. In return, the new Abuna Abraham swore an oath of loyalty to the Italian government: treachery committed by the Abuna or those under him would result in the curse of Judas.<sup>161</sup> The Italian government's relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church remained underwritten by terror.

Italy's policy of religious toleration in East Africa was announced before the conquest, clearly as part of a divide-and-conquer strategy aimed against the Ethiopian government and for propaganda motives, especially in the Muslim world.<sup>162</sup> Since the early 1930s, Mussolini had followed an aggressive policy towards the Middle East, trying to exploit rising Arab nationalism and Zionism at the expense of Britain and France.<sup>163</sup> Graziani's pro-Muslim policy, then, was based on the *Duce's* broader efforts to win over the Arab world — in 1937 he unscrupulously proclaimed himself "protector of Islam" — and expand Italian interests in the Levant before a European war broke out. More

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<sup>161</sup> "Autocefalia della chiesa copta abissina," n.d., ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 15.

<sup>162</sup> Italian representatives in Arab countries emphasized the Italian government's guarantees towards freedom of religion and the support of Ethiopian Muslims for Italy. Suvich to Ministers in Jeddah, Teheran, Cairo, and Baghdad, 11 and 17 April 1936, DDI 8, III, 630, 687.

<sup>163</sup> Manuela A. Williams, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad: Subversion in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, 1935–1940* (London: Routledge, 2006), 35; see also John L. Wright, "Mussolini, Libya, and the Sword of Islam," in Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, *Italian Colonialism*, 121–30.

immediately, it was an attempt to co-opt Ethiopian populations that previously had been subjected to Amhara overlordship. In this respect, religious policy was closely related to the elimination of old elites through “no power to the *ras*,” taken to a point that bordered ethnic cleansing. Graziani explained to Nasi that the natural conclusion of pro-Muslim policy in Harar was to “eliminate all the Amhara and Shewans from territories of Abyssinian conquest truly to give the impression to the native populations that now we are the masters [*padroni*].”<sup>164</sup> Harar was to be purged of its Christian Amhara minority populations, forcing them to return to their “countries of origin.”<sup>165</sup> Italian support of Islam must be considered another contributor to rebellion in Amhara and Shewa.<sup>166</sup>

At times persecuted by Ethiopian rulers and always subject to social prejudice, Ethiopian Muslims now found themselves favoured by the new regime. Graziani subsidized Muslim clerics, mosques, and communities in Addis Ababa.<sup>167</sup> Pirzio Biroli did the same in Amhara, claiming that the local Muslim population were “devoted and faithful subjects by proof of facts” whereas Coptic leaders could not be trusted.<sup>168</sup> Special attention was given to Harar, with its Muslim majority. For this reason, Nasi had more freedom of action than other governors to adopt a benevolent approach, particularly when it came to collaborating with indigenous elites.<sup>169</sup> By November 1936, an Islamic court had been set up in the city of Harar for the practice of Sharia law. Civil, commercial, and lesser penal charges could be brought before the Islamic court, so long as both parties were Muslim. The Italian government provided funding for the court and appointed its

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<sup>164</sup> Graziani to Nasi, 13 June 1937, ACS, FG, b. 29, fasc. 29, sf. 33c. Lessona fully approved Graziani’s instructions regarding his pro-Muslim policy. Lessona to Graziani, 29 June 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>165</sup> “Governo del Harar: Questioni politiche,” 28 May 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>166</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 163–64.

<sup>167</sup> The Muslim population of Addis Ababa in October 1937 amounted to 8,360. “La capitale dell’Impero,” 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41. On the status of Islam through Ethiopian history, see Chris Prouty and Eugene Rosenfeld, eds., *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1981), s.v. “Islam.”

<sup>168</sup> “Notiziario politico mese di maggio 1937,” 14 August 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>169</sup> Dominionini agrees that these underlying conditions enabled and explain Nasi’s relatively enlightened approach in Harar. Dominionini, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 222.

president from among the local Muslim elite. An Italian report on the establishment of the court described it as “a simple act of administrative shrewdness.”<sup>170</sup>

Italian policies towards the indigenous populations were characterized by unscrupulous pragmatism in some areas and ideological rigidity in others. As the Fascist leadership took advantage of the abolition of slavery, welfare programmes, freedom of religion, and an anti-Amhara line as part of a divide-and-conquer strategy, its policies more or less guaranteed the alienation of large and powerful sections of Ethiopian society. Mussolini and Lessona’s insistence on super direct rule involved the total subjugation of the Ethiopian populations. Traditional elites were excluded from any role in the new administration and the general populace was denied the rights of Italian citizens and subjected to a strict system of segregation. Economically, the Amhara and Oromo populations were no better off under Mussolini than they had been under Haile Selassie.<sup>171</sup> Italian generals worked as governors and administrators within this legal framework and guiding policy. Rome’s directives allowed generals like Nasi to achieve a degree of calm in places like Harar, but placed men like Pirzio Biroli in Amhara in a nearly impossible situation that was aggravated by the inconsistent behaviour of Italian administrators. Combined with the natural opposition against a foreign invader, failure almost was preordained.

## Repudiation of Policy

### *Graziani under Attack*

The revolt that broke out in Shewa and the Governorate of Amhara in the summer of 1937 signalled the definitive failure of Italy’s occupation policy in Ethiopia. The governor on the spot, Pirzio Biroli, initially took the lion’s share of the blame. Hazon criticized Pirzio Biroli for ignoring Graziani’s warnings about the disloyalty of Ethiopian

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<sup>170</sup> “Relazione sul Tribunale Sciaraitico,” 3 March 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>171</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 157–61.

nobles and for trusting them too much.<sup>172</sup> At the same time, he was held responsible for Corvo's "arbitrary dishonourable acts of ferocity and abuse of authority" in Bahir Dar and blamed for "having tolerated a policy of excessive rigour."<sup>173</sup> The "jolly governorate" epitomized the lack of centralization, coordination, consistency, and good sense that plagued the entire administration in East Africa. Alongside Pirzio Biroli's alleged sexual adventures, he was blamed for appointing incompetent and corrupt relatives to important positions and for alienating the Coptic clergy by leaving lesser clerics destitute while granting their bishop an annual purse of 120,000 Lire. Reports also accused Pirzio Biroli's office of spreading rumours that Graziani was soon to be replaced, a grave error given that the "primitive populations" universally deemed Graziani an "invincible *condottiero*, protected by God."<sup>174</sup> Here lies the crux of the matter; for Pirzio Biroli was Lessona's cousin and confidant.<sup>175</sup> He became a scapegoat for Graziani's own failings as viceroy in the context of Lessona's consistent efforts to undermine his authority.

Pirzio Biroli would be repatriated in some disgrace at the end of 1937, although incredibly he was appointed three years later as the military governor of occupied Montenegro. Neither Graziani nor Lessona survived him. All three personalities fell victim to a major shuffle in the leadership of the Ministry of Italian Africa and in Ethiopia itself.<sup>176</sup> Contrasting the policies of Graziani and his successor, the Duke of Aosta, it is easy to see them as the result of two opposed personalities and viewpoints. For Del Boca, "while Graziani was ignorant, impulsive, and merciless, the Duke was cultured, moderate, and generally lenient."<sup>177</sup> Sbacchi characterizes the Duke of Aosta as

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<sup>172</sup> Hazon memorandum, October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c. On the revolt, see Chapter 3.

<sup>173</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Mussolini, 12 March 1939, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 213.

<sup>174</sup> Cerica report to Graziani, 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c.

<sup>175</sup> Canosa, *Graziani*, 183, 196, 203.

<sup>176</sup> Of the five governors serving in 1937, only two remained by the following year: Nasi in Harar and Carlo Geloso in Galla Sidamo. Geloso himself was repatriated in August 1938. See "Africa Orientale Italiana – Dislocazione comandi, reparti e servizi dal 1-6-1936 al 1-4-1940, Secondo volume," 1966, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 7.

<sup>177</sup> Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, 3:307.

a liberal who “sometimes followed his own judgment rather than the *duce*’s orders.”<sup>178</sup> Whereas Graziani represented the prototypical Fascist “new man,” Giulietta Stefani argues that the Duke of Aosta better characterized the moderate and paternalistic “old colonials” [*vecchi coloniali*] of the Liberal era.<sup>179</sup> These interpretations are not incorrect, but the shift in policy also was made possible by a change in attitude within the central leadership in Rome, namely with Mussolini himself. Graziani’s removal signalled the repudiation of his policies as viceroy. In turn, this meant that the official Fascist approach to occupation had to be transformed. However, it never became clear precisely what the new official line was.

According to Lessona’s memoirs, Mussolini made the decision to remove Graziani after the assassination attempt in February 1937.<sup>180</sup> Certainly, Graziani’s deranged and brutal response to the attempt had not helped Italian diplomatic negotiations with the British and French towards formal recognition of empire.<sup>181</sup> Graziani’s extreme brutality contradicted the regime’s official propaganda abroad concerning Italy’s civilizing and modernizing mission.<sup>182</sup> However, Graziani was difficult to remove from his post for a number of reasons. First, Graziani was genuinely popular among the functionaries and Italian population in East Africa. Siniscalchi reported to Rome that “everyone is proud to serve under his command and everyone values his praise, which is the most sought-after award that anyone can wish for.”<sup>183</sup> As late as September 1940, with Graziani now commanding Italian forces in Cyrenaica against the British, censor reports from the colonial police noted the total trust and veneration for the old “*Condottiero*” among Italian and indigenous populations in

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<sup>178</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 55, 226.

<sup>179</sup> Giulietta Stefani, *Colonia per maschi: Italiani in Africa Orientale; Una storia di genere* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2007), 49–58.

<sup>180</sup> Lessona, *Memorie*, 312–13.

<sup>181</sup> Italian ambassadors reported on the negative impact of Fascist reprisals on foreign public opinion. Cerruti to Ciano, 6 April 1937, and Grandi to Ciano, 28 April 1937, DDI 8, VI, 415, 524.

<sup>182</sup> David Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 130.

<sup>183</sup> “La capitale dell’Impero,” 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41.

Harar.<sup>184</sup> A second factor impeding Graziani's removal was that some leading Fascists blamed Lessona, rather than the viceroy, for failure in East Africa.<sup>185</sup> Third, Mussolini's hesitation may have been due to his continued belief in Graziani's military competence.<sup>186</sup> Over the past decade, Graziani had become a darling of the regime who could not readily be disowned.

Finally, on 11 November 1937, Mussolini informed Graziani that his mission in East Africa was finished and that he would be replaced as viceroy by the Duke of Aosta. Graziani tried to convince Mussolini to allow him to remain in the theatre to serve as the Duke's commander of troops, but the position had already been assigned to Ugo Cavallero and the new viceroy reportedly insisted that Graziani return to Italy. Graziani acted as military commander until Cavallero's arrival whereupon, on 10 January 1938, the former viceroy departed by car for the port of Mogadishu and a ship home.<sup>187</sup>

It was clear upon Graziani's return to Italy that the attitude in Rome had changed. Graziani found himself under attack for conducting policies that the central regime had thrust upon him. Receiving Graziani at the train station in Rome, Mussolini commented to Ciano that "he fought well but he governed poorly."<sup>188</sup> The *Duce* explained his replacement of Graziani to the Supreme Defence Commission in February as being necessary since Graziani's policy had been wrong. John Gooch describes this as "a remarkable volte-face" given Mussolini's previous support of Graziani's methods.<sup>189</sup> Graziani himself noted on his return that "public opinion" was against him. He came into possession of a colonial police report that summed up common perceptions of his tenure as viceroy. It criticized Graziani for pursuing first a phase of "sweet talk" but then overreacting to the assassination attempt, inaccurately blaming the entire Ethiopian

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<sup>184</sup> "Relazione sui servizi di istituto disimpegnati durante il mese di settembre 1940," 3 October 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>185</sup> Ciano and Turati appear to have shared this conviction. Ciano diary, 9 October 1937.

<sup>186</sup> Mayda, *Graziani, l'africano*, 119–20.

<sup>187</sup> Canosa, *Graziani*, 203–13. "Direttive politico-militare e loro sviluppo," ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1d. Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 51. Lessona, *Memorie*, 316.

<sup>188</sup> Ciano diary, 26 February 1938.

<sup>189</sup> Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 400.



aristocracy and thereafter eschewing collaboration with locals in favour of an authoritarian policy based on terror which “alienated the sentiments of the natives and set the stage for revolt.” The report concluded that the Ethiopians could become loyal if treated properly, and cited Nasi’s Governorate of Harar as a model to follow.<sup>190</sup>

Pirzio Biroli added his weight to the mountain of criticism piling on top of Graziani in a personal letter to Mussolini. Seeking to rehabilitate his own reputation, Pirzio Biroli argued — with supporting documentary evidence — that all the actions he had been accused of were the result of Graziani’s shift in policy after February 1937. Pirzio Biroli claimed merely to have followed the viceroy’s directives while he himself favoured an approach based “more on love than fear.” Corvo, as the official inquiry found, had applied Graziani’s draconian orders. Specifically, Pirzio Biroli criticized Graziani’s treatment of indigenous elites and the Amhara population as part of the viceroy’s “flawed policy” that ended in rebellion.<sup>191</sup> Similarly, a ministerial report in 1939 summarized the “mistakes” made by Graziani’s regime. These included the replacement of truly influential chiefs with a multitude of non-entities largely imported from Eritrea, the exclusion of natives from any economic activity or employment, a lack of understanding in religious matters, the overzealous sequestration of indigenous lands, the excessive and arbitrary use of violence, as well as “having identified racial policy with that of ill-treatment and subjection.”<sup>192</sup>

The charges against Graziani, while largely accurate, were astonishing in that they came from the same central authority that had imposed the system of super direct rule in the first place. Graziani made an equally strong case that he, in fact, had merely followed ministerial directives. In a letter to the King, Graziani complained that hierarchs in Rome had labeled him an “executioner” [*fucilatore*], forgetting that at one point they had charged him with weakness and ordered him to apply the “terror.”<sup>193</sup> In addition,

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<sup>190</sup> “Direttive politico-militare e loro sviluppo,” ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1d.

<sup>191</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Mussolini, 12 March 1939, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 213.

<sup>192</sup> “Organizzazione delle gerarchie indigene,” 6 July 1939, *Documents on Italian War Crimes: Submitted to the United Nations War Crimes Commission by the Imperial Ethiopian Government* [DIWC] (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Justice, 1949), 1:55.

<sup>193</sup> Graziani to Vittorio Emanuele III, 25 May 1938, ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 40, sf. 1.

Graziani responded to the attacks against him with yet another manuscript — this one never published — on “The Second Year of Empire.” In it, Graziani again placed the blame for revolt on Pirzio Biroli, whose overly rosy reports from Amhara had resulted in the Italians being taken by surprise. Like Pirzio Biroli, he compiled a long list of telegrams demonstrating how Rome had forced draconian measures upon him. Graziani claimed that his own philosophy, based on twenty years of experience in North and East Africa, combined the carrot and the stick: “The good, the honest, the loyal found in him a man of peace; the traitors and rebels, a man of inexorable war.”<sup>194</sup> Both sides in the dispute were disingenuous when it came to their role in the formulation and execution of the failed policy in East Africa.<sup>195</sup> Both pursued the damaging indigenous policy with equal vigor, especially after February 1937.

The attacks on Graziani and the subsequent bickering within the colonial leadership make clear two points. First, past policy was rejected at the highest level as flawed and incorrect. Second, a more enlightened and conciliatory approach was in order. What this meant for the ideal Fascist “style” of occupation was less clear. What had begun as a process of radicalization for Italian Fascism had bogged down into a state of entropy, reflecting the regime’s broader tendency to vacillate between radicalization and normalization.<sup>196</sup> More specifically, the replacement of Graziani effectively reopened debates within the Fascist Party and Italian colonial administration over the role of violence and definitions of prestige that dated to the early transitional years of the regime.<sup>197</sup> Whereas Mussolini’s directives in 1936 had exalted violence and disparaged compromise, Italian generals now were criticized for having adopted such an attitude. Perhaps the generals proved more “fascist” in their execution of policy than the Fascist regime itself was willing to allow, at least once it became clear that the revolt in Ethiopia

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<sup>194</sup> “Direttive politico-militare e loro sviluppo,” ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1d. The final draft of Graziani’s manuscript is available in ACS, FG, b. 29, fasc. 29, sf. 33c.

<sup>195</sup> As Knox cautions, Graziani’s papers at the ACS owe their existence to his attempts to pass responsibility for decisions and failures to his subordinates or superiors. Knox, *Common Destiny*, 161n36.

<sup>196</sup> On these themes, see Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 153–57, 164–71.

<sup>197</sup> On these debates in the 1920s, see Ryan, “Violence and the Politics of Prestige.”

was not going away. Central directives from Rome, which in 1936 were so clear and resolute, now became confusing and equivocal in the void left by Graziani's departure.

### *The Duke of Aosta*

Into that void stepped Amedeo di Savoia, the Duke of Aosta. At first glance, Mussolini's appointment of a member of the royal family to represent the Fascist empire was an unusual one.<sup>198</sup> However, for a regime seeking a change in direction to its colonial policy, the Duke was a more than suitable choice. From an early age, he had been fascinated by Africa. He accompanied his adventurer uncle, the Duke of the Abruzzi, on an expedition to Somalia in 1919. After a spat with the King — reportedly, Amedeo was overheard making fun of Vittorio Emanuele's short stature and the Montenegrin origins of his wife — he spent another two years in exile in the Belgian Congo in the guise of a worker at a soap factory. Upon his return to Italy, he enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Palermo, graduating in December 1924 with a thesis on “Juridical Relations between Modern States and the Native Populations of their Colonies.”<sup>199</sup>

Although commonly regarded as a liberal and an admirer of the British colonial system, the Duke of Aosta was not devoid of traits that appealed to the Fascist regime. His father, Emanuele Filiberto, was recognized as a member of the “pro-fascist” group at the Italian court. As first cousin to the King, Emanuele Filiberto was the subject of various rumours involving Fascist or military coups that would have placed him on the Italian throne.<sup>200</sup> Amedeo had a colourful military career, supposedly becoming the youngest soldier in the Italian army in 1915 before receiving a medal for valour in the

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<sup>198</sup> Rochat argues that the Duke of Aosta's appointment as viceroy may have been a rare concession to the Italian monarchy by Mussolini, a reflection of the lack of suitable Fascist hierarchs capable of taking the position, or an attempt to reaffirm the importance of empire at a time when public support was waning. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 87.

<sup>199</sup> No truly objective biography exists on the Duke of Aosta. After his death in a British prisoner-of-war camp in Kenya, the Fascist regime supported the publication of several accounts of his life. The most notable additions in the postwar period were Berretta, *Amedeo d'Aosta*, and Borra, *Amedeo di Savoia*. Borra was an Italian surgeon in East Africa; his account also serves as a personal memoir.

<sup>200</sup> Fear of a coup by Emanuele Filiberto may have been a factor prompting Vittorio Emanuele's acquiescence to the Fascist March on Rome. Mack Smith, *Italy and its Monarchy*, 238–41, 248, 250.

First World War and commanding camel-mounted *sahariani* troops in Libya between 1925 and 1931. Like Mussolini, he was passionate about airplanes and learned how to fly before requesting a transfer to the Italian air force in 1932.<sup>201</sup>

Nor were his thoughts on colonial government wholly incompatible with Fascist concepts. Although his thesis approved of the modern emphasis on the progressive elevation of natives, it attacked Liberal Italy's Libyan "statute" as a total failure and criticized efforts to develop indigenous civilization at too rapid a pace, as the French had done by trying to assimilate "subjects" into "citizens." For Amedeo, native subjects inhabited a different level of civilization and should be allowed to develop according to their own limited capacity.<sup>202</sup> This did not differ significantly from Fascist literature of the 1930s that advocated perpetual European domination over African peoples.<sup>203</sup>

Although far from a champion for native equality, the Duke of Aosta saw dialogue and collaboration with local populations, including indigenous elites, as the foundations of his political strategy. To this end, he praised Nasi's work in Harar as the model for a revamped Italian policy. Nasi's engagement of indigenous chiefs and notables in the administration of justice, his economic support for the Coptic Church and Islamic centres, his language education programmes for both natives and Italians, and his collection of statistical data all were cited as "aspects that demonstrate both the working efficiency of the Governorate and its organs, as well as the excellent situation of public order [...] without recourse to exceptional means."<sup>204</sup> Whereas Lessona and Graziani had criticized Nasi for being too lenient on the Amhara population in Harar, the Ministry of Italian Africa applauded his pro-Amhara policy. Lessona's replacement, Teruzzi, hoped that Nasi's "balanced political sense and realistic spirit" would be echoed by the other

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<sup>201</sup> Berretta, *Amedeo d'Aosta*, 20–21, 44–45, 47–50, 74. The regime's propaganda took advantage of Amedeo's masculine traits partly to justify the replacement of the virile Graziani. Stefani, *Colonia per maschi*, 54.

<sup>202</sup> Amedeo's university thesis was published posthumously, likely to serve Italian propaganda purposes, in Amedeo Savoia-Aosta, *Studi africani* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1942), 1–31.

<sup>203</sup> Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882–1941: Policies, Praxis and Impact* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987), 108.

<sup>204</sup> "Relazione politico-amministrativa ottobre 1938," 12 November 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 222.

governors.<sup>205</sup> In 1939, Nasi was nominated Vice-Governor General — the viceroy’s deputy — and placed in charge of the newly formed Governorate of Shewa.<sup>206</sup> Upon taking over in Shewa, Nasi distributed a circular to all functionaries and officials of his governorate. Entitled “My ‘Creed’” [*Il mio ‘Credo’*], the circular comprised a series of orders and decrees issued by Nasi during his time in Harar. They embodied the method or style in which he expected his commands to operate.<sup>207</sup>

The Duke of Aosta and Nasi certainly intended to bring a new direction to Italian governance in East Africa. However, in most cases the practical results of their policies fell short of their objectives. In part, change simply came too little and too late. The fundamental framework for the empire was established during Graziani’s tenure as viceroy. Functionaries on the ground were set in their ways — Nasi frequently bemoaned the inability of Italian functionaries to govern with patience and sensitivity — and much of the damage done to Italian relations with local elites and populations was not easily reversed.<sup>208</sup> Furthermore, three years of war and guerrilla fighting had taken a heavy toll on the Ethiopian economy. Italian forces consumed more local resources while the amount of cultivated land declined due to the inability to maintain security in the countryside. Combined with a drought in the spring of 1938, Nasi feared that these

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<sup>205</sup> “Relazione politico amministrativa del Governo del Harar per il mese di novembre 1938,” 19 December 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>206</sup> Prior to Nasi, Amedeo’s vice governor had been Enrico Cerulli, a career civil servant who was also a widely respected Orientalist scholar. Despite Cerulli’s liberal values and knowledge of East Africa, he did not get along with the Duke of Aosta. Cerulli considered the viceroy to be a mere figurehead and tried to take administration into his own hands by communicating directly with Rome. The relationship between Cerulli and the Duke of Aosta was yet another example of conflict arising from jurisdictional and personal rivalries, despite a shared ideology. A brief biography of Cerulli’s colonial and intellectual career is available in Karla Mallette, *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean: Toward a New Philology and a Counter-Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 132–61.

<sup>207</sup> The documentation includes Nasi’s treatises against corruption, on jurisdictional disputes, troop discipline, and relations with the native population. “Il mio ‘Credo,’” 23 May 1939, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>208</sup> Nasi complained that many of his subordinates continued to treat native chiefs as “followers” instead of with honour and respect, and that commissioners and residents were too rigid in excluding former Abyssinian functionaries from any charge or compensation. “Norme di tratto coi capi,” 9 May 1938, and “Ha detto male di Garibaldi,” 11 August 1938, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

factors placed the population of Harar in serious danger of famine and, subsequently, popular discontent.<sup>209</sup>

With recalcitrant personnel, socio-economic factors, and time working against them, Amedeo and Nasi also had to deal with confusing and contradictory orders from Rome. Despite its clear repudiation of Graziani's policy and its outward show of support for the new administration, the Ministry of Italian Africa proved reluctant to abandon key policies where it felt political and racial prestige was at stake. Mussolini, who took over personal control of the Ministry from Lessona and appointed Teruzzi as his undersecretary, made this clear to the new viceroy when the two met in June 1938. The *Duce* reaffirmed his commitment to the policy of "no power to the *ras*." Racial considerations required a clear separation between whites and blacks, including *rases*, who could be offered honorific or consultative posts in Addis Ababa but were by no means to be granted "territorial command."<sup>210</sup> Later that year, Teruzzi confirmed the Ministry's position on the matter by rejecting Mezzetti's plan to appoint three provincial chiefs [*dejaz*] as regional commanders. Such an appointment would have amounted to a "territorial command," threatening Italy's colonial programme "that excludes any form of government by sharecropping [*mezzadria*] or indirect government."<sup>211</sup> Alberto Sbacchi attributes Mussolini's unwillingness to befriend the Ethiopian aristocracy to his "ignorance and lack of interest in colonial affairs" as well as to his acceptance of "second-rate administrators" like Teruzzi.<sup>212</sup>

Thus, direction from Rome proved contradictory. The criticism of Graziani's treatment of indigenous elites seemed to provide the Duke of Aosta with a new mandate for collaboration, which he genuinely sought. On the other hand, central directives limited his ability to win support from previously hostile elements. Fortunately for

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<sup>209</sup> "Relazione politica-amministrativa giugno 1938," 5 July 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 249.

<sup>210</sup> Meregazzi to Teruzzi, n.d. [June 1938], ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>211</sup> Teruzzi to Mezzetti, 17 November 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 249. When Mezzetti was suddenly ordered home in 1939, he "was told that someone considered my policy towards elites to be weak or contradictory to central directives." Mezzetti memorandum, n.d., ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 220. The document most likely dates from early 1939.

<sup>212</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 144.

Amedeo, he enjoyed considerably more freedom of action than had his predecessor. In the first years of empire, Mussolini had played a central role in colonial events. He was informed of everything, signed off on everything, and sent countless directives to East Africa.<sup>213</sup> However, once the propaganda value of the Ethiopian campaign was fully tapped, Mussolini lost interest in colonial affairs and left the Ministry of Italian Africa without guidance. Mussolini gradually allowed his undersecretary, Teruzzi, to run the ministry before formally appointing him minister in October 1939.<sup>214</sup> Although the Duke of Aosta had a troubled relationship with Teruzzi, he was able to implement a more “elastic” policy than that of Graziani, especially in 1939.<sup>215</sup> Despite the various challenges and limitations that stood in the way, the incorporation of indigenous elites into the administration remained a cornerstone of Amedeo’s policy even after the commencement of hostilities against Britain in June 1940.<sup>216</sup>

With the approval of Teruzzi, the Duke of Aosta also emphasized the need to respect local customs. This included a more frequent recourse to traditional disciplinary measures, such as flogging, when applying criminal sanctions. Authorities seeking confinement for non-political crimes [*reati comuni*] were supposed first to sound out the opinion of local leaders and notables. The policy appealed to conservative populations and elites while also reducing the budgetary strain of incarcerating large numbers of colonial subjects.<sup>217</sup> On the other hand, it contradicted earlier Fascist claims regarding the export of Roman justice to Ethiopia as part of Italy’s civilizing mission, which rejected the use of heinous corporal punishments instead of jail time as barbaric.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Del Boca, “I crimini del colonialismo fascista,” 248–51.

<sup>214</sup> Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*, 120; Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 234; Borra, *Amedeo di Savoia*, 92.

<sup>215</sup> Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 26. Dominiononi argues that after spring 1939, Rome’s interference in colonial affairs ceased almost completely. Dominiononi, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 218.

<sup>216</sup> Amedeo di Savoia to Teruzzi, 24 August 1940, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 1.

<sup>217</sup> “Direttive di governo,” 25 October 1938, and Teruzzi to Amedeo di Savoia, 10 November 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>218</sup> “La capitale dell’Impero,” 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41.

Amedeo reinforced Italy's longstanding policy of religious tolerance and tried to smooth over Graziani's troubled relationship with the Orthodox clergy by compensating them for the loss of feudal rights that had enabled them to collect tribute.<sup>219</sup> These policies came much to the consternation of Vatican Secretary of State Eugenio Pacelli, who complained that the attitude of Italian authorities towards the Catholic Church in East Africa had deteriorated markedly after Graziani's departure.<sup>220</sup> In July 1938, Pope Pius XI himself protested that Italian authorities in East Africa furnished more support to Islam and Protestantism than to Catholicism.<sup>221</sup> The Vatican expected favourable treatment for its missionaries in East Africa in return for its neutrality during the Italo-Ethiopian conflict.<sup>222</sup> When its representative in East Africa, Monsignor Giovanni Maria Castellani, tried to bring the new autocephalous church under the influence of the Vatican, Amedeo sought his deportation from the colonies. Italian authorities deemed Castellani's attempt at "conversion from above" dangerous, as it risked sparking a religious revolt.<sup>223</sup> Difficulties with the Catholic Church must be understood as part of a general worsening of relations between the Fascist regime and the Vatican by 1938, but it

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<sup>219</sup> "Relazione politica del mese di luglio 1938," 27 July 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. See also the more detailed account in "Relazione politica del mese di settembre 1938," 1 October 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 249.

<sup>220</sup> Pignatti to Ciano, 1 August 1938, ASMAE, AISS, b. 81, fasc. 7, sf. 7.

<sup>221</sup> Pignatti to Ciano, 26 July 1938, and Pignatti to Pacelli, 10 August 1938, ASMAE, AISS, b. 81, fasc. 7, sf. 7. The Pope's protests were echoed the following year in a letter from an anonymous Catholic priest in Harar, who complained that the government subsidized Muslim and Coptic religions while excluding Catholic missionaries from the education system. "Relazione riservatissima fatta da un sacerdote," 28 January 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>222</sup> On the ambiguous position of the Catholic Church during the Ethiopian crisis and on the Italian diplomatic efforts to maintain papal neutrality, see Peter C. Kent, "Between Rome and London: Pius XI, the Catholic Church, and the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935–1936," *International History Review* 11, no. 2 (1989): 252–71; Lucia Ceci, *Il papa non deve parlare* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2010); and, Nicolas G. Virtue, "A Way Out of Isolation: Fascist Italy's Relationship with the Vatican during the Ethiopian Crisis," in *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*, ed. G. Bruce Strang (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 287–310.

<sup>223</sup> Meregazzi to Teruzzi, n.d. [June 1938], ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.; "Monsignor Castellani," 31 July 1938, and Pignatti to Pacelli, 10 August 1938, ASMAE, AISS, b. 81, fasc. 7, sf. 7.



also demonstrates the Duke of Aosta's commitment to using traditional customs and institutions as a means of attracting indigenous support for the regime.<sup>224</sup>

Despite the Duke of Aosta's conciliatory policies towards indigenous hierarchies and traditions, his tenure as viceroy overlapped with a renewed impetus for racial discrimination coming from Rome. In January 1938, the Fascist press launched an anti-Semitic propaganda campaign to prepare the Italian population for the state-sanctioned persecution of Jews, formalized in a series of laws issued between November 1938 and July 1939. Mussolini's official endorsement of anti-Semitism in 1938 traditionally has been interpreted as a tactical move to shore up the Rome-Berlin Axis by eliminating a source of friction with Nazi Germany.<sup>225</sup> However, more recent scholarship has seen it as part of Fascism's "vast re-education project" for the Italian people. In this respect, anti-Semitic policies in Italy were closely related to the regime's imperial racist measures, which were intended to establish racial consciousness among Italians.<sup>226</sup> The substance of the anti-Semitic legislation, which bore similarities not just to the Nazi Nuremberg Laws but also to Fascist colonial legislation, reflected these links.<sup>227</sup> Certainly, the regime justified the propaganda and legislation as a necessary corollary to its efforts to instil racial consciousness amongst Italians for the imperial age.<sup>228</sup>

In one of the few critical accounts of Amedeo's viceroyship, Richard Pankhurst argues that "despite his liberal pretensions the Duke of Aosta was responsible for implementing the increasingly rigorous racial discrimination introduced at this time, and

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<sup>224</sup> Relations with the Vatican were soured by Fascist racial legislation and Mussolini's diplomatic gravitation towards Hitler. Peter C. Kent, "The Catholic Church in the Italian Empire, 1936-38," *Historical Papers* 19, no. 1 (1984): 138-140.

<sup>225</sup> Renzo De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History*, trans. Robert L. Miller (New York: Enigma, 2001), 223, 236.

<sup>226</sup> De Grand, "Mussolini's Follies," 143. Daniel Carpi, *Between Mussolini and Hitler: The Jews and the Italian Authorities in France and Tunisia* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 246.

<sup>227</sup> David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1994), 58. Luigi Goglia, "Note sul razzismo coloniale fascista," *Storia contemporanea* 19, no. 6 (1988): 1223-66.

<sup>228</sup> The need to instil racial consciousness among Italians was the official justification given by the regime to the Pope. Pignatti to Ciano, 26 July 1938, ASMAE, AISS, b. 81, fasc. 7, sf. 7.

was indeed an apologist for it.”<sup>229</sup> In fact, Fascist racial policy was perfectly compatible with Amedeo’s philosophy of allowing indigenous populations to develop at their own pace and within the bounds of their own level of civilization. In one of his first circulars after taking charge as viceroy, Amedeo reiterated Mussolini’s policies on racial prestige and the need for segregation. He reminded all governors to maintain a clear distinction between the type of work given to indigenous labourers and their Italian counterparts, assigning the former to the lowest and most menial tasks.<sup>230</sup> In his June meeting with the Duke of Aosta, Mussolini insisted that natives were to be allowed only an elementary education with technical instruction focused on agriculture and basic military training.<sup>231</sup> Nasi immediately distributed orders limiting the education of natives, which he justified by arguing that educating the indigenous masses “tends to put individuals out of their class,” drawing them away from the fields and into the towns where they would compete with Italians for jobs. Education, therefore, was restricted to the sons of chiefs and important notables so they could serve as interpreters or hold minor offices. Nasi concluded that these directives were of a “very secret character, and should be applied without divulging the real motives.”<sup>232</sup>

As preparatory propaganda for the race laws in Italy increased, Nasi held a meeting with his leading officials in Harar. Measures taken for the “defence of the race” included the organization of assistance to unemployed nationals, purging of compromised nationals, and assistance for the transfer of families from Italy to East Africa. In addition, Nasi called for the severe application of a 1937 decree against *meticci* [mixed-bloods]. Government assistance for the mothers of *meticci* was limited to the basic necessities, after which children would be taken away and cared for in a distant institution. Nasi

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<sup>229</sup> Pankhurst, “Secret History of the Occupation of Ethiopia,” 70–71.

<sup>230</sup> Amedeo di Savoia to governors, 4 January 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>231</sup> Meregazzi to Teruzzi, n.d. [June 1938], ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>232</sup> “Indirizzo per l’istruzione degli indigeni,” 5 June 1938, DIWC, I, 53.

asked commissioners to inform his office of all *meticci* births.<sup>233</sup> Colonial authorities, including army generals, remained fully involved in the execution of Fascist racial policy.

As with the battle against *madamismo* — which continued with even more severe penalties — measures to ensure “racial prestige” appeared paradoxically to target the Italian community in East Africa.<sup>234</sup> The Jewish population in East Africa was sparse and difficult to identify; once accounted for, the colonial police found little reason to suspect their loyalty.<sup>235</sup> Instead, ordinary Italians were expelled for “behaviour detrimental to the prestige of the race,” indiscipline, lack of morals, stealing from natives, or exhibiting “doubtful fascist faith.”<sup>236</sup> In December 1939, colonial police in Harar laid charges against two men for threatening “racial prestige” and “Italian dignity.” One had rented a room from an Ethiopian; another drew obscene graffiti on a wall in the native quarter of Dire Dawa. Because the graffiti was viewed by natives, it was handled as a racial crime.<sup>237</sup> Assaults against indigenous subjects — including the sexual assault of a minor — were considered crimes not on their own merits, but because they threatened the “dignity and superiority of the [Italian] race.” Colonial police desired that “brutish elements [...] who maintain an irreprehensible attitude towards the natives, are removed from the territories of the Empire as undesirables. In such a way, one will be able to

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<sup>233</sup> “Verbale della prima riunione dei commissari di Governo tenutasi in Harar,” 19 September 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>234</sup> In 1939, an Italian in Harar deemed guilty of “*madamismo*” was sentenced to eighteen months in prison as well as deportation from the colonies. “Rimpatrio di connazionali dall’A.O.I.,” 7 January 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. “Espulsioni dall’A.O.I.” The maximum sentence allowed by a 1937 law to punish the crime of intercourse with an indigenous subject was five years. In fact, legislation for the preservation of “racial prestige” applied to natives as well; crimes committed by natives against Italians were punished more severely — sentences could be augmented by one-third — than native-on-native crime. Merzaggi, “Lineamenti di legislazione per l’Impero,” in *Il colonialismo italiano*, ed. Giorgio Rochat (Turin: Loescher, 1973) 209, 213. Merzaggi’s article was initially published in the September 1939 issue of *Gli Annali dell’Africa italiana*.

<sup>235</sup> See the monthly reports of the Colonial Police in Harar for 1939 and 1940, in ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>236</sup> “Connazionali rimpatriati con foglio di via obbligatorio dall’A.O.I.,” 22 September 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. “Espulsioni dall’A.O.I.”

<sup>237</sup> “Relazione sui servizi d’istituto eseguiti durante il mese di dicembre 1939,” 3 January 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247. A later report revealed that a lack of housing for Italian workers forced many of them to live in the native quarter. “Relazione sui servizi d’istituto espliciti dalla Questura del Harar durante il mese di gennaio 1940,” 3 February 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247

obtain the clear distinction between Italians and natives demanded by our laws for the protection of our civilization.”<sup>238</sup> Sanctions against the white community for racial crimes therefore bolstered both the long-term aim of the Fascist regime to instil a colonial consciousness amongst Italians as well as Amedeo’s calls for greater respect and understanding in relations with indigenous populations.

According to a sympathetic biographer, the Duke of Aosta genuinely believed that African cultures deserved individual respect, that indigenous traditions and laws remained valid and should be preserved, and that the delegation of some power to the indigenous population was the best way to achieve the illusory goal of harmonious collaboration between the dominator and the dominated.<sup>239</sup> Certainly, he and Nasi changed the tone and some of the rhetoric within the administration in East Africa. However, they never managed completely to overhaul the system bequeathed to them. Likewise, in its critique of Graziani the Fascist regime appeared to take lessons from the first two years of imperial rule — namely, that super direct rule was unrealistic and that the hasty imposition of a civil apparatus in East Africa had caused serious structural dysfunction — but it offered no alternative arrangements. Instead, Mussolini distanced himself from colonial policy and provided no clear direction. The result was a confusing model for behaviour, both in the present and for the future.

Experience in Ethiopia set an ambiguous precedent for the political administration of Fascism’s empire and the army’s role within it. In theory, civil powers were the preserve of functionaries trained by the Ministry of Italian Africa. In practice, military officers exercised many of these functions, from the level of viceroy down to district administrators. As a result, the armed forces were fully involved in the application of Fascist policies, including the segregation of colonial society, the imposition of racial legislation, colonization, urban planning, and the exploitation of local resources. These policies were imposed by the regime and driven by ideological considerations, primarily

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<sup>238</sup> “Relazione sui servizi d’istituto espliciti dalla questura del Harar durante il mese di febbraio 1940,” 3 March 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247. Reports from July through November 1940 suggest that charges for racial crimes dropped in number after Italy’s entry in the Second World War.

<sup>239</sup> Borra, *Amedeo di Savoia*, 106–107.

the desire to create the “new Fascist man,” but senior officers of the *Regio Esercito* managed to justify most of them according to military necessity and expediency. By behaving as traditional imperialists, preoccupied with the maintenance of white prestige, Italian military officers largely conformed to Fascist objectives.

When given a clear line from Rome, army officers dutifully worked towards it. After 1937, however, Rome’s line became less clear. The regime distanced itself from Graziani and his policies towards indigenous elites and populations, which it recognized as contributors to revolt. The appointment of the Duke of Aosta as viceroy ushered in a new phase of conciliation, but this too received criticism from the regime. There is no evidence to suggest that Mussolini was in the end any more pleased with the Duke of Aosta than he had been with Graziani, but it was not politically expedient to recall a member of the House of Savoy.<sup>240</sup> The behaviour expected of Italian colonial functionaries, civilian or military, was less clear in 1940 than it had been in 1936.

Regional variation added to this ambiguity. Separated from Italy by thousands of kilometres and isolated even from the viceroy and governors, local administrators often were left to their own devices. Governors themselves had to respond to local ethnic, socio-economic, and military conditions. The regime permitted different policies for different parts of the empire for pragmatic and — in the case of pro-Muslim policy — political reasons. Thus, while Italian forces struggled to pacify the Governorate of Amhara, Teruzzi’s last visit to Harar at the end of February 1940 suggested the possibility of a smoothly functioning empire that could count on the enthusiastic loyalty of both colonizer and colonized. Warmly received by Italian colonists and Harari locals, Teruzzi applauded the Duke of Aosta’s “unfaltering” rule over the “revived empire.”<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, 3:326. In conversation with Ciano at the beginning of 1939, Mussolini took a dim view of the Duke of Aosta’s work in East Africa. Ciano diary, 1 January 1939.

<sup>241</sup> For accounts of Teruzzi’s speech and his allegedly enthusiastic reception by the population, see the reports of the colonial police and Governor Cerulli. “Relazione sui servizi d’istituto esplicati dalla questura del Harar durante il mese di febbraio 1940,” 3 March 1940, and “Relazione politica del mese di febbraio 1940,” 2 April 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

## 2 Fascist Propaganda for a Fascist War

Central directives and the legal framework of the colonial administration in East Africa limited the autonomy of military commanders in matters of policy. In a similar fashion, the army's influence over the creation and distribution of propaganda for the troops in the colonies also was curtailed. A decade of rule under an aspiring totalitarian regime that sought to control the flow of information to the population diminished the army's role in all aspects of propaganda. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia was first and foremost a Fascist war, fought for the Fascist regime to rekindle the Fascist spirit of revolution. The conflict therefore saw an unprecedented level of control by Rome over its propaganda organs and the themes they presented to the Italian public. These themes sought to justify Italian aggression against Ethiopia, to establish a colonial consciousness among Italians, and to devalue the local populations and delegitimize the resistance that Italian soldiers met in East Africa. Although military commanders interfered more frequently in the direction of propaganda during and after the Italo-Ethiopian war, the top-down structure of the propaganda apparatus in the colonies limited their capacity to produce original works for their men. Propaganda for the troops in East Africa tended to be formulated by civilians under the supervision of Fascist agencies. But, when military commanders and governors addressed their officers and men, they too echoed the official line from Rome.

### The Fascist Propaganda Apparatus in East Africa

For the Fascist regime, propaganda was a broad concept. It involved not only the creation and presentation of overtly political messages, but more generally the control over news and information that reached both domestic and foreign populations. Between 1925 and 1935, propaganda came under the exclusive control of a single body within the Fascist regime. Mussolini's Press Office conducted a gradual process of centralization, evolving into the Undersecretariat of Press and Propaganda in September 1934 before being upgraded to a full ministry in June 1935. Following the extension of its responsibilities to include the censorship and coordination of intellectuals and artists as well as the media,

the ministry was renamed the Ministry of Popular Culture [Minculpop] in May 1937.<sup>1</sup> Mussolini had a central role in establishing this propaganda apparatus and staffing it with loyal bureaucrats. Moreover, the central line found enthusiastic mouthpieces at the local level, whether for ideological or socio-economic motives. As Nicola Labanca argues, “in any case, the impulse and coordination came from the centre.”<sup>2</sup>

The Fascistization and centralization of propaganda applied to the Italian army as well. Although the army had developed a sophisticated propaganda apparatus during the First World War, it was dismantled in the interwar period. After the rise of Mussolini’s dictatorship the army, like other institutions, lost any active role in propaganda.<sup>3</sup> The regime allowed the army to control only a few publications of technical nature, but even the run of the *Rivista Militare* — the army’s main journal for technical and theoretical debate on military art and science — was interrupted in 1933 because its authors were not permitted to express independent thought.<sup>4</sup> The army of course remained active in providing moral assistance to the troops through welfare programmes and basic education, but its influence over political propaganda was limited to advertising the publications of Fascist agencies or ministries. As an institution, the Italian army entered the Ethiopian campaign unprepared and lacking experience in the coordination of propaganda.

The invasion of Ethiopia enabled the Italian army to claw back some autonomy in the direction of propaganda. The complex nature of the propaganda campaign during the

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<sup>1</sup> The standard structural history of Fascism’s propaganda apparatus and its cultural policies remains Philip V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso: Fascismo e mass media* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1975). A concise overview is available in *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, ed. Philip V. Cannistraro (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982), s.v. “Ministry of Popular Culture.” On the early work of Mussolini’s Press Office to establish control over Italian newspapers, see also Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 394–400.

<sup>2</sup> Nicola Labanca, *Una guerra per l’impero: Memorie della campagna d’Etiopia 1935–36* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005), 46.

<sup>3</sup> On Italian propaganda in the First World War, see Nicola Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella grande guerra (1915–1918)* (Rome: USSME, 1989), the first of a four-volume series covering the Italian army’s role in propaganda between 1915 and 1945. Although lacking in rigorous documentation, Della Volpe’s works provide the only systematic study of the army’s role in propaganda during the Fascist era.

<sup>4</sup> Nicola Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda fra le due guerre (1919–1939)* (Rome: USSME, 1992), 32–33. Censorship of military journals impeded internal criticism within the army and restricted access to foreign thought, with negative repercussions on Italian military culture. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 172.

Ethiopian crisis forced the Propaganda Ministry to delegate certain tasks to the army and other ministries. Its office in Asmara was staffed largely with military personnel. On grounds of military secrecy and security, General Badoglio strictly controlled the press in East Africa, limiting the movements of correspondents and even suggesting which topics they ought to cover.<sup>5</sup> The army used its newfound influence in the field of propaganda primarily to limit potentially useful intelligence from reaching the enemy and to improve its reputation in Italy and abroad.

Following the declaration of empire, the organization of propaganda was plagued by the jurisdictional conflicts that characterized relations between the viceroys and Fascist ministries. The Propaganda Ministry tried to impose control by staffing the East African press office, now in Addis Ababa, with civilian personnel and establishing subsidiary offices in the various governorates.<sup>6</sup> However, the ministry complained that Graziani and colonial officials in East Africa obstructed its work. The main problem was that Graziani, like Badoglio before him, did not keep the press office current on news and events; nor did local authorities run drafts of newspapers past the office prior to publication.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Lessona accused the Propaganda Ministry of treading on his heels. He insisted that the press and propaganda office, like all agencies in East Africa, answered only to the Ministry of Colonies.<sup>8</sup> The result was a three-way jurisdictional tug of war between the Minister of Press and Propaganda, the Minister of Colonies, and the Viceroy of Ethiopia.

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<sup>5</sup> Enrica Bricchetto, *La verità della propaganda: Il 'Corriere della sera' e la guerra d'Etiopia* (Milan: Unicopli, 2004), 68, 80–95. Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda fra le due guerre*, 53–54, 62–64. On the makeup of the press office, see “Personale civile Ufficio Stampa Addis Ababa,” 30 August 1936, ACS, Ministry of Popular Culture – Gabinetto [MCP-Gab], b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Ruolo organico.”

<sup>6</sup> “Personale civile Ufficio Stampa Addis Ababa,” 30 August 1936, and De Bosdari to Sorrentino, 23 July 1936, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Ruolo organico.”

<sup>7</sup> De Bosdari to Graziani, 11 July 1936, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

<sup>8</sup> Lessona to Alfieri, 2 August 1936, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”



The Propaganda Minister, Dino Alfieri, took the issue straight to Mussolini, who allowed the office to remain in East Africa.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in October 1936, representatives of the Colonial and Propaganda Ministries came to an agreement regarding jurisdictional boundaries for Italian East Africa. The press and propaganda office was considered a section of the Propaganda Ministry employed by the Governor General — the viceroy — in Addis Ababa. Manpower derived exclusively from the Propaganda Ministry, but the office reported and answered only to the Colonial Ministry. In return, Lessona was to provide Alfieri with daily news reports.<sup>10</sup> Although the parties involved remained most interested in controlling the flow of information back to Italy, the jurisdictional dispute had ramifications on the organization and coordination of propaganda for the troops in East Africa, since the same office was ultimately responsible for all these tasks. The arrangement curtailed military control over and participation in propaganda.

Essentially, the model for the coordination of propaganda in the mother country was transplanted into the colonies. The tasks of the press office were manifold. It provided communiqués to the *Agenzia Stefani*, the official and only news service in Italy, and it issued licenses to foreign journalists. In addition, it organized propaganda for Italians and natives, overseeing the newspaper press and radio in East Africa.<sup>11</sup> The head office in Addis Ababa approved all actions of the subordinate branches in the governorates. In theory, it was supposed to maintain unity of direction while avoiding duplication or dispersal of effort in the field of propaganda.<sup>12</sup>

In practice, jurisdictional squabbling remained a problem. By summer 1937, Minculpop representatives considered the problem of propaganda in East Africa to be “serious and urgent.” The viceroy, they complained, continued to interfere in the press office’s work and the governorates tended to operate independently. Again, the main

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<sup>9</sup> Lessona, *Memorie*, 282–83.

<sup>10</sup> “Appunto circa gli accordi col Capo Gabinetto Ministero Colonie nei riguardi dei rapporti tra i due ministri, in specie per quanto riguarda l’A.O.I.,” 19 October 1936, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

<sup>11</sup> “Compiti della Stampa e Propaganda in Etiopia, n.d. [23 May 1936], ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 72, fasc. “Africa Orientale Italiana.”

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Press and Propaganda memorandum, 4 December 1936, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

point of conflict remained that military authorities did not furnish correspondents with useful or interesting news.<sup>13</sup> Nor was jurisdictional overlap remedied. In 1939, the Duke of Aosta complained that the Inspectorate of Labour, the MVSN, the Fascist Party, the political affairs office, municipal offices, and other agencies all were involved in the organization of propaganda in East Africa.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these jurisdictional complexities, so typical of Fascist Italian bureaucracy, the propaganda that reached the troops conformed more or less completely to the official line emanating from Rome. The army used its influence through the office of the viceroy to control the flow of news abroad rather than to develop propaganda material for its soldiers. Having lost much of its creative capacity over the course of the previous decade, the military relied on civilian sources of propaganda. The newspapers, magazines, books, radio broadcasts, and films to which Italian soldiers had access echoed and in many cases were the same as what was available to them in Italy under the close guidance of the Propaganda Ministry.

The newspaper press was the most important propaganda organ for the Fascist regime. Mussolini's own background in journalism prompted him to take daily interest in the Italian and foreign press. Although most Italian newspapers — and the most successful ones — remained in private hands, by 1926 Mussolini had established conformity within the Italian press. His Press Office and later the Ministry of Press and Propaganda controlled content by pressuring proprietors and managers, limiting the power of editors, and restricting access to the journalistic profession, as well as by issuing daily “orders” to editorial staffs that outlined the regime's expectations. By the mid-1930s, the regime generally could rely on the press to self-censor its publications.<sup>15</sup> This institutional culture was exported to Ethiopia, either directly through the provision of

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<sup>13</sup> Minculpop memorandum, 9 July 1937, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

<sup>14</sup> Amedeo di Savoia to Teruzzi and Alfieri, 21 October 1939, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

<sup>15</sup> On the Fascistization of the Italian press, see Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, 173–224, which is summarized neatly in *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, s.v. “Press.” See also Bricchetto, *La verità della propaganda*, 9–11, 40.

reading material printed or written in Italy or through the entrepreneurs that started new local papers in the colonies.

A unique example of self-censorship during the Italo-Ethiopian war came in the form of illustrated postcards that middle-class officers and soldiers kept as mementos or sent to acquaintances in Italy. Whereas the official postcards supplied by the army and regime were blank or adorned with generic symbols or maps, these were supplemented with more colourful privately produced specimens.<sup>16</sup> Individual military units, especially from the MVSN, and opportunistic illustrators produced postcards that nonetheless reflected the main themes of Fascist ideology and imperial propaganda. Often through caricature and satire, postcards emphasized Fascist militarism, racism, and concepts of a “civilizing mission.”<sup>17</sup>

Periodicals and literature were the main sources of information and satire sought out by officers and soldiers in East Africa. Unlike the First World War, where the army produced its own “trench newspapers,” the vast majority of reading made available to the troops in Ethiopia was developed by Fascist agencies or private publishers subject to Fascist censorship. Soldiers in East Africa read the newspapers and magazines that were most popular back home.<sup>18</sup> Literature intended specifically for the troops was developed externally before being endorsed by the War Ministry and army. With the build-up of forces in East Africa prior to the invasion, the periodical *L’Azione Coloniale*, published by the Fascist Colonial Institute since 1931, began printing a weekly edition designed for the troops in East Africa. Entitled *La Tradotta Coloniale*, it was inspired by *La Tradotta*, the famous trench newspaper of the Italian Third Army in the First World War. Unlike its predecessor, the contents of *La Tradotta Coloniale* were not under the control of the army. Nonetheless, Army Chief of Staff and Undersecretary Federico Baistrocchi considered that, “since the purpose of the newspaper is that of bringing a breath of cheerfulness and serenity to the troops, especially in E[ast] A[frica], the initiative of

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<sup>16</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda fra le due guerre*, 91–92, 110.

<sup>17</sup> Luigi Goglia, “Le cartoline illustrate italiane della guerra etiopica 1935–1936: Il negro nemico selvaggio e il trionfo della civiltà di Roma,” in Centro Furio Jesi, *La menzogna della razza*, 27–40.

<sup>18</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda fra le due guerre*, 64.

‘L’Azione Coloniale’ deserves to be supported.” He ordered all commands to advertise the periodical among their officers and men and to encourage subscriptions at the rate of 10 lire a year.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the army supported the distribution of *Gioventù Fascista* — published by the *Fasci giovanili di combattimento*, the Fascist organization for young men aged eighteen to twenty-one — since the magazine fed “the flame of faith, valour and devotion to the noble cause.”<sup>20</sup>

Following the declaration of empire, the immediate focus of the press office was the establishment of local newspapers. By the end of May 1936, there were two dailies in East Africa — Asmara’s *Corriere dell’Impero* and Dire Dawa’s *Corriere Sud-etiopico* — as well as *Il Giornale di Addis Abeba*, which was published three times a week. However, according to reports from the Ministry of Propaganda, none of these papers satisfied the soldiers’ need for daily news; it was necessary to supplement local papers with African editions of major Italian ones, like Mussolini’s own *Il Popolo d’Italia*.<sup>21</sup> The privately owned *Corriere della Sera*, Italy’s largest newspaper with a circulation of 600,000, also quickly established offices in East Africa.<sup>22</sup> Officers of colonial battalions, isolated in far-flung garrisons or in combat operations, managed to receive their subscriptions to the Milanese daily by aerial delivery.<sup>23</sup>

Efforts to establish a local press in Ethiopia were beset by logistical difficulties, meaning that the large Italian dailies remained influential. The regime concentrated its

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<sup>19</sup> “Diffusione del periodico ‘La Tradotta Coloniale’,” 9 December 1935, AUSSME, L-13, b. 237, fasc. 329.

<sup>20</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda fra le due guerre*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> “Compiti della Stampa e Propaganda in Etiopia, n.d. [23 May 1936], ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 72, fasc. “Africa Orientale Italiana.”

<sup>22</sup> *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, s.v. “Press.” In 1936, the *Corriere della Sera* sent Ciro Poggiali to East Africa as a special correspondent. Poggiali also was tasked with setting up a sales office for the newspaper in Asmara. Poggiali diary, 24 June 1936. Although the *Corriere della Sera* adopted an openly anti-Fascist stance during the Matteotti crisis in 1924 and 1925, by 1930 the newspaper had been brought into line with the rest of the Italian press. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, 183–84; Bricchetto, *La verità della propaganda*, 10–11.

<sup>23</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 258.

resources on the *Corriere dell'Impero*, extending its distribution throughout the empire.<sup>24</sup> Its offices were moved to Addis Ababa and it took over the old printing press of the Ethiopian government, which certainly made it unique but in need of improvement. In 1938, Mussolini approved plans to establish a new printing press in Addis Ababa, but Minculpop officials estimated that it would not become operational for at least two years. The *Corriere dell'Impero* covered national and international news supplied from Italy and propaganda articles provided by Minculpop, while its local content consisted of bulletins, economic chronicles, and the reproduction of laws and decrees emitted by the viceroy and governors.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, overt political propaganda adhered to the standard set in Italy. The *Corriere dell'Impero* was supplemented by various local gazettes of limited propaganda value. The daily *Somalia Fascista* lacked originality, merely extracting articles from Italian newspapers. The *Corriere Hararino* commenced publication with grand intentions, but by summer 1937 had been reduced to a weekly bulletin. The ministry considered *Il Bollettino del Gomma* to be a complete “miscarriage” [*aborto*].<sup>26</sup> In sum, given Minculpop’s formal role as supervisory organ, the lack of originality and communications difficulties within the East African press, and the continued profusion of major Italian dailies, newspaper content in East Africa did not differ significantly from that available in Italy.

Written material was not the only means of propaganda in East Africa. The dispersal of Italian forces throughout the vast empire made radio an important medium for disseminating information in the colonies. The Fascist regime’s use of radio never became as sophisticated as that of Nazi Germany. However, because Italian radio developed almost entirely during the Fascist period, it was relatively easy for the regime to control. The Propaganda Ministry dictated the content of broadcasts in the 1930s. It

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<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Press and Propaganda memorandum, 4 December 1936, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

<sup>25</sup> Press and Propaganda Office memorandum, 8 May 1937, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

<sup>26</sup> Minculpop memorandum, 9 July 1937, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

never devoted more than one-third of broadcasts to direct political propaganda; the remainder consisted of music and entertainment.<sup>27</sup> As with the newspaper press, this model of centralized control was transplanted to the colonies. Indeed, whereas radio listeners in Italy always had access to foreign broadcasts, isolation from Europe made it easier for authorities to control the messages reaching soldiers and populations in East Africa.

From the commencement of operations in Ethiopia, the Ministry of Press and Propaganda oversaw special radio transmissions from Italy to East Africa, consisting of an afternoon programme of news and music. After the conquest, the demand for radio increased. Authorities experimented with three transmissions per day — news and music between 11:00 and 12:00, again between 17:00 and 18:15, and news at 19:37 — but reception problems forced them to cancel the morning transmission. By the end of 1938, broadcasting from Italy to East Africa consisted of two improved evening transmissions. Ideological programming typically focused on themes of demographic policy, autarky, racial prestige, imperialism, and Fascist social achievements.<sup>28</sup>

In 1937, the East African press office began broadcasting its own transmissions from the *Centro Radio Marina* in Addis Ababa. These comprised a brief news bulletin followed by a second transmission “directed in a particular way to the troops and workers,” based on news, education, and recreation. Declaring that “every Italian centre must be equipped with a radio,” the press office also planned to establish “places for community listening” [*posti d’ascolto collettivo*] throughout the empire, beginning with worksites and military posts. Graziani granted the office a sum of 1 million lire for the project.<sup>29</sup> This was a minuscule portion of the overall cost of empire — the invasion had cost the regime one billion lire per month and by 1940 the Italian government was

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<sup>27</sup> On the organization and development of radio in Fascist Italy, see Philip V. Cannistraro, “The Radio in Fascist Italy,” *Journal of European Studies* 2 (1972): 127–54. For a comparison to the coordination of radio in Nazi Germany, see David A. Welch, “Restructuring the Means of Communication in Nazi Germany,” in *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion: New and Classic Essays*, ed. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 128–32.

<sup>28</sup> “Servizio radiofonico speciale per l’Impero,” 24 November 1938, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 72, fasc. “Africa Orientale Italiana.”

<sup>29</sup> Minculpop memorandum, 9 July 1937, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

spending six million lire per month to maintain the irregular armed bands that helped police the empire — but, given that a radio set cost 2,000 lire, it was not insignificant.<sup>30</sup> Radio was an important means of propaganda in East Africa, particularly because it could provide isolated soldiers with a voice from the mother country. There is nothing to suggest that its content differed substantially from that presented in Italy.

After the Ethiopian campaign, motion pictures eclipsed radio as a means of mass communication in Fascist Italy.<sup>31</sup> However, the logistics of providing projection equipment for the hundreds of garrisons dispersed throughout the empire relegated cinema to a secondary role in East Africa, behind print and radio media. Whereas the government ran cinemas for natives — racial segregation was applied to the colonial film industry — those for the white population were based on private enterprise.<sup>32</sup> By 1939, there were forty public cinemas in East Africa, half of which were concentrated in three major urban centres.<sup>33</sup> From time to time, isolated workers or soldiers were able to take in a complimentary show provided by one of the six “autocinemas” — mobile units complete with film projector and audio equipment — operated by the LUCE [*L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa*] Institute, the government-run film company.<sup>34</sup>

As with newspapers and radio, film propaganda in East Africa was virtually the same as in Italy. The LUCE institute maintained a small section in Addis Ababa, made up of a director, three cameramen, two film developers, an operator for each “autocinema,” an administrative assistant, and two indigenous orderlies. The section was attached to the press office and took orders from the Governor General. The viceroy therefore controlled

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<sup>30</sup> Brogini Künzi, “Total Colonial Warfare,” 316. Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 229.

<sup>31</sup> Cannistraro, “Radio in Fascist Italy,” 153.

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Press and Propaganda memorandum, 4 December 1936, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

<sup>33</sup> By 1940, the number had increased to 55 cinemas with a combined seating capacity of 60,000; an impressive level of growth that came too late. Salvatore Ambrosino, “Cinema e propaganda in Africa Orientale Italiana,” *Ventesimo secolo* 1, no. 1 (1991): 138–39.

<sup>34</sup> The institute began with two “autocinemas” in East Africa, but expanded to six in 1938. “Propaganda cinematografica nell'A.O.I.,” n.d. [1938], ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 72, fasc. “Africa Orientale Italiana.” Mobile cinemas had been used in Tripolitania since the late 1920s, largely to impress the indigenous populations. Ambrosino, “Cinema e propaganda in Africa Orientale Italiana,” 136.

what the unit was allowed to film but, whereas still photographs could be developed on site, all motion film had to be edited and developed in Rome. Therefore, political material shown in East Africa was largely produced in Italy. As in Italy, cinemas were subject to government requirements to accompany public showings of commercial films with a LUCE newsreel, which tended to focus on the accomplishments of the regime, especially in sports and, at least through 1936, in the colonies. “Autocinema” shows usually involved a theatrical release preceded by a documentary or newsreel.<sup>35</sup> Newsreels represented the most overt use of cinema as political propaganda by the Fascist regime. Otherwise, cinema mostly served entertainment purposes, fulfilling the public’s desire to escape everyday problems.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Hollywood productions proved most popular among Italians up to the outbreak of war; Italian films tended to emulate American styles and themes in order to compete. Supply shortages meant that most films available in the colonies were of foreign origin.<sup>37</sup>

Military authorities in East Africa made use of written, audio, and visual forms of propaganda supplied to them by the Fascist regime and its agencies. Another type of propaganda that should not be underestimated in its importance to the military establishment came in the form of speeches and orders of the day — general directives meant to be read to the men or distributed through the ranks.<sup>38</sup> The speeches of central

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<sup>35</sup> “Propaganda cinematografica nell’A.O.I.,” n.d. [1938], ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 72, fasc. “Africa Orientale Italiana.” In 1940, Minculpop complained that the Duke of Aosta did not offer adequate support to the LUCE section in East Africa. It is not clear whether this represented a general lack of interest on the part of the viceroy or whether the problems cited were solely the result of the outbreak of war against Great Britain. See Fantechi to Pavolini, 19 July 1940, and Pavolini to Amedeo di Savoia, 21 July 1940, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 80, fasc. “Reperto fotocinematografico in Guerra.” On the development and work of the LUCE institute in Italy, see Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, 276–79; and, *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, s.v. “LUCE, Istituto Nazionale.” On coverage of the Italo-Ethiopian War in LUCE film reels, see Labanca, *Una guerra per l’impero*, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, 288–89, 311–12, 322. Federico Caprotti, “Information Management and Fascist Identity: Newsreels in Fascist Italy,” *Media History* 11, no. 3 (2005): 181. The same features characterized the use of cinema as propaganda weapon in Nazi Germany. Welch, “Restructuring the Means of Communication,” 137–46.

<sup>37</sup> Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 71–92, 139, 175. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “The Italian Colonial Cinema: Agendas and Audiences,” in Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, *Italian Colonialism*, 183.

<sup>38</sup> Gianni Dore, “Guerra d’Etiopia e ideologia coloniale nella testimonianza orale di reduci sardi,” *Movimento operaio e socialista* 5, no. 3 (1982): 476.



figures like Mussolini, his ministers, as well as the viceroy often were printed in the press, played over the radio, or shown in newsreels. More difficult to track down are the speeches made in the field by commanding officers to their men. Even in the case of printed directives, it is clear that staff officers did not consider all of them worthy of preservation in unit war diaries. As a result, although the previous chapter made clear that higher-level communications between commands easily assimilated Fascist discourse and attitudes, a systematic study of the language of speeches and directives issued to soldiers in East Africa is not possible.

In some respects, the level of ideological enthusiasm of commanding officers and the example that they set for their men is questionable. First, the Italian officer corps did not traditionally enjoy a close relationship with the lower ranks. A “caste mentality” prevented many regular officers from resorting to demagogic appeals towards their men.<sup>39</sup> The dubious quality of officers in East Africa added to the gap between commanders and enlisted personnel. By 1940, eighty percent of officers commanding military units in East Africa were reservists, most of whom, according to one report, demonstrated “apathy” and an “inability to command.” Many of the regular officers came from the logistical services and likewise were not trained to command.<sup>40</sup>

Second, the institutional culture of the army, with its traditional autonomy from government and loyalty to the monarchy, precluded the wholehearted assimilation of Fascist propaganda, especially by regular officers. During the invasion of Ethiopia, Fascist hierarchs complained that the methods they employed to motivate their Blackshirts — which included embellishing earthworks and fortifications with stone mosaics of the *fascio littorio* or with Fascist mottos to demonstrate the omnipresence of the *Duce* — were not shared or understood by regular army officers, who it appeared were not completely “up to date on our Party matters.”<sup>41</sup> As Labanca demonstrates, the

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<sup>39</sup> Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 147. Rochat adds that officers, as a rule, were not impressed by the regime's demagogic propaganda. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 170.

<sup>40</sup> “Relazione al Duce sulle questioni militari più importanti concernenti l'Impero,” 6 April 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207.

<sup>41</sup> “Relazione del Segretario federale di Trieste sulla sua permanenza in Africa Orientale,” 18 July 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

difference in approach between army officers and Fascist leaders continued to manifest itself after the invasion in the form of memoir literature published during the Fascist era. The regime censored all such publications and ensured that they served its propaganda interests but, whereas party and militia leaders almost unanimously presented the conquest of Ethiopia as a victory for Italian Fascism and Mussolini's regime, the writing produced by professional military men tended to depict the war as a triumph of the state and of the armed forces as an institution.<sup>42</sup>

Regardless of the enthusiasm of their commanding officers, all soldiers in the colonies were subject to occasional messages from the Colonial Ministry. Upon taking over as minister, Lessona issued an order of the day to be read to all military personnel in Ethiopia, emphasizing "the honour and responsibility of serving Fascism" as well as "the great works of peace and civilization that await us, and that we will accomplish with the fast pace that the *Duce* has impressed on our task."<sup>43</sup> Army officers were capable of using similar language in appeals to their men. Before their departure from Italy for Africa in November 1936, the commander of the 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the *Granatieri di Savoia* Division addressed his men as the "supreme flag bearers of the destinies of imperial Italy," who carried with them the faith "of Italians, of Fascists and of soldiers."<sup>44</sup> The road to Addis Ababa had been paved by "the sword and pickaxe of Roman civilization," and he called for his men to defend it with honour, tenacity, and perfect discipline, "in the name of the Emperor King, of the undefeated *Duce*, [and] of the sacred memory of the fallen."<sup>45</sup>

The report on the division's departure, published in the magazine *Le Forze Armate* and proudly preserved in the unit's war diary, further indicates how the army and regime could fuse Fascist motifs with traditional nationalism and institutional pride. As the only large metropolitan unit in Addis Ababa, the *Granatieri di Savoia* represented

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<sup>42</sup> For a comparison between Fascist and military memoirs of the Italo-Ethiopian War, see Nicola Labanca, "La guerra per il regime (1935–45)," chap. 3 in *Una guerra per l'Impero*.

<sup>43</sup> "Saluto di S. E. Lessona," 13 June 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 168.

<sup>44</sup> Meneghini order of the day, 13 November 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 528.

<sup>45</sup> Meneghini order of the day, 21 December 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 528.

“the *Regio Esercito* of Vittorio Veneto, renewed and invigorated in spirit and means in the brilliant light of the *Littorio*.” The division, the article went on, “has had its spirit, heart, and muscle toughened in the generous atmosphere of the *Littorio* and the House of Savoy, where Fascism has permeated every mind and every lump of dirt.” While the division took for its colours the blue of the House of Savoy along with the traditional red of the grenadiers, it also displayed “the magnificent and warlike spirit of the new youthfulness of Fascist Italy.”<sup>46</sup> The language in the magazine article was more overtly ideological than the regimental commander’s orders of the day, akin to the differences between Fascist and military memoir literature noted by Labanca. There is little doubt that army officers were less inclined than Fascist leaders to resort to full-fledged bombastic propaganda exalting the regime, but the example of the *Granatieri di Savoia* reveals that officers could and did employ ideological language — or at least language compatible with that of the regime — in their discourses, perhaps because they believed it made a genuine impact on their men.

At least in terms of outward appearances, the army had submitted to a degree of Fascistization by the time of the Ethiopian campaign. Military documents and reports from the occupation almost always included the year according to the Fascist calendar, beginning in October 1922 with the “march on Rome” and expressed as a roman numeral. Graziani’s use of Fascist rhetoric is well-known, but the Duke of Aosta also drew upon the requisite themes and language in his discourses, which he knew could be made public in Italy. Upon taking over as viceroy, he praised Mussolini as the “founder and *Duce* of the empire” and recognized the importance of his mission to the “Fascist nation.”<sup>47</sup> Guglielmo Nasi, too, in his foreword to a book on Harar, voiced his pride in having “had the opportunity to fulfil one of the most important commandments of the

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<sup>46</sup> “La partenza per l’A.O.,” 3 November 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 528. *Le Forze Armate* was a biweekly military journal created by the Fascist regime primarily as a propaganda instrument. Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda fra le due guerre*, 34. Vittorio Veneto was the site of Italy’s greatest victory in the First World War.

<sup>47</sup> “Il Vicerè d’Etiopia riafferma al Duce la certezza del superbo avvenire,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 2 January 1938, 1.

*Duce* that the empire would develop rapidly.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, although it has been argued that Mussolini’s popularity among the Italian masses had waned by the late 1930s, Nasi tended to fall back on the *Duce* myth in order to motivate his men when conditions became difficult.<sup>49</sup>

Junior officers and unit commanders were the main point of contact between the Fascist regime, the Italian army, and the thousands of indigenous troops employed in the Italian colonies. After 1937, colonial soldiers — made up of Eritrean and Ethiopian *askari* as well as Somali *dubats* — outnumbered Italian military personnel in East Africa and conducted the lion’s share of the work in counterinsurgency operations.<sup>50</sup> This poses difficulties when assessing Italian propaganda for the soldiers in East Africa. The sources and themes of propaganda distributed to Italian officers, soldiers, and civilians were not designed with indigenous troops in mind. Levels of literacy, and even oral comprehension, were limited by the reluctance of Liberal and Fascist colonial authorities to educate subject populations.<sup>51</sup> The paucity of documentation on *askari* battalions provides few clues as to the extent of propaganda directed towards them.

To maintain loyalty and morale in *askari* battalions, Italian commanders relied less on sophisticated propaganda than upon unit-level negotiation and discipline. Fifty years of colonialism in Eritrea created a myth in Italy of the “faithful askari,” a virtual

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<sup>48</sup> Guglielmo Nasi, foreword to *L’Harar: Territorio di pace e di civiltà*, by Fernando Santagata (Milan: Garzanti, 1940).

<sup>49</sup> After Italy’s entry into the Second World War, Nasi credited the Italian conquest of British Somaliland to the “unfaltering will of the *Duce*.” “Relazione sui servizi d’istituto disimpegnati durante il mese di agosto 1940,” 3 September 1940, ASMAE, MAE, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247. Afterwards, when Italian East Africa found itself in an increasingly desperate situation, isolated and under attack from all sides, Nasi relied even more on the *Duce* cult to inspire the Italian population and soldiers, reportedly with some success. “Relazione sui servizi d’istituto disimpegnati dalla questura del Harar durante il mese di novembre 1940,” 3 December 1940, ASMAE, MAE, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247. On the waning of the *Duce* cult after 1936, see Corner, “Everyday Fascism in the 1930s,” 217–18; and, Paul Corner, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini’s Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 245–53.

<sup>50</sup> The term *askari* had Arabic origins and was used by the Italians to describe Libyan and Eritrean colonial troops, whereas the less-valued Somali fighters were named *dubats*. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 41.

<sup>51</sup> Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism’s Empire Cinema*, 53–54. Policy makers sought to avoid the evolution of an indigenous intellectual elite that could challenge Italian claims to superiority. Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*, 84.

automaton bred for war and unwaveringly loyal to the Italian banner.<sup>52</sup> Although such myths allowed for genuine admiration among Italians for the *askari* — culminating in the participation of 3,500 Eritrean colonial troops in a grandiose triumphal parade in Rome to celebrate the first anniversary of the empire in May 1937 — the relationship between the two never came on equal terms and always was strongly paternalistic.<sup>53</sup> *Askari* — who could never become officers themselves — often referred to their commander as *gwäitana*, meaning “our lord.” The gap between Italian officers and colonial soldiers widened further with the introduction of racial legislation and segregation.<sup>54</sup> Indigenous intermediaries — non-commissioned officers and, for Orthodox Christians, chaplains [*casci*] — undoubtedly played a crucial role maintaining unit cohesion.<sup>55</sup>

Although he argued that relationships between Italian officers and indigenous troops were in many ways closer than those between officers and enlisted men in white units, Paolo Corazzi, a lieutenant in a colonial battalion, remembered his men in a stereotypical and patronizing way.

The *askari* were not able to understand abstract reasoning. Their life was simple: marching, fighting, satisfying basic needs. They had no complicated problems, their reports were always accompanied by exaggerated imagery: ‘*shifita* [bandits]

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<sup>52</sup> A newspaper article by Mario Appelius at the outbreak of war in Ethiopia encapsulated the myth of the *askari* as demonstrating a typically African “love of war for war’s sake” alongside a unanimous loyalty to Italy. “Ascari d’Italia,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 10 October 1935, 3.

<sup>53</sup> The relationship between the Italian public and Eritrean *askari* has been compared to that between the British people and Nepalese *Gurkhas*. Giulietta Stefani, “Italiani e askari: Percezioni e rappresentazioni dei colonizzati nell’Africa Orientale Italiana,” *Italian Studies* 61, no. 2 (2006): 207–223. British depictions of *Gurkhas* differed from representations of their other colonial subjects, emphasizing their masculine qualities as a martial race that supposedly shared British traits of chivalry and honesty without considering them capable of leadership. Lionel Caplan, “‘Bravest of the Brave’: Representations of ‘The Gurkha’ in British Military Writings,” *Modern Asian Studies* 25, no. 3 (1991): 571–97. The presence of the *askari* in Rome drew much interest from locals and the Italian press. One article praised the colonial troops as “courageous” while at the same time concluding that their participation in the grand review “will be the most important event of their lives.” “Al campo degli ascari,” *Corriere della Sera*, 8 May 1937, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Alessandro Volterra, *Sudditi coloniali: Ascari eritrei 1935–1941* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2005), 69–70; Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, “Fedeli servitori della bandiera? Gli ascari eritrei tra colonialismo, anticolonialismo e nazionalismo (1935–1941),” in Bottoni, *L’Impero fascista*, 444, 455–56.

<sup>55</sup> On the *casci*’s role in colonial formations, see Mimmo Franzinelli, “Il clero e le colonie: I cappellani militari in Africa Orientale,” *Rivista di storia contemporanea* 21, no. 4 (1992): 564.

be [*stare*] many like grass or like locusts'. They were at the same time, infantile, superstitious, violent and cruel as the *shifita*, but devoted and obedient.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, both paternalism and racism were evident in official Italian reports that described indigenous soldiers as “primitive.” The main tools of motivating colonial troops were harsh discipline and the authority of the white commander, who was told to grant his men “praise and rewards when they have done well, censure and punishment [...] when they have failed.”<sup>57</sup>

The heterogeneous nature of *askari* battalions after 1936 further impeded any Italian efforts at persuasion. Prior to the conquest of Ethiopia, most *askari* came from the Eritrean highlands. After the declaration of empire, however, almost all colonial units comprised a mixture of men with different religions, traditions, ethnicities, and languages. In this context, discipline and material incentives were the primary means of ensuring unit cohesion, rather than ideological propaganda. Italian authorities tried to maintain the morale of colonial troops by improving the general conditions of their camps and, when possible, allowing families to accompany them there.<sup>58</sup> According to the oral testimony of Eritrean veterans, economic convenience, cultural and social prestige, and adventurism were the principal motivating factors for the *askari*.<sup>59</sup> The same can be said for the irregular Ethiopian bands in which Italian officers served as commanders or liaisons. Ettore Formento, the commander of one such band, found it difficult to convince his men to fight for something other than plunder and economic security. Formento told them that the Italians had come to show Ethiopians “the cultural

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<sup>56</sup> Paolo Corazzi, *Etiopia, 1938–1946: Guerriglia e filo spinato* (Milan: Mursia, 1984), 16, 19.

<sup>57</sup> “Relazione politico-amministrativa del mese di maggio,” 30 May 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247. These attitudes towards just but harsh discipline echoed those voiced by Pirzio Biroli and Badoglio during the conquest of 1935–36. Volterra, *Sudditi coloniali*, 95–97.

<sup>58</sup> Such camps were part of a long-standing military tradition in East Africa, which Italian authorities merely took advantage of. Based on his study of memoir literature and interviews with veterans, Alessandro Volterra concluded that family camps were done away with after 1935, since all Eritrean battalions were employed in operational areas. However, Nasi referred to the establishment of family camps in one of his monthly reports in 1937, especially for Somali troops and other groups “that did not inspire much confidence.” See Volterra, *Sudditi coloniali*, 155, 160–66, 171; and, “Relazione militare mensile – maggio-giugno 1937,” n.d. [July 1937], AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62.

<sup>59</sup> Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, “Fedeli servitori della bandiera?,” 453, 457–58; Volterra, *Sudditi coloniali*, 83, 189–90.

and intellectual way to a higher level of civilization,” but he doubted that this argument made much of an impact on his men.<sup>60</sup> Italian propagandists — when they considered their indigenous troops at all — likely targeted colonial soldiers with the same themes that they used for the general indigenous population. These exalted Roman power and civilization, touted values of loyalty, and venerated the *askari* as model colonial subjects.<sup>61</sup>

The Fascist propaganda apparatus in the colonies was unique and complex. It had to take into consideration both Italian and indigenous populations, military and civilian. In addition, its structure combined the regime’s totalitarian desire for centralized control over communications and information with the intricacies of the dysfunctional legal framework of Italian East Africa. The Propaganda and Colonial Ministries vied to represent the centre while, in the field, the office of the viceroy issued direct orders to propaganda organs. In terms of the type of propaganda that reached Italian soldiers, these internal rivalries in fact were moot. What the army made available to them to read, listen to, and watch differed little from what soldiers and civilians had access to in the mother country. A pronounced hierarchical gap distanced many commanding officers from their men and prompted them to adopt themes similar to and compatible with those supplied by the regime. Through the viceroy, the army had a role in propaganda, but it did not choose to depart from the model ordered by Rome. Given the centrality of empire to the regime and the importance which Mussolini attributed to propaganda, any such departure necessarily would have been limited.

## A War for Empire

The nature of the Fascist propaganda apparatus in East Africa ensured more or less complete conformity with the directives and themes emanating from Rome. Propaganda in East Africa responded to international events and reflected Fascist policies in Europe. For example, the pages of *La Tradotta Coloniale* exhibited themes of militarism, anti-

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<sup>60</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 64–65.

<sup>61</sup> Matteo Pretelli, “Education in the Italian Colonies during the Interwar Period,” *Modern Italy* 16, no. 3 (2011): 286.

British or anti-League sentiment sparked by economic sanctions against Italy in 1935 and 1936, and anti-communism in response to Italian involvement in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, newspapers covered the development of the Rome-Berlin Axis after 1936 and the regime's anti-Semitic turn in 1938. The deification of the *Duce* and glorification of the Fascist "new man" were among the central themes of the regime's propaganda in general.<sup>63</sup> These motifs all were present in East Africa as well as in Italy.

Most importantly, Fascist propagandists presented the conflict in Ethiopia as a war for empire. Imperial propaganda themes had the potential to inform the behaviour and attitudes of Italian officers and soldiers in East Africa towards the local populations and resistance. Selling Italian aggression in Ethiopia as part of a civilizing mission as well as a means to future prosperity for Italians undermined the dignity of the occupied populations. Efforts to instil in Italians a colonial and racial consciousness added to this tendency. Indigenous enemies that resisted Italian occupation were labelled as barbaric and illegitimate combatants that deserved no mercy.

An examination of print media — the most important organ of Fascist propaganda — from the invasion and the early stages of the occupation of Ethiopia highlights all of these themes. The years 1935 and 1936 witnessed a colossal propaganda effort to rally the Italian population behind the war in East Africa, reflecting the campaign's revolutionary intent in the metropole and its status as a "national" war that differed from typical "colonial" conflicts in terms of public mobilization.<sup>64</sup> It was during this period

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<sup>62</sup> On militarism and the Italian response to sanctions as emblematic of British hypocrisy, see *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 14 September 1935, 1, 2; 21 September 1935, 4; 28 September 1935, 2. On anti-communism, see "La partenza per il 'Fronte Popolare'," *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 30 May 1936, 3–4; and, "Comunismo," *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 1 August 1936, 1.

<sup>63</sup> According to Cannistraro, "the fundamental aim of the Ministry of Popular Culture, as with the PNF, became that of moulding the 'fascist new man'." By the mid-1930s, "physical health, martial spirit, industriousness, discipline and intellectual vigour were the ideal distinguishing marks of the new Italian, summed up by the slogan 'book and rifle, perfect fascist' [*libro e moschetto, fascista perfetto*]." Fascist propaganda presented Mussolini as the archetypal "new man." Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, 139–42. For an excellent overview of Mussolini's cult of personality, focusing on its god-like attributes, see Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, "Mussolini the Myth," Chap. 2 in *Fascist Spectacle*, 42–88.

<sup>64</sup> Unlike typical colonial wars, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia demanded the full mobilization of society behind the war effort, for which propaganda — aided by a decade without freedom of expression in Italy — played a vital role. Labanca, *Una guerra per l'impero*, 45–46. These characteristics made the Italo-Ethiopian War "an important way station on the road to total war." Brogini Künzi, "Total Colonial Warfare," 326.



that the Fascist regime defined Italy's mission in East Africa and formed the assumptions that would govern relations between Italians and natives in occupied territory. After 1936, with the stagnation of Italian colonization and military efforts, discussion of Ethiopia steadily decreased and few new themes were added.<sup>65</sup> Mussolini established the key themes to be depicted in propaganda through his speeches and the personal input he continued to provide to the regime's semi-official newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. This section examines the pages of *Il Popolo d'Italia* as well as the mainstream *Corriere della Sera*, which combined provide a thorough overview of the main characteristics of Fascist propaganda surrounding the conquest of Ethiopia. In addition, the trench newspaper *La Tradotta Coloniale* — although it ceased publication in September 1936 — is a particularly rich source of satirical literature and cartoons developed specifically with a military audience in mind.<sup>66</sup>

### *Justifying Aggression*

During the Ethiopian crisis, the regime justified its aggressive expansion to foreign and Italian populations through several angles. First, it argued that Italian imperialism merely followed the example set by other colonial nations; therefore, countries like France and Britain were hypocritical to oppose Italian expansion. Second, the regime posited the economic and demographic necessity of colonies to absorb Italian emigration. Third, the regime touted its civilizing mission, claiming in Catholic circles to be exporting Christianity while universally defining Ethiopia as a primitive country whose populations begged emancipation from slavery. Last, Mussolini claimed that Ethiopia posed an immediate threat to the small Italian colonies in Eritrea and Somalia.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> In her study of the *Corriere della Sera*'s treatment of the Ethiopian war, Enrica Bricchetto notes a marked decrease in the coverage of East African affairs after 1936. The *Corriere* published 365 signed articles during the seven-month conflict, 138 for the remaining eight months of 1936, 134 in all of 1937, only 23 in 1938, 41 in 1939, 56 in 1940, and none in 1941. Bricchetto, *La verità della propaganda*, 247.

<sup>66</sup> *La Tradotta Coloniale* has not received thorough analysis by historians. The issues examined for this study are housed at the Biblioteca universitaria Alessandrina in Rome.

<sup>67</sup> This rationale was summed up in a letter from Talamo to Pizzardo, 2 October 1935, ASMAE, AISS, b. 56, sf. 1a.

The notion of Ethiopia as a security threat dominated the early days of the campaign in October 1935. *Il Popolo d'Italia* explained the invasion as a necessary means “to face the direct and immediate threat constituted by Ethiopian mobilization.”<sup>68</sup> Baron Aloisi’s highly publicized speech to the League of Nations presented the conflict as a defensive war against an aggressive Ethiopian state, which had continued to arm itself after its 1928 pact of friendship with Italy and had proven unable or unwilling to control its feudal military system and prevent raids along the Eritrean and Somali frontiers.<sup>69</sup> By April 1936, Mussolini argued that security in East Africa could only be accomplished through the “total annihilation” of Ethiopian armies.<sup>70</sup> This implicit call for total occupation provided the first justification for establishing an Italian empire.

During the invasion, the Fascist regime also claimed to defend oppressed indigenous peoples from Abyssinian domination. The theme of liberation provided a positive message of the Italian mission in Ethiopia as being essentially a humane one. On the other hand, it was inseparable from the negative portrayal of Ethiopian leaders and populations as backwards, barbaric, and passive. Both positive and negative forms of propaganda were evident in an October 1935 article on “The March of Civilization,” which responded self-righteously to the League’s denunciation of the Italian invasion.

Geneva’s arbitrary judgement can condemn the Italian soldiers and workers that bring order, justice and civilization to Ethiopia. [...] The Italian advance instead represents the liberation of oppressed populations. Our soldiers, with perfect Italian kindness, share their bread with the hungry. Italian doctors take in the wounded and care for the sick. Chaplains give protection to abandoned children. Our authorities administer justice. Pillaging [*spogliazioni*] stops. Banditry disappears. Workers open roads, dig wells, build bridges, viaducts, aqueducts. Roman civilization establishes its empire and brings comfort to territories abandoned for millennia to a dark barbarism.<sup>71</sup>

Fascist propaganda thereby touted the humanitarian nature of Italian soldiers towards occupied, or “liberated,” populations.

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<sup>68</sup> “Posizioni avanzate oltre le nostre linee occupate dalle truppe italiane nell’Africa Orientale,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 4 October 1935, 1.

<sup>69</sup> “La parola del nostro rappresentante,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 7 October 1935, 6.

<sup>70</sup> “Il Duce precisa la situazione al Consiglio dei ministri,” *Corriere della Sera*, 9 April 1936, 1.

<sup>71</sup> “La marcia della civiltà,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 12 October 1935, 1.

Delivered to a crowd of thousands gathered in the Piazza Venezia, Mussolini's declaration of empire on 9 May 1936 linked the civilizing mission of the Italian conquerors to the Fascist revolution.

Italy finally has its empire. A Fascist empire, because it bears the indestructible marks of the will and power of the Roman *Littorio*, because this is the purpose towards which the unbridled and disciplined energies of vigorous young Italian generations were directed for fourteen years. An empire of peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for all and settles on war only when forced to by pressing, incoercible needs of survival. An empire of civilization and of humanity for all populations of Ethiopia. It is in the tradition of Rome, who after victory associated peoples with its destiny.<sup>72</sup>

The contradictory imagery of Italy as a militaristic but peace-loving nation had both domestic and international audiences in mind. Mussolini presented Italy as a bastion of peace in Europe and at the same time fired warning shots across the bows of potentially hostile foreign governments.

Mussolini's claims to a civilizing mission in East Africa, which contrasted with the overbearing policies he immediately enacted there, also were geared towards foreign audiences. But this humanitarian rhetoric had ideological foundations too. Mussolini's emphasis on the symbolism and tradition of Imperial Rome not only reaffirmed Fascist claims of heredity with the ancient past, it introduced a universal dimension for Fascism that would grow in prominence through the late 1930s. Like ancient Rome and Christian Rome, Fascist Rome would provide a guiding model for others. Empire provided the key to Fascism's national and universal missions of remaking Italians and remodeling civilization.<sup>73</sup> Although racism and social Darwinism often undermined or negated civilizing missions in colonial practice, the rhetorical linkage of concepts of domination and superiority with civilization and liberation was nothing new for Italian and Western imperialists.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> "Lo storico discorso di Mussolini," *Corriere della Sera*, 10 May 1936, 1. "La parola del Capo," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 10 May 1936, 1. Reproduced in *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini* [OO], XXVII, 268–69.

<sup>73</sup> Gentile, *La Grande Italia*, 149, 171–75.

<sup>74</sup> The concept of a "civilizing mission" — involving belief in a right to propagate one's own norms and institutions to other societies based on a conviction of the inherent superiority of one's own way of life — is a core element of modern imperialist ideology. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Europe, the 'West' and the Civilizing Mission* (London: German Historical Institute, 2006).

For Fascist propagandists, Italy's civilizing mission was embodied in its liberation of slaves in East Africa. Throughout the Ethiopian campaign, headlines announced the end of slavery in the areas under Italian occupation.<sup>75</sup> Descriptions of Ethiopian practices of slavery provided a way to demonize the enemy while justifying Italian aggression. Italian propaganda rejected as specious Haile Selassie's proclamations against slavery, arguing that "slavery truly will be abolished [...] only by the Italian troops who in their advance collect shackles and chains."<sup>76</sup> After the conquest, a running column in *La Tradotta Coloniale* on "The Former Uncivil Code of Ethiopia" focused on slavery as a prime example of the barbaric systems that the Italian conquerors had to set right in East Africa.<sup>77</sup> The indigenous population was seen as backwards but also as worthy of pity.

In Africa we destroyed a barbaric enemy and have opened roads and schools, built hospitals and clinics, aqueducts and houses, we have freed slaves, prohibited child labour, in sum we have given to the oppressed, to the destitute kept in slavery and in squalor, abandoned to every abuse, to tyranny and to plunder, the civilization of the *Littorio* and with it liberation, breath, life.

All this gives Mussolini's empire a popular, human, character.<sup>78</sup>

In the context of liberation and abolitionism, the general indigenous population was not necessarily regarded as the enemy. The war was fought "to overcome the resistance not of the Ethiopian people, but of the exploitative and abusive chiefs aided and abetted by foreign intrigue."<sup>79</sup> In liberating an enslaved people and bringing the light of civilization, the Italian public and soldiers were told that they were performing a good act in Africa.

The regime also assured Italians that their troops were indeed received as liberators. Newspaper headlines reported the supposed "jubilee of liberated populations," who welcomed the Italian soldiers, "offering them eggs and chickens and speaking the

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<sup>75</sup> See "L'Italia, madre di civiltà, abolisce la schiavitù nel Tigrà," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 20 October 1935, 1; "Gli schiavi liberati dall'Italia ammontano a ottantamila," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 26 October 1935, 1; "Il gen. Graziani abolisce la schiavitù nel territorio dei Galla Borana," *Corriere della Sera*, 25 January 1936, 1; and, "Badoglio emanerà oggi un bando che abolisce la schiavitù nelle regioni occupate," *Corriere della Sera*, 12 April 1936, 1.

<sup>76</sup> "Schiavismo in atto," *Corriere della Sera*, 16 February 1936, 1.

<sup>77</sup> "Il fu codice incivile d'Etiopia," *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 27 June 1936.

<sup>78</sup> "Infallibilità storica," *Corriere della Sera*, 14 May 1936, 1.

<sup>79</sup> "L'Impero fascista sarà fecondato del lavoro degli italiani," *Corriere della Sera*, 11 May 1936, 1.

word ‘Italia’ with an intonation full of respect and admiration.”<sup>80</sup> Mussolini himself claimed that the Ethiopian populations supported Italy, to the point of rebelling against their former oppressors.

Italians were defined as ‘aggressors.’ The Ethiopian populations welcomed them with manifestations of joy and with gifts of homage. Dessie is in celebration. Gojam awaits emancipation. Where the Italians have arrived, civilization has arrived, in all its manifestations of order, of justice, of welfare, of well-being. [...] An ‘Ethiopian nation’ does not exist. The empire of the Negus was a jumble of populations harshly oppressed by a rapacious feudal caste. Tegrays, the Danakil, Somalis, Gallas, Gojamites, when the hour of emancipation struck on the clock face of history, took up arms against the barbaric government of the *rases*.<sup>81</sup>

Even the ruling Amhara and Shewa populations, it was said, “threw open the door to the Italian soldiers,” greeting them with signs of homage and celebration.<sup>82</sup>

More than two months after the conquest, a song printed in *La Tradotta Coloniale* summed up the view of Italians as liberators of a grateful people from barbarism.

Good Abyssinian, / good Abyssinian, / raise your glass, / raise your glass, / Italy has saved you, / Italy has saved you, / from an assassin, / from an assassin, / and deserter, / and deserter, / that after having fled / lost his honour. [...] With the king of kings / with the king of kings / you went by foot, / you went by foot, / now you have buses, / now you have buses, / first for you, / first for you, / there was terror, / there was terror, / You took many beatings / now bread and work.<sup>83</sup>

*La Tribuna Illustrata* told the reassuring story of an Italian parachutist who upon landing was met by “a large mob of spear-wielding blacks” who — grateful for liberation or awestruck by Italian technology — “prostrated themselves to pay him homage.”<sup>84</sup>

[Appendix C]

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<sup>80</sup> “Il giubilo delle popolazioni liberate nello Scirè e nel Tembien,” *Corriere della Sera*, 6 March 1936, 1.

<sup>81</sup> “Verso Addis Abeba,” 3 May 1936, in OO, XXVII, 259–60.

<sup>82</sup> “Verso il colpo di grazia all’Impero dello schiavismo e della barbarie,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 5 May 1936, 2.

<sup>83</sup> “Canti popolari abissini,” *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 1 August 1936, 8. The original Italian reads: “Bravo abissin, / bravo abissin, / leva il bicchier, / leva il bicchier, / l’Italia t’ha salvato, / l’Italia t’ha salvato, / da un assassino, / da un assassino, / e disertor, / e disertor, / che dopo esser scappato / perduto ha l’onore. [...] Col re dei re / col re dei re / andavi a piè, / andavi a piè, / ora ci hai l’autobusse, / ora ci hai l’autobusse, / prima per te, / prima per te, / c’era il terror, / c’era il terror, / Avevi tante busse / or pane e lavor.”

<sup>84</sup> *La Tribuna Illustrata*, 7 February 1937, back cover.

The theme of liberation promoted a range of attitudes and behaviours among Italian troops. It lauded their humanity while reinforcing their sense of superiority. It promoted kindness towards friendly natives but hatred and disgust towards those who sided with the old regime. Assurances that they would be welcomed as liberators — assurances which continued during the operations to occupy the rest of Ethiopia in 1936 — set up Italian officers and men for disappointment when much of the region rose up in open revolt, especially during 1937.<sup>85</sup> This reflected the classic “built-in crisis in any civilizing programme.”<sup>86</sup> The expectations created by the theme of liberation unintentionally contributed to the harsh and unforgiving Italian response to resistance from an apparently duplicitous and ungrateful population.

When combined with exoticism, notions of liberation also threatened ideological and military imperatives to avoid fraternization between Italian soldiers and natives. The most famous marching song of the war, “Faccetta nera” [Black Face], revealed how themes of liberation could — with a willing audience — become fused with the erotic.

If from the highlands you glance down toward the sea,  
 little black woman, you slave among slaves,  
 you will see, as if in a dream, so many ships  
 and a tricolored flag will wave for you.

Black face, beautiful Abyssinian,  
 wait and hope, for Italy is drawing near;  
 and when we are together with you,  
 we will give you another law and another king.

Our law is the slavery of love  
 but freedom to live and think,  
 we Blackshirts will vindicate  
 the fallen heroes, and we will liberate you.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> During the occupation of the western territories of the empire in 1936, Stefani news releases referred to the limited “resistance of surviving rebel groups that tried to oppose our advance in order to continue their detestable exploitation of the populations [...] who everywhere welcome our units as liberators.” “Comunicato per la ‘Stefani’,” n.d. [1936], ACS, Segreteria Particolare del Duce – Carteggio Riservato [SPDCR], b. 31, fasc. “Gran Consiglio,” sf. 14.

<sup>86</sup> Osterhammel, *Europe and the Civilizing Mission*, 31.

<sup>87</sup> The Italian lyrics to the song are available in Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 170–71. The English translation used here is from Karen Pinkus, “Shades of Black in Advertising and Popular Culture,” in

Although the song adhered to most dictates of Fascist propaganda, the allusion to sexual promiscuity with indigenous women — *madamismo* — prompted the regime to pull it from circulation. “Faccetta nera” was dismissed as representing an outdated romantic view of empire that Fascism intended to replace with disciplined sobriety.<sup>88</sup> *La Tradotta Coloniale* reminded its readers to “sing ‘Faccetta Nera’, but think of the white face that waits for you [at home].”<sup>89</sup>

Although the regime frowned upon fraternization with the indigenous population, its propaganda organs tried to present Italy’s civilizing mission as uniquely generous and in touch with local needs. “Roman imperialism that yearns not to rule but to govern, not to exploit but to civilize,” was supposedly more enlightened than others.<sup>90</sup> During the invasion, propaganda emphasized the medical care provided to natives by Italian doctors.<sup>91</sup> After the conquest, *Il Popolo d’Italia* described Lessona’s *legge organica* as embodying “complete and total respect for the just interests of the native populations.”<sup>92</sup> Conviction in Italy’s civilizing mission continued through the period of occupation. In his preface to Fernando Santagata’s 1940 publication on the Governorate of Harar, General Guglielmo Nasi wrote that all aspects of Italian policy were “so many branches [*armi*] of a regular and methodical march, solemn and austere, that leaves, everywhere, the imprint of our race.”<sup>93</sup>

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*Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, ed. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 140–41.

<sup>88</sup> Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 191–93.

<sup>89</sup> The text is from the caption to a drawing of a *bersagliere* returning to his wife or girlfriend in Italy. *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 7 December 1935, 2.

<sup>90</sup> “Viva l’Esercito!”, *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 5 October 1935, 1.

<sup>91</sup> “Medici italiani al fronte,” *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 7 December 1935, 4; “La trasformazione del Tigrai,” *Corriere della Sera*, 14 February 1936, 1.

<sup>92</sup> “L’ordinamento e l’amministrazione dell’Impero Italiano dell’Africa Orientale,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 2 June 1936, 1. Similarly, the *Corriere* praised Graziani’s policy as enlightened. “La nuova era di giustizia e di progresso nell’Impero,” *Corriere della Sera*, 26 June 1936, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Fernando Santagata, preface to *L’Harar*.

Themes of the liberating and civilizing mission naturally resulted in a strongly paternalistic view of the local populations. A cartoon entitled “Ferro e civiltà” [Iron and Civilization] depicted three Italian infantrymen firing at an indistinct target, with the caption: “See?... Gunshots are to savages what spankings are for little boys... they wail when you give it to them but there comes a day when they thank you.”<sup>94</sup> Another drawing entitled “Insegnamenti” [Lessons] portrayed an Italian tractor operator extending his hand to on-looking and apparently awe-struck Ethiopians in robes, exclaiming: “now that I have taught you how to fight, I will teach you how to work!”<sup>95</sup> Characterizations of Ethiopians as ignorant, lazy, and backwards could result in their emasculation. In another illustration, an anonymous “native” pointed out an imposing Italian-built dam to his child, explaining that “only he who manages to tame the elements has the right to be called a man.”<sup>96</sup>

Propaganda on Italy’s civilizing mission in Ethiopia, while primarily intended to justify the Fascist invasion, thus provided value-laden depictions of the general indigenous population. Descriptions of natives almost always referred to their filth, poverty, inactivity, sickness, or degradation, leading to the ineluctable conclusion that Italian intervention was necessary to improve the situation.<sup>97</sup> “Until yesterday,” wrote Vincenzo Rovi, “one could say — without fear of being mistaken — that every Abyssinian was a collection [*campionario*] of illnesses.” He claimed to have known an Ethiopian who was “almost completely devoured” by a seventy-kilogram tapeworm.<sup>98</sup> Ciro Poggiali focused on the laziness of indigenous populations, pointing out how Italian punishment through forced labour was an effective deterrent to crime: “Incredible but true; the compulsoriness of labour is a certain impediment to delinquency; because the

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<sup>94</sup> “Ferro e civiltà,” *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 7 December 1935, 1.

<sup>95</sup> “Insegnamenti,” *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 23 May 1936, 4.

<sup>96</sup> “Dominazione,” *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 20 June 1936, 1. On the whole, however, Stefani argues that emasculation of Ethiopians did not form a predominant theme in Italian colonial discourse. Stefani, *Colonia per maschi*, 118–19.

<sup>97</sup> Bricchetto, *La verità della propaganda*, 259.

<sup>98</sup> “Vecchia Abissinia,” *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 20 June 1936, 3.



native might not fear prison which allows idleness, but always fears hard work, even if paid for.”<sup>99</sup>

Security, liberation, and the progress of civilization all were important justifications for the Italian presence in Ethiopia. Added to these themes, and of particular ideological significance to the Fascist regime, was the economic and demographic value of the new empire to Italy. Upon advancing into Ethiopia, Italian war correspondents wrote of “the great fertility of all the valleys [...] likely to provide tremendous agricultural, forestial and horticultural production as soon as the ground is handled with modern systems and production is removed from the oversight of the barbaric feudal government of Addis Ababa.”<sup>100</sup> Despite a lack of knowledge and data on the true potential of the region, arguments promoting the economic value of Ethiopia became one of the most prominent themes of Fascist propaganda in the immediate aftermath of Mussolini’s declaration of empire. The conquest of Ethiopia was supposed to provide Italy with the means to achieve economic self-sufficiency or autarky. Writers depicted the region as a land of untapped riches where ordinary Italians would benefit.

From the beginning of the Italian occupation, propaganda claimed that “Ethiopia was conquered for the needs of the Italian people, for its future, for its economic autonomy.”<sup>101</sup> Early reports expressed great optimism towards the economic value of the region and made exaggerated claims regarding the studies underway in the colonies.<sup>102</sup> While *Il Popolo d’Italia* admitted that full-fledged economic exploitation awaited the results of proper studies — which Haile Selassie’s “barbaric central government,” it claimed, had refused to sanction out of fear of European penetration — there was “no doubt” that Ethiopia abounded in gold, as confirmed by Egyptian hieroglyphs. Platinum and iron deposits also were verified in Ethiopia, but in unknown quantities. The question of petroleum, on the other hand, was “very debatable” and an “enigma.” The report

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<sup>99</sup> “La civiltà romana in Etiopia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 4 May 1937, 1.

<sup>100</sup> “L’avanzata della civiltà nel Tigray,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 17 October 1935, 1.

<sup>101</sup> “Impresa di popolo,” *Corriere della Sera*, 16 May 1936, 1.

<sup>102</sup> See for example, “La valorizzazione dell’Etiopia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 14 May 1936, 1; and, “Gli studi per la valorizzazione agricola dell’Etiopia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 27 May 1936, 1.

concluded that, while mineral deposits held much promise, Ethiopia's greatest asset was cultivatable land.<sup>103</sup>

If Italian officers and men were not motivated by the prospect of fulfilling the economic objectives of the state, Fascist propaganda also provided hope for collective and individual economic improvement. Propaganda presented Italy as a proletarian nation, a land of peasants and workers whose very survival depended on territorial expansion and access to new resources and markets. Two days after the declaration of empire, the *Corriere della Sera* wrote that "imperial expansion was a question of life or death for Italy, being an essential condition of work [*condizione indispensabile di lavoro*]." The article claimed that this characteristic set Italian imperialism apart from that of capitalist powers, who merely sought another means of exploiting the masses.<sup>104</sup> Empire gave Italy "that place under the sun necessary for its development, for its wellbeing, for its survival," and enabled the "expansion of the people [...] giving them new and greater possibilities for the fruitful work of their sons."<sup>105</sup> Claiming that Ethiopia had "gigantic reserves of raw materials," an article in *Il Popolo d'Italia* voiced "the impression that God and destiny wanted to reward Italy for its long and undeserved centuries of political misfortune and economic weakness."<sup>106</sup> The conquest of East Africa was to provide ordinary Italian families with work and opportunities, if not in the present then certainly for their children in the future: "Like all the work of Fascism, the conquest of E[ast] A[frica] is not an end, it is a beginning; in the sense that that large region, rich in potential resources, must be and will be exploited; it must become and will become the

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<sup>103</sup> "Le risorse delle nuove terre italiane," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 28 May 1936, 1. After one year of occupation, reports continued to claim the existence of "mountains of iron and deposits of coal" — along with prospects for gold and silver — in Ethiopia. "Le grandiose linee della nuova economia etiopica," *Corriere della Sera*, 7 May 1937, 1.

<sup>104</sup> "L'Impero fascista sarà fecondato dal lavoro degli italiani," *Corriere della Sera*, 11 May 1936, 1. Underlined in original.

<sup>105</sup> "Infallibilità storica," *Corriere della Sera*, 14 May 1936, 1.

<sup>106</sup> "Le grande possibilità economiche del nostro nuovo possesso africano," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 13 May 1936, 2.

legacy of labour and wealth that Mussolini's Italy bequeaths to the generations of tomorrow.”<sup>107</sup>

Some Italian functionaries sought immediate wealth in East Africa. Describing an Italian major who put his men to work panning for gold, Poggiali commented in his diary that “everyone wants to find treasure in E[ast] A[frica]. But in reality one only finds mica and kaolinite in this area.”<sup>108</sup> As the deportations for protection of Italian racial prestige and the numerous efforts against corruption in East Africa attest, the regime frowned upon this sort of activity. Propaganda on one hand proclaimed Ethiopia's qualities as a literal and figurative gold mine, while at the same time demanding further personal sacrifice in favour of the state. As viceroy, Graziani called for “Fascist comrades” to tighten their belts and think first of autarky for the empire. He decried the practice of colonists to waste precious gasoline on trips to the café or barber when in Italy they would have travelled by foot or public transit. Repeating the Fascist creed, “believe, obey, fight” [*credere, obbedire, combattere*], Graziani demanded that restrictions be “applied with iron Fascist discipline.”<sup>109</sup> The viceroy's speech demonstrated his assimilation of Fascist language and also characterized the conflicting aims of propaganda that presented Ethiopia as both panacea and burden.

Closely connected to economic value as a motive for war, according to Fascist propaganda, was the concept of demographic colonization. Not only would Ethiopia provide the resources to make Italy economically self-sufficient, it also would furnish virgin land to be settled by Italian peasants who otherwise would have emigrated to the Americas. As a classic social Darwinist who considered population expansion a vital condition for national survival, Mussolini was obsessed with demographics.<sup>110</sup> He and Lessona ensured demographic colonization became a central theme of colonial

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<sup>107</sup> “Il passaggio del Mareb,” *Corriere della Sera*, 3 October 1936, 1.

<sup>108</sup> Poggiali diary, 9 December 1936.

<sup>109</sup> “Il discorso di S. E. il Vice Re,” *Notiziario Radio*, 29 September 1937, ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 41, sf. 4.

<sup>110</sup> Strang, *On the Fiery March*, 26–28. On Fascist demographic policy, see Carl Ipsen, *Dictating Demography: The Problem of Population in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

propaganda.<sup>111</sup> *Il Popolo d'Italia* confidently envisioned an Ethiopia populated by two million whites and claimed that Italy finally had the living space it needed to survive: “Without Fascism, the empire in Ethiopia was impossible! Without Ethiopia, Fascism would not have sufficient space or labour to be able fully to accomplish its mission.”<sup>112</sup>

Propaganda on demographic colonization portrayed Ethiopia as a region to be exploited, populated, and dominated by white Italians. “Industrial colonization” and cultivation with the participation of natives was reserved for areas where demographic colonization was not possible. Otherwise, colonizing action was to be “purely rural, according to the Roman spirit,” based on large-scale farms operated solely by whites.<sup>113</sup> Propaganda assured Italians that, despite the failure of Europeans to settle in large numbers outside Mediterranean Africa and South Africa, Fascist colonization would succeed in Ethiopia, thanks in part to the region’s suitable climate. “The vitality of the Italian race, the extraordinary ability of our people to adapt, the relative proximity of Ethiopia to Italy, the iron will and broadmindedness of the Fascist government, will take care of the rest.”<sup>114</sup> Particularly high hopes were held for the area around Addis Ababa.

Now we have surveyed and reconnoitred the entire territory — almost as large as the whole of Italy — where, due to its altitude between one thousand five hundred and two thousand metres, our farmers are assured a healthy life and an abundant harvest of all ‘Italian’ produce: from grains to vegetables, from fruit to vines.<sup>115</sup>

As late as 1940, Fernando Santagata wrote that the highlands of Harar were “perfectly suited to intense settlement [...] Harar is an extensive area where one lives, and one lives very well.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> In his memoirs, Lessona claimed to have been ahead of his time as a proponent of demographic colonization. Lessona, *Memorie*, 147.

<sup>112</sup> “Le grande possibilità economiche del nostro nuovo possesso africano,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 13 May 1936, 2.

<sup>113</sup> “La colonizzazione agricola dell’A.O.,” *Corriere della Sera*, 17 June 1936, 1.

<sup>114</sup> “L’avvenire dell’Etiopia italiana,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 21 May 1936, 1.

<sup>115</sup> “Le grandiose linee della nuova economia etiopica,” *Corriere della Sera*, 7 May 1937, 1.

<sup>116</sup> Santagata, *L’Harar*, 24.

### *Colonial Consciousness*

According to the Fascist regime, demographic colonization required that Italian settlers be imbued with a colonial consciousness. Since the 1920s, Fascist propaganda had worked to improve knowledge of colonial affairs in Italy and to convince Italians that colonies were indeed necessary and useful.<sup>117</sup> In the months and years following Mussolini's 9 May 1936 declaration of empire, Fascist party and state organs worked to convince the Italian people that they did, in fact, live in an empire.<sup>118</sup> At this point, colonial consciousness switched from a way to establish consensus for the regime's African adventures to a means of informing the behaviour and attitudes of Italians in the colonies themselves. Fascism's objective of national rebirth remained at the core of this propaganda. Italians had to be remade as a disciplined people capable of dominion over others.

Fascist propagandists turned to ancient Rome as the model through which Italians would regain imperial greatness and colonial consciousness, even though Ethiopia had never formed part of the Roman empire. *Il Popolo d'Italia* touted the formation of Italian East Africa in 1936 as the "reconstitution of the Roman empire" and claimed that the "Roman mission" was the "sacred right" of the Italian people.<sup>119</sup> A year later, the *Corriere della Sera* equated Mussolini's declaration of empire to the rebirth of Italians through the "resurrection" of ancient Rome.<sup>120</sup> The greatness of Rome, one article claimed, had never died, but had undergone a series of revivals: "Spiritual rebirth, artistic rebirth and finally also political rebirth. The latter is still in progress, and has recently

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<sup>117</sup> The establishment of colonial museums, art exhibitions, school programmes, literature, and lectures achieved some level of success after 1925, aided by the lack of alternative anti-colonial sources of information. Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, 2:18–19; Labanca, *Oltremare*, 130, 145.

<sup>118</sup> Labanca, *Una guerra per l'impero*, 9.

<sup>119</sup> "La ricostituzione dell'Impero di Roma," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 10 May 1936, 7; "Le aquile romane a Addis Abeba," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 6 May 1936, 8.

<sup>120</sup> "L'annuale dell'Impero," *Corriere della Sera*, 7 May 1937, 1.

acquired a rapid and irresistible pace. The political rebirth of Italy is called *Fascism* and its new historic physiognomy is called *Empire*.”<sup>121</sup>

Propaganda often compared the constructive work conducted by Italians in East Africa to the spread of ancient Roman civilization to barbaric lands.

According to the Roman system, Italy begins to affirm its rule in Ethiopia by building 2800 kilometres of roads. One must realize, to have an accurate picture of the significance of the step, that for centuries Ethiopia and roads have been two opposing words. [...] Ethiopia was one of the very few countries in the world that for ages and ages, and almost until our times, remained ignorant of the use of the wheel!<sup>122</sup>

Soldiers and workers in East Africa were depicted as the new legionaries of Rome. They built roads and bridges in accordance with the Roman motto that “the road is life” [*via = vita*].<sup>123</sup> A drawing in *La Tradotta Coloniale* of two Italians building a large modern bridge over an Ethiopian river claimed playfully that “after two thousand years they will also call us ‘ancient Romans’.”<sup>124</sup> Landscape transformation became a key theme in Fascist colonial propaganda, supposedly setting Italy’s “civilising effort” apart as a uniquely “good colonialism.”<sup>125</sup>

Colonial consciousness based on representations of Roman superiority easily became fused with racism. Two years before the application of racist legislation on the Italian peninsula, the *Corriere* rallied to the cause of racial prestige in East Africa: “The defence of the race is a foundation of Italian expansion; our steadfast character must be even more resilient and stronger to have the right to conquest new lands for Italian labour.”<sup>126</sup> An article by Lidio Cipriani, entitled “Anthropology in Defence of the Empire,” explained the inferiority of African races using the terminology of classic

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<sup>121</sup> “Sole di Roma,” *Corriere della Sera*, 9 May 1937, 1. Italicized in original.

<sup>122</sup> “Sistema romano,” *Corriere della Sera*, 20 May 1936, 1.

<sup>123</sup> “Le grandiose linee della nuova economia etiopica,” *Corriere della Sera*, 7 May 1937, 1.

<sup>124</sup> “Costruzioni,” *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 30 May 1936, 1.

<sup>125</sup> Loredana Polezzi, “Description, Appropriation, Transformation: Fascist Rhetoric and Colonial Nature,” *Modern Italy* 19, no. 3 (2014): 296.

<sup>126</sup> “Il Duce destina ai figli del popolo,” *Corriere della Sera*, 17 June 1936, 1.

scientific racism that had gained popularity during the previous century.<sup>127</sup>

Anthropological science, wrote Cipriani, proved that “compared to Europeans, Africans have less developed regions of vital importance for psychic functions.” Africans, he continued, were capable at best of “simple repetition,” but unlike whites they could not develop intellectual ideas of their own. Moreover, these limitations were biological and, therefore, permanent. Since “every human type has its own material and spiritual qualities that crossbreeding corrupts inexorably,” Cipriani called for “the strict regulation of certain relations, difficult to avoid, between Italians and Africans, inspired by dictates of anthropological science.” The alternative was to fall into decadence, like the French.

Anthropology teaches that the collapse of many peoples in the past had no other cause than indiscriminate crossbreeding. Those nations that today welcome indifferently into their fold inferior races — even Senegalese blacks or the like — and whose members proclaim themselves *citoyens*, with the same rights as men of the white race, thereby expose themselves to very serious and irreparable damage. In domestic animals, as everyone knows, reproduction with an inferior race always results in a shoddy product. It does not work any differently for men.<sup>128</sup>

There was nothing particularly novel about Cipriani’s arguments, nor in the way Italian artists tended to depict Ethiopians with large round pink or white lips as stupid, ignorant, or subservient, similar to the work of the contemporary Belgian cartoonist, Hergé, in *Tintin au Congo*.<sup>129</sup> Regardless, combined with discriminatory indigenous policies and the practice of segregation in East Africa, this propaganda sent a clear message to Italians in Europe as well as in the colonies. The occupied populations had nothing in common with their European conquerors, and they were not to be treated on anything like equal terms.

Although they did not fully correspond to the sombre behaviour demanded by the Fascist regime, themes of adventurism and discovery also played a role in establishing

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<sup>127</sup> Laura Ricci, *La lingua dell'impero: Comunicazione, letteratura e propaganda nell'età del colonialismo italiano* (Rome: Carocci, 2005), 84.

<sup>128</sup> “L’antropologia in difesa dell’Impero,” *Corriere della Sera*, 18 June 1936, 1. Excerpts of the article also are available in Roachat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 193–95.

<sup>129</sup> Hergé’s *Tintin au Congo* was originally published in serial form by the children’s newspaper supplement *Le Petit vingtième* in 1930. For Italian visual representations of natives in cartoons, see, for example, *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 19 October 1935, 4; 7 December 1935, 3–4; and, 6 June 1936, 3; as well as the collection of postcards in Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda fra le due guerre*, 113–16.

colonial consciousness. Newspapers and publishers printed exotic travel stories from the new empire and even some official internal reports got carried away in the excitement of supposedly new discoveries. Nasi described the passage of his troops into the territory of Bale, “discovering mysterious and wild regions untouched by Europeans and confirming everywhere the government’s authority.”<sup>130</sup> The African hunting adventure also was a common theme. A serial novel written by Vincenzo Rovi for *La Tradotta Coloniale*, entitled “The Pith Helmet,” made reference to the headgear issued to Italian soldiers in East Africa and the sensation it gave of being on safari [*un’avventura di caccia*].<sup>131</sup> Many Italians indeed took the opportunity to photograph or shoot at the wildlife they encountered in the colonies — the Fascist hierarch Roberto Farinacci lost a hand trying to fish with grenades.<sup>132</sup>

### *The Enemy*

Propaganda on Italy’s civilizing mission and racial supremacy indirectly bestowed negative attributes on Ethiopians in general, presenting them as socially, culturally, intellectually, and biologically inferior. For Fascism, the African was anti-modern and even subhuman. Added to these representations, the way Italian propaganda depicted its indigenous enemies helped establish the groundwork for the barbarization of warfare in East Africa. Propaganda delegitimized first the conventional Ethiopian army and later the “rebel” enemy as another way to rally Italians behind the war effort while justifying military methods that flouted the rules of war.<sup>133</sup>

During the campaign of 1935 and 1936, Italian propaganda granted the enemy the dignity of combatants in order to justify the huge scale and expense of Italy’s war.

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<sup>130</sup> Nasi to Graziani, 17 June 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170.

<sup>131</sup> “L’elmetto di sughero,” *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 14 September 1935, 3.

<sup>132</sup> The photo album of Vittorio Gregoratti included numerous pictures of wildlife, including an image of soldiers holding outstretched the wings of an eagle that they had shot. Giuliano Bini, et al., *Scjampe Negus!: L’Etiopia e la guerra del Duce viste dall’obiettivo di un soldato semplice; Note e documenti friulani sulle guerre coloniali italiane* (Latisana: La Bassa, 2000), 84, 88, 93, 101, 122, 125. Lessona related the story of Farinacci’s lost right hand in his memoirs with apparent relish. Lessona, *Memorie*, 266.

<sup>133</sup> Labanca, *Una guerra per l’impero*, 47–49.



Nonetheless, Fascist propagandists emphasized the cultural and racial inferiority of their opponents. Ethiopian forces always were presented as unorganized and uncoordinated hordes assaulting Italian positions. Enrica Bricchetto has argued that the frequent use of animal-like stereotypes, through which Ethiopian soldiers were depicted as mice, locusts, or monkeys, were intended to make it easier for Italian personnel to conduct a war of annihilation against an enemy that they saw as physically different from themselves.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, Ethiopian soldiers were regarded as undisciplined, merciless, and savage.

All the tribes of the Ethiopian empire provide excellent warriors. Their valour and disregard for death are beyond discussion. Being good warriors however does not mean being good soldiers. The Abyssinian is not only cruel by nature; he is also very quarrelsome, as observed especially among the Amhara. [...] The Abyssinian warrior, to whichever tribe he belongs, knows neither mercy nor sentiments of chivalry towards the vanquished enemy.<sup>135</sup>

This merely confirmed the expectations of Italians preconditioned by prewar films and literature.<sup>136</sup> Facing such an enemy, the rules of war granted to civilized peoples — such as the humane treatment of prisoners of war — need not be applied.

Italian propagandists emphasized the atrocities or breaches of international law supposedly committed by Ethiopian forces in order to justify Italian reprisals, including the bombing of civilian targets and — indirectly, since Italian authorities never admitted to its application — the use of poison gas.<sup>137</sup> The Italians accused the Ethiopians of using explosive dum-dum bullets, abusing the emblem of the Red Cross, and decapitating Italian prisoners.<sup>138</sup> Aviator Tito Minniti, beheaded after falling prisoner, became a

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<sup>134</sup> Bricchetto, *La verità della propaganda*, 156–58. The use of animal metaphors to “soften the killing process” was commonplace in wartime propaganda and would be employed by both sides during the Second World War. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2015), 328.

<sup>135</sup> “Barbarie e abusi etiopici nelle conclusioni del capitano Jonke,” *Corriere della Sera*, 14 February 1936, 1. The article was supposedly written by an Austrian officer who had formerly instructed and commanded Ethiopian forces in Addis Ababa.

<sup>136</sup> Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins*, 122.

<sup>137</sup> The foreign press accused the Italians of using poison gas and bombing Red Cross hospitals and other civilian targets after November 1935. Rosario Mascia, *I giornalisti alla conquista dell’Impero: Corrispondenze di guerra dall’Africa Orientale 1935–1936* (Milan: ASEFI, 2003), 177.

<sup>138</sup> “Protesta italiana per l’abuso delle insegne della Croce Rossa,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 7 October 1935, 1; “Evirazione e decapitazione di prigionieri italiani,” 16 May 1936, ASMAE, AISS, b. 56, sf. 1f. Italian

martyr for the Italian cause. The manner of his death prompted a flurry of outrage against Ethiopians. An army's conduct after a battle, an article in the *Corriere della Sera* claimed, "best reveals the nature of a people: whether civilized or savage, advanced or still buried in the barbarism of prehistoric times." Atrocities like that committed against Minniti were not, therefore, merely the result of a deranged ruling elite, but were inherent to the nature of a barbaric people that knew only force. Claiming that Italian commands had tried to conduct the war without excessive cruelty or casualties, the article complained that the Ethiopians had refused to respond in kind. A harsh Italian response was justified: "Only the use of force and the merciless demonstration of our military superiority can enforce respect of the law of peoples. [...] Against savages one must fight war without quarter."<sup>139</sup>

Neither side took many prisoners during the seven-month invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>140</sup> Italian soldiers were told consistently that falling into enemy hands would result in torture and death. Among the officers of Walter Pierelli's colonial battalion, "the subject of castration was always on the agenda, in the mess and in any occasion in which the officers had the chance to talk among themselves."<sup>141</sup> Following the declaration of empire, *La Tradotta Coloniale* managed to combine humour with gruesome descriptions of Ethiopian atrocities by printing the founding charter of the fictitious EMPIETA, the *Ente Mutilazione Prigionieri Italiani e Torture Affini* [Agency for the Mutilation of Italian Prisoners and Related Tortures]. Directed by the emperor and his *rases*, the agency's executive functions were "imposed directly on Italian prisoners, through extraction of eyes, scalping, cutting of ears, hands, feet, as well as any other important human organ," concluding with "the decapitation of the prisoner, whose body will be

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representatives to the League of Nations lodged a formal protest over the use of dum-dum bullets in December 1935; the details were officially made public on 3 January 1936. Mascia, *I giornalisti alla conquista dell'Impero*, 213.

<sup>139</sup> "I barbari etiopici uccidono e decapitano un aviatore prigioniero," *Corriere della Sera*, 3 January 1936, 1.

<sup>140</sup> Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 69.

<sup>141</sup> Walter Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre in Africa Orientale* (Bologna: Conti, 1987), 1:11.

distributed in equal parts to the executioners, as compensation for special imperial service.” The final article of the charter prohibited Italians from taking reprisals against Ethiopian prisoners of war.<sup>142</sup> Stories of Ethiopian brutality spurred rumours that Italian troops were given poison pills to swallow in the event of capture, prompting a concerned Pope Pius XI to question the Italian government on the matter.<sup>143</sup> Although the regime assured the Vatican that such suggestions were groundless, its atrocity propaganda clearly encouraged a more brutal conduct of war.

Even during the conventional military campaign against regular Ethiopian armies and feudal levies, Italian propaganda presented the enemy as illegitimate and undeserving of humane treatment. How, then, did propagandists portray the rebel forces that continued to resist the Italian occupation after May 1936? In fact, Ethiopian resistance received very little lip service after the declaration of empire. If Italian soldiers were supposed to be welcomed as liberators, the regime could not admit to the continuation of large-scale armed opposition. As far as Mussolini was concerned, the fighting had ended with the fall of Addis Ababa on 5 May.

I announce to the Italian people and the world that the war is over. I announce to the Italian people and the world that peace is restored. [...] Our peace, a Roman peace, that expresses itself in this simple, irrevocable, definitive proposition: Ethiopia is Italian! Italian by deed because it is occupied by our victorious armies, Italian by right because with the gladius of Rome it is civilization that triumphs over barbarism, justice that triumphs over cruel abuse, redemption of the destitute over a thousand years of slavery. With the populations of Ethiopia, peace is already an accomplished fact. The various races of the former empire of the Lion of Judah have shown the clearest signs of wanting to live and to work peacefully in the shade of the Italian flag [*tricolore*].<sup>144</sup>

Mussolini’s declaration was followed by news of the “rapid occupation of the entire territory,” during which Italian troops were “joyously received by the populations.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> “Il fu codice incivile d’Etiopia,” *La Tradotta Coloniale*, 16 May 1936, 8.

<sup>143</sup> “Lettera anonima al Pontefice,” 4 January 1936, ASMAE, AISS, b. 56, sf. 1a.

<sup>144</sup> “Mussolini al popolo e al mondo,” *Corriere della Sera*, 6 May 1936, 1. “Il Duce annuncia all’Italia ed al mondo,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 6 May 1936, 1. Reproduced in OO, XXVII, 265–66.

<sup>145</sup> “Il Vicerè annuncia agli Etiopi la proclamazione dell’Impero,” *Corriere della Sera*, 11 May 1936, 1. “Le nostre truppe continuano la pacifica marcia in Etiopia festosamente accolte dalle popolazioni,” *Corriere della Sera*, 26 May 1936, 1. See also “L’estensione della nostra occupazione in Etiopia,” *Corriere*

Newspapers gave only the briefest of mentions to the attacks on Addis Ababa at the end of July 1936, defining the enemy as “rebels” and “raiders” [*predoni*].<sup>146</sup> During the occupation of western Ethiopia in 1936, the regime allowed references to dwindling “rebel” resistance, even though the enemy at this point largely comprised Ethiopian formations that had never surrendered to the Italians in the first place.<sup>147</sup> Instead, Italian reports described them as brigands who, “accustomed to looting and raiding, find it difficult to return to their villages and to the hard work of the fields.”<sup>148</sup> Brigandage was dismissed as endemic to the region.

Brigandage that, in Ethiopia, has absolutely no political value, but is connected only with the appalling state of moral and material chaos in which the country has always been held under its pseudo-sovereigns, and that recently has had a new incentive with the war, which has put arms in the hands of thousands of malefactors, bandits and deserters.<sup>149</sup>

Given its prominent place in Italian collective memory, the use of the term “brigandage” carried special importance and would have resonated with the public. As in the 1860s, the term indicated alterity and barbarism, and it deprived enemy fighters of legitimacy. Equating indigenous resisters with outlaws also drew upon long-established practices in Italy’s East African colonies.<sup>150</sup> In May 1936, the regime redefined continued military offensives in Ethiopia as “colonial police operations” [*operazioni di polizia coloniale*], typical of all colonial conquests.<sup>151</sup> The enemy no longer enjoyed any attributes of lawful

*della Sera*, 28 June 1936, 1; and, “Tutti i territori dell’Etiopia sotto il soldo controllo delle nostre armi,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 31 July 1936, 1.

<sup>146</sup> “Durissima lezione ai ribelli,” *Corriere della Sera*, 31 July 1936, 5. “Nell’Etiopia italiana,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 30 July 1936, 1. Not surprisingly, no mention was made of the attacks on Lessona’s train in October. “Le accoglienze di Addis Abeba ai ministri delle Colonie e dei Lavori Pubblici,” *Corriere della Sera*, 14 October 1936, 1.

<sup>147</sup> “Comunicato per la ‘Stefani,’” n.d. [1936], ACS, SPDCR, b. 31, fasc. “Gran Consiglio,” sf. 14.

<sup>148</sup> “L’asestamento in Etiopia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 16 May 1936, 1.

<sup>149</sup> “Rastrellamento,” *Corriere della Sera*, 19 May 1936, 1.

<sup>150</sup> Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins*, 125.

<sup>151</sup> “La nuova terra italiana in Africa,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 8 May 1936, 2. After the formal conclusion of hostilities, lists of Italians killed in East Africa described them as having been lost on “reconnaissance” or in “police operations.” See, for example, “L’albo della gloria,” *Corriere della Sera*, 7 August 1936, 4.

combatants. Even the pursuit and destruction of the armies of *Ras Imru* and *Ras Desta* were described as victories over “raiders.”<sup>152</sup>

After 1936, the regime became officially mute on the rebel enemy in East Africa. Towards the end of that year, the Ministry of Press and Propaganda ordered a shift of emphasis away from police actions towards ethnographic, demographic, industrial, and commercial reports. Having made many sacrifices for the empire, the Italian population needed to see that actual progress was being made.<sup>153</sup> In February 1937, Lessona sent similar orders to his governors; since Mussolini had declared to the Senate that the empire was completely occupied and pacified, journalists could no longer report on military operations.<sup>154</sup> Dispatches from Rome prohibited correspondents like Poggiali from writing about armed conflict in Ethiopia, because “the war is over.”<sup>155</sup>

Despite the relative silence on enemy combatants after the conquest, it is clear that the so-called “rebels,” “brigands,” and “raiders” were presented as illegitimate and just as merciless as the Ethiopian enemy had been in the seven-month war. Brigands, viewed as endemic to lands inhabited by “savage people,” were considered prone to “murder and massacre.” They were believed to mutilate children and kill any male prisoners they took. They were also deemed to be treacherous; not to be trusted if they surrendered, it was considered best to execute them on the spot.<sup>156</sup> Tales similar to that of Minniti’s martyrdom continued to manifest themselves in rare references to Ethiopian resistance in 1937. The *Tribuna Illustrata* described “the heroic end of two airmen forced to land among the raiders.” The pilot and his observer emptied their side arms, “thereby

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<sup>152</sup> “La vittoriosa azione sul Giabassirè,” *Corriere della Sera*, 20 October 1936, 5. “L’aspra lotta nella boscaglia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 21 October 1936, 5. “I predoni distrutti inesorabilmente,” *Corriere della Sera*, 25 December 1936, 1.

<sup>153</sup> Ministry of Press and Propaganda memorandum, 4 December 1936, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

<sup>154</sup> Pirzio Biroli to zone commanders, 3 February 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

<sup>155</sup> Poggiali diary, 3 February 1937.

<sup>156</sup> “Il nemico dei predoni dancali,” *Corriere della Sera*, 23 May 1936, 3.

sowing death among the savages ready to massacre them,” before being overcome by the merciless horde that clearly did not take prisoners.<sup>157</sup>

Italian military commanders encouraged accounts of the guerrilla enemy’s savagery in order to motivate their men. According to Poggiali, who was attached to an Italian column that was ambushed by thousands of rebels, the column commander told his men to save their last bullets for themselves rather than fall into the hands of the “brigands.”<sup>158</sup> Silvano Anselmi, a young medical officer who served in Amhara between 1937 and 1939, later recalled being terrorized by stories of two Italian lieutenants who were decapitated by a rebel scimitar.<sup>159</sup> Such attitudes, whether exaggerated or not, served as they had during the conventional campaign to barbarize the nature of warfare between Italian forces and insurgents. As guerrilla resistance grew more effective and widespread, it became easy to transfer the traits of the enemy — which depended on the support or intimidation of local civilians — onto the general indigenous population as a whole. In the aftermath of the assassination attempt on Graziani, General Pirzio Biroli issued an order of the day on “native psychology and imperial demeanour.” The circular is noteworthy for its conflation of insurgents with natives in general. Ethiopians, it claimed, had responded to Italy’s repeated “acts of clemency” with “dislike, misunderstanding and, worse, open rebellion.” Inherent psychological characteristics of “deceit, treachery, [and] trickery” had turned natives into “masters of duplicity. [...] Cowardly sheep or ravenous hyenas,” depending on the circumstances. Their “way of life is vendetta exacerbated by hatred.”<sup>160</sup> By connecting rebellion and resistance to the indigenous mentality, Pirzio Biroli effectively broadened the definition of the enemy and blurred the line between rebels and the civilians that the Italians had claimed to liberate.

Although Fascist propaganda on the Ethiopian war included nuanced and sometimes contradictory themes, in the context of guerrilla warfare it took on barbaric proportions. The regime’s justifications for war — centred on Italy’s liberating and

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<sup>157</sup> *La Tribuna Illustrata*, 10 January 1937, front cover.

<sup>158</sup> Poggiali diary, 8 July 1936.

<sup>159</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 67–68.

<sup>160</sup> “Psicologia indigena e contegno imperiale,” 12 March 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

civilizing mission and Ethiopia's potential for Italian economic and demographic growth — promoted a sense of superiority and entitlement on the part of the Italian colonizers. Italians had the right as conquerors to exploit the land and its people, all the while convincing themselves that they performed good and humane deeds. Efforts to instill a colonial and racial consciousness among Italians reinforced this sense of superiority and provided the framework to dehumanize natives that did not immediately submit to Italian rule. The recently terminated conventional war against Imperial Ethiopian armies provided a legacy of barbarization that carried forward into the period of occupation when not all Ethiopians chose to welcome the Italians as liberators. “Brigands” and “raiders,” resisting the regime's generous efforts to civilize them, were not recognized as lawful combatants. Within this mindset, the opposition of the rebels, and the apparent support they garnered from elements of the indigenous population, could only be resolved by force.

It is always difficult to determine the actual effectiveness or impact of propaganda. Although this chapter has focused on how Italy's political and military leadership presented the Ethiopian campaign to the Italian population and soldiers in East Africa, the reception of the message needs also briefly to be considered. Did the propaganda campaign for the war in Ethiopia provide a successful model to be duplicated in the future? Scholars are divided over the issue. While Renzo De Felice famously described the period surrounding the Ethiopian war as the “years of consensus” for Mussolini's regime, more recently historians have challenged his conclusion that Italians fully backed the East African adventure.<sup>161</sup> Richard Bosworth and Paul Corner both emphasize the doubts many Italians harboured regarding Italy's civilizing mission and Ethiopia's supposed wealth in resources and suitability to Italian settlement. Fascist propaganda had difficulty countering the facts that Italy fought a war of aggression in East Africa and that the great colonial powers of Britain and France had apparently not seen Ethiopia as worth

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<sup>161</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce: Gli anni del consenso* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974).

conquering for themselves. The status and living conditions of Italian peasants even prompted doubts as to their superiority over their Ethiopian counterparts.<sup>162</sup>

De Felice, Bosworth, and Corner focused their research on the Italian home front. It is even more difficult to isolate the impact of propaganda on those who actually fought in East Africa, leaving aside the dilemma of accounting for the tens of thousands of colonial troops serving under the Italian banner. Official reports on the morale of Italian personnel in East Africa generally were positive, although they hinted at problems caused by illness and long tours of duty away from home.<sup>163</sup> Such reports did not analyze the effectiveness of individual themes of propaganda. Another factor to consider is literacy. During the war and occupation, written propaganda remained the most important means of indoctrination, but perhaps one in five Italian soldiers were illiterate.<sup>164</sup> What this meant for Italian propaganda is not clear. In theory, a modicum of literacy was necessary to access the message of propaganda in the first place, but full literacy that imparted a sense of skepticism on readers may have been counterproductive.<sup>165</sup> Some peasant soldiers gained an elementary level of literacy while serving in the army and others would have had access to propaganda through communal reading, so the negative impact of illiteracy in the army may in fact have been less than in Italian society in general.

Gianni Dore's analysis of the memory of Sardinian veterans regarding the Ethiopian campaign suggests that, for some soldiers at least, Fascist propaganda themes left a lasting impression. Some of Dore's interviewees recalled being drawn in by promises of land, which they lacked in Sardinia; some remembered Ethiopia as being more fertile than their homeland. They also evinced true belief in the Italian civilizing

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<sup>162</sup> Bosworth, "War, Totalitarianism and 'Deep Belief,'" 480–84. Paul Corner, "Italian Fascism: Organization, Enthusiasm, Opinion," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 15, no. 3 (2010): 380–81. These arguments are echoed in the memoirs of Ettore Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 7.

<sup>163</sup> "Relazione militare mensile – maggio-giugno 1937," n.d. [July 1937], AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62.

<sup>164</sup> According to the 1931 census, 17 percent of the class of 1911 — the largest group called up for the invasion of Ethiopia — was illiterate, but illiteracy rates in the South were almost twice the national average. Southern peasants would have been overrepresented in the ranks of the Italian army. Labanca, *Una guerra per l'impero*, 65.

<sup>165</sup> Lenin's literacy campaigns dealt with the same conundrum in Bolshevik Russia. Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 145–46.



mission in Africa, supported by negative views of Ethiopians as lazy workers, undisciplined soldiers, savages, and even cannibals that tortured prisoners and wounded.<sup>166</sup> One must exercise caution when dealing with memory, but Dore's findings suggest that, especially when it came to the indigenous enemy and population, soldiers managed to reconcile elements of the regime's propaganda with the conditions they encountered on the ground.

For Italian officers and soldiers sent to East Africa after 1936, it would have been much more difficult to reconcile the regime's claims of peace and progress in Ethiopia with reality. The relative silence on East African affairs after the first year of empire did little to prepare Italian personnel for what awaited them.<sup>167</sup> The reality of failed colonization and exploitation and of armed rebellion may well have prompted disenchantment with Fascism, as had the regime's domestic failures by the late 1930s.<sup>168</sup> However, towards the occupied populations, it may have added to Italian attitudes of miscomprehension and frustration.

Racist attitudes almost certainly were widespread among Italian military personnel. Classical racism was the theme that tied the sometimes inconsistent traits of Italian propaganda together. Fascist concepts of liberation and exploitation both were based on the racist belief that Ethiopians were inherently and permanently inferior. Traditional racism informed the attitudes and behaviour of many Italians towards the local populations in East Africa. In a remarkable but singular order to his subordinate functionaries and commanders, Nasi warned against the dangers of "racism," which included arbitrary behaviour by officials, moral deficiency, ignorance, an inclination towards cruel orders, the sadistic use of justice, and pretensions towards *ius primae noctis*, the fictitious right of a feudal lord to his vassal's marriage bed on the wedding night. Nasi claimed that the Italian race was less afflicted by racism than others, but he asked his officers to look for "initial symptoms" of racism, since its effects reduced Italian prestige and inhibited pacification. The only "therapy," he concluded, was a return

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<sup>166</sup> Dore, "Guerra d'Etiopia e ideologia coloniale."

<sup>167</sup> Bricchetto, *La verità della propaganda*, 261.

<sup>168</sup> On widespread disenchantment with the Fascist government in Italy, see Corner, "Everyday Fascism."

to “higher latitudes.”<sup>169</sup> One of the only direct critiques of racism by an Italian general — and somewhat hypocritical, given Nasi’s other racist directives — the circular suggests that racism was widespread among soldiers and administrators to the point that it impeded good governance. Among soldiers confronted by a population that looked and behaved differently from them, Fascist propaganda may have found a receptive audience.

The Italian army in East Africa lacked the legal authority and institutional tradition to develop unique forms of propaganda for military personnel in the region. In the colonies, propaganda — broadly defined as the control of information and political messages into and out of East Africa — was a realm contested by the Ministry of Colonies and the Ministry of Press and Propaganda in Rome. The viceroy used his influence to control the military news destined for the mother country. A decade of Fascistization and centralization had brought military publications under the direct supervision of Rome. The process of centralization of propaganda organs reached new heights with the invasion of Ethiopia. The pervasiveness of the Fascist propaganda campaign for Ethiopia left the army little room for deviation. There is no doubt that many regular army officers, and especially senior commanders, saw the war in Ethiopia more as a victory for their institution than for the regime.<sup>170</sup> However, the propaganda they made available to their men during the conflict and the ensuing occupation did not differ significantly from the central themes prescribed by political authorities in Rome.

Those themes focused on rallying Italians behind the war effort, convincing them of the need for colonies, remaking Italians as racially conscious and confident imperial legionaries, and dehumanizing the Ethiopian enemy. Fascist propaganda combined positive and negative components. It encouraged Italians to see themselves as humane liberators bringing civilization to a victimized population. It also presented Ethiopia as a land to be exploited and left no question as to the inferior and barbaric nature of Ethiopians, whether armed or submissive. Fascist propaganda therefore allowed for, and

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<sup>169</sup> “Rassismo,” 9 November 1937, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>170</sup> In his study of memoir literature from the Ethiopian campaign, Labanca notes that although some army officers were “enthusiasts for the regime,” many others were “very cautious.” The war had exposed problems — including the poor quality of reserve officers — that undermined the regime’s claims to have improved the army’s efficiency and readiness for war. Labanca, *Una guerra per l’impero*, 140–42, 215.

seemed to promote, multiple forms of behaviour in the colonies. At the ground level, it could be interpreted differently, depending on individual prejudices and local conditions. However, in areas of conflict, the message was not so contradictory. It provided clear justification for a particularly brutal brand of warfare, both during the invasion of Ethiopia and afterwards.

### 3 Counterinsurgency in Ethiopia

The army's role in the political organization of Italian East Africa and in the propaganda effort that sustained Italy's war of aggression was limited by top-down power structures imposed by the Fascist regime. Decisions made by Fascist ministries in Rome dictated policies in these fields, especially during the crucial first two years of occupation.

Conversely, the conduct of counterinsurgency operations was primarily the responsibility of the military authorities in East Africa, under the direction of the viceroy and his governors. This chapter examines the conditions and methods of the Italian counterinsurgency. Even here, Mussolini and his colonial ministers interfered in local affairs, promoting a clearly Fascist direction not only to civil policy but to military conduct as well.

Following the "reconquest" of Libya in the early 1930s, Italian generals — when they considered counterinsurgency techniques at all — recognized that successful pacification depended on a careful balance of political and military measures, of repression and clemency. However, their narrow view of politics, their equation of military power with political prestige, and their traditional view of irregular fighters and colonial rebels as illegitimate predisposed them towards the doctrine of terror desired by the regime in Ethiopia. With their political options constrained by the Fascist regime, in military affairs Italian generals tended to rely on violence.<sup>1</sup> They pursued an unsophisticated and one-dimensional counterinsurgency policy based primarily on the use or threat of force to destroy insurgents and dissuade the population from supporting them. Often disproportionate to the level and type of resistance actually encountered, Italian repression strategies were guided by racist assumptions, an obsession with military prestige, and by contempt for the resistance that their own policies helped foment.

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<sup>1</sup> Cristiana Pipitone argues that Mussolini's orders not to involve local elites in administration gave Graziani little choice but to rely on force to control his territory. Pipitone, "La operazioni di polizia coloniale," 474.

## Guerrilla Resistance

During their five-year occupation of Ethiopia, Italian forces confronted a widespread and tenacious resistance movement. As Angelo Del Boca writes, “no more than six days passed between the end of the war and the beginning of guerrilla warfare.”<sup>2</sup> The Italians never managed to eradicate Ethiopian resistance to their rule and, as a result, their hold over some of the more isolated parts of the realm remained tenuous. The techniques of the Ethiopian insurgents and Italian security forces evolved over time and in relation to one another. Italian counterinsurgency methods and practices in East Africa developed partly as a response to the type of resistance they faced. At the same time, Ethiopian resistance hardened in response to Italian socio-economic and military policies.

Resistance and counterinsurgency in Ethiopia can be divided into several phases. Each phase conformed to changes in leadership, the composition and strength of the belligerent forces, as well as to foreign and domestic political developments. Between the conventional warfare of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935–36) and the country’s liberation through a British-led offensive (1940–41), the Italian occupation underwent three phases. The first phase, between May 1936 and February 1937, can be considered a continuation of the invasion of 1935. With large numbers of metropolitan forces still available in the theatre, the Italians occupied the western half of Ethiopia and conducted operations against Ethiopian armies whose commanders refused to surrender and continued to offer resistance en masse. The destruction of these armies and the withdrawal of much of the Italian invasion force permitted the transformation to irregular warfare. Even so, the second phase of occupation (1937–1939) continued to employ tens of thousands of colonial troops in “police operations.” This was the most violent period of the occupation, as Italian forces responded to the assassination attempt on Graziani in February 1937 and to the outbreak of major revolt later that summer.<sup>3</sup> Under Italian

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<sup>2</sup> Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, 2:726.

<sup>3</sup> Dominiononi, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 176. Official Italian statistics, based on telegrams sent to Rome, reported 12,248 dead, 485 wounded, and 1,138 rebels taken prisoner in 1936; in 1937, these figures jumped to 37,620 dead, 2,098 wounded, and 716 taken prisoner; in 1938, they claimed 14,718 rebels killed, 736 wounded, and 386 captured; and, in 1939, the total dropped to 9,523 killed, 729 wounded, and 318 taken prisoner. Real figures likely were much higher, because not all deaths were reported and statisticians did

pressure, Ethiopian resistance movements became more slender and developed more sophisticated guerrilla techniques at this time. Although the Duke of Aosta replaced Graziani as viceroy in 1938, he did not make a profound impact on military affairs until the repatriation of Ugo Cavallero as commander of troops in April 1939. This ushered in a third phase (1939–40) in which the exhausted Italians reduced the number and scale of their operations and attempted to pacify some resistance groups through negotiation.<sup>4</sup>

Counterinsurgency forces, by nature, tend to be reactionary. They must respond to local conditions and threats. During the occupation of Ethiopia, Italian authorities encountered a diverse array of conditions subject to regional variation. Italian East Africa included zones of relative calm — the old colonies of Somalia and Eritrea and the new Governorate of Harar, populated by Oromo Muslims — in contrast to regions seemingly in constant revolt — mainly Amhara and Shewa, where Amhara populations and culture predominated. It is not surprising that revolt began and remained strongest among the nobles and populations that had lost the most from the Italian conquest. A host of other factors contributed to the character of local resistance to Italian rule. These could include the strength and attitudes of indigenous leaders, the prevalence of traditions of brigandage, weather patterns, geographic isolation, and terrain. Northern Ethiopia was particularly well-suited to guerrilla warfare; its mountains, forests, and caverns provided

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not include generic casualty reports that referred to “exacting, significant, large, etc.” rebel casualties. Death rates among Italian forces rose and fell in a similar fashion, amounting to between ten and fifteen percent of the rebels reported killed. “Specchio numerico delle perdite ribelli quali risultano dai telegrammi operativi pervenuti dall’A.O.I. dal 6 maggio 1936-XV alla data odierna,” 10 June 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 205. Annual lists comparing Italian to rebel losses are available in the same folder.

<sup>4</sup> Historians have developed alternative, but not mutually exclusive, periodizations for the military operations in East Africa. Pankhurst simply divides Ethiopian resistance into three phases: the army’s resistance to the Italian invasion (1935–36); patriotic resistance to Italian occupation (1936–1940); and, resistance in concert with Commonwealth forces to achieve liberation (1940–41). Richard Pankhurst, “La storia della resistenza all’invasione e occupazione dell’Italia fascista in Etiopia (1935–1941),” trans. Alessandro Magherini, in Bottoni, *L’Impero fascista*, 431–35. Dominiononi and Pipitone both subdivide the period of occupation into three parts, with some differences between them. After the initial phase of continued operations against Ethiopian armies, Pipitone places the Italian response to the assassination attempt on Graziani in a category of its own, emphasizing its role as a turning point in the occupation. She classifies the ensuing period of 1937–41 as a classic colonial war while allowing for significant variation and evolution within it. Pipitone, “La operazioni di polizia coloniale,” 478–79. Dominiononi, whose periodization has been adopted here, divides his study between “national war” (1936), “war of occupation” (1937–39), and “colonial war” (1939–40). Dominiononi, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 155.

refuge for bandits and partisans alike, even in close proximity to administrative centres like Addis Ababa and Gondar.

While conditions throughout much of Ethiopia were favourable to the development of guerrilla techniques, it took more than a year for a truly effective partisan movement to establish itself in Ethiopia. The first year of occupation was comprised primarily of pitched battles between the Italians and armed groups led by recalcitrant Ethiopian nobles. In July 1936, the Italians fended off a major Ethiopian initiative to retake Addis Ababa and spent the following months hunting down the remnants of these forces. Meanwhile, Italian troops pushed westwards into previously unoccupied parts of Harar, Amhara, and Galla Sidamo, where they confronted the armies of *Ras* Imru and *Ras* Desta.<sup>5</sup> Although the Italians referred to these campaigns as “police operations,” they involved major engagements in the open field. Ethiopian forces — accustomed to conventional styles of warfare — actively sought battle with the Italians and were willing to make defensive stands.<sup>6</sup>

Between May 1936 and March 1937, the Italians reported few instances of “guerrilla” activity, including attacks on infrastructure and communications or reprisals against collaborators. However, the aptitude of some insurgent chiefs caused a degree of alarm for the Italian leadership. Sporadic attacks on the railroad between Addis Ababa and Djibouti forced the Italians to adopt a system of armoured trains as early as July 1936.<sup>7</sup> By September, Nasi had become concerned that rebels in western Harar appeared to be adopting “systems of guerrilla warfare that, if not very refined, nonetheless achieve their objective of keeping garrisons in state of alarm and forcing them to watch

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<sup>5</sup> Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 148–75. Bahru Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, 167–70.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see the account of the Cerio Column which operated west of Harar in October 1936. “Relazione sulle operazioni di grande polizia, svolte dal IV Battaglione A.S. (Colonna ‘Cerio’),” 30 November 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62. On Ethiopian military doctrine, see Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest*, 157.

<sup>7</sup> Based on an Italian list of events during this period, only seven percent involved what could be classified as guerrilla activity. “Elenco cronologico avvenimenti dall'occupazione della capitale al 31 marzo 1937,” April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 30. During summer 1936, rebels targeted train bridges and submissive villages along the western portion of the railroad. “Azione svolta il 29/8 da Capitano Mossotti – Arbà,” 1 September 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 168.

communications lines.”<sup>8</sup> In eastern Harar, “guerrillas” under *Fitawrari* Bahade led Nasi’s troops on a chase that lasted the better part of a year before they broke up and fled to British Somaliland in April 1937. By the end of June 1937, Nasi claimed that the “pacification” of his entire governorate was complete; only isolated incidents of brigandage remained.<sup>9</sup>

The first phase of the Italian occupation thus saw the potential for guerrilla warfare without it becoming widespread. Between December 1936 and February 1937, the destruction of the forces of *Ras Imru*, *Ras Desta*, and the Kassa brothers dealt a serious blow to resistance in Ethiopia. Without broad support from the populations — still in a state of shock following the Italian conquest or adopting a wait-and-see attitude to foreign rule — localized guerrilla movements were vulnerable, as events in Harar proved. On the other hand, the defeat of the Ethiopian standing armies, immediately followed by Graziani’s disproportionate response to the assassination attempt in Addis Ababa, forced the resistance gradually to adopt the more widespread use of guerrilla tactics and to develop underground networks for coordination on a nation-wide scale.<sup>10</sup>

Although it lacked a unifying ideology or political direction, the Ethiopian resistance movement became particularly effective at spreading propaganda through traditional songs, leaflets, and underground newspapers.<sup>11</sup> In the summer of 1937, garrisons in western Shewa discovered Amharic leaflets hidden in bamboo shoots destined for town markets.<sup>12</sup> Word of mouth played an important role as well. Italian authorities repeatedly voiced frustration over the ease with which rumours spread and the impact they had on the occupied populations. One such rumour was that Italy had run out of airplanes and that the British would soon intervene in East Africa. When the Italians

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<sup>8</sup> “Situazione Harrarino,” 1 September 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 168.

<sup>9</sup> Nasi to Graziani, 13 April 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 169; “Relazione sull’attività del mese di giugno,” 11 July 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247. Eastern Harar, whose Muslim population Nasi described as a “leaderless mass,” was deemed pacified by December 1936. “Operazioni Arussi,” 3 December 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 169.

<sup>10</sup> Bahru Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, 171–74. Pipitone, “La operazioni di polizia coloniale,” 480–81.

<sup>11</sup> Aregawi Berhe, “Revisiting Resistance in Ethiopia,” 96, 105.

<sup>12</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 40.



responded with an aerial demonstration of force and dropped their own counterpropaganda leaflets, rebel propagandists merely changed their line to claim that Italy still had aircraft but now lacked bombs.<sup>13</sup>

In 1937, the Ethiopian resistance, known as the Patriots [*Arbegnoch*], became a genuine mass movement. Estimates of its numbers range widely, from 25,000 to 300,000. Most Patriot bands included a small number of permanent fighters, largely made up of former soldiers, which would be augmented from time to time by armed peasant masses. Individual resistance leaders could be motivated by diverse factors, including regionalism and religion, but historians agree that the Ethiopian resistance ultimately became a movement of national liberation directed against the Italian occupiers. Although the Patriot leadership included parvenus — former bandits or peasants — who proved exceptional and enduring guerrilla fighters, most leaders remained loyal to Haile Selassie and did not seek to overturn the traditional social order. In exile, the Negus remained an important symbol of resistance.<sup>14</sup>

The great revolt of summer 1937 in Amhara saw the heaviest fighting since the end of the war. Rebel leaders clung stubbornly to mass tactics in an effort to drive Italian forces out of the region altogether. Once the element of surprise wore off, the more-disciplined and better-equipped Italians generally had the upper hand in open engagements. The obstinacy of the Patriots is made clear by the frequency of combat and the number of losses sustained by both sides during the Italian campaign to suppress the uprising. On 29 September, the Angelini Column fought a day-long battle, which included hand-to-hand combat. One Italian battalion lost 5 officers and nearly 150 *askari* in the engagement, and Italian reports noted the “particular persistence of rebels to shoot at our officers.” The Italians estimated that more than one thousand rebels died in the battle.<sup>15</sup> That same day, the Farello Column was involved in combat for five hours after

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<sup>13</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 28 October and 10 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>14</sup> On the Ethiopian resistance movement, see Aregawi Berhe, “Revisiting Resistance in Ethiopia;” Bahru Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, 167–74; Dominiononi, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 276–77; Pankhurst, “La storia della resistenza;” Pipitone, “La operazioni di polizia coloniale,” 480–83; and, Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 176–81.

<sup>15</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 1 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

attacking a rebel position, losing 2 officers and 53 irregular fighters.<sup>16</sup> One day later, another irregular band came under attack, managing to hold out until relieved by a sortie from a nearby garrison. The captain commanding the band was killed, along with a hundred of his men, killed, wounded, or missing.<sup>17</sup> Sustained fighting of this sort continued through October, at great cost to the rebel movement.<sup>18</sup>

After the revolt of 1937, the Ethiopian partisan movement became smaller but more efficient. It became increasingly difficult for the Italians to bring the enemy to battle and force a decision on the open field.<sup>19</sup> By 1938, Italian reports confirmed that “the Amhara have now learned how to conduct a guerrilla war.” They described the enemy as “very mobile” and “free from any worry about supplies,” with perfect knowledge of the terrain in which they operated.<sup>20</sup> According to Italian estimates, the largest guerrilla formations counted between 1,000 and 3,000 men, but there were dozens of smaller bands in Amhara alone.<sup>21</sup> Guerrillas like Belay Zeleke avoided costly attacks on Italian columns and fortified garrisons and instead targeted softer targets, including local collaborators and detachments of labourers.<sup>22</sup> Attacks on workers compelled the

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<sup>16</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 29 September 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>17</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 2 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>18</sup> During 19 and 20 October, the De Laurentis Column sustained a two-day battle against “rebels,” losing one officer and 106 irregulars killed, and another 125 wounded. The Italians claimed to kill more than 600 rebels in the process. Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 21 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>19</sup> Dominionioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 176, 226.

<sup>20</sup> “Relazione politico-amministrativa del mese di maggio,” 30 May 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247. Amedeo di Savoia to Teruzzi, 18 November 1938, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

<sup>21</sup> Intelligence reports provided the approximate whereabouts of thirty of the most important guerrilla bands in Amhara. “Relazione politica del mese di gennaio 1939,” 1 February 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. See also “Relazione al Duce sul viaggio compiuto nell'Impero,” 31 January 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207.

<sup>22</sup> Belay Zeleke was active in Gojam even before the great revolt of 1937. An outlaw of noble birth before the occupation, the Italians regarded him as a “brigand.” “Notiziario del giorno ventinove giugno,” 30 June 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62. “Notiziario politico e relazione mensile mesi Dicembre e Gennaio,” 10 March 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. “Notiziario quindici settembre,” 16 September 1938, and “Notiziario tre febbraio,” 4 February 1939, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

Governor of Amhara to dissolve some of the smaller work camps outside of Gondar and concentrate them into larger fortified ones until security could be restored.<sup>23</sup>

Guerrilla hit-and-run attacks kept Italian forces busy through 1938, even through the rainy season. Operational columns of varying size incessantly made marches and countermarches back and forth across Amhara and Shewa without coming to grips with the main resistance forces.<sup>24</sup> Rebel leaders made a name for themselves by avoiding capture. The Italian practice of placing bounties on their heads may have contributed to their fame.<sup>25</sup> Some Italian officers shared a grudging respect for their most implacable enemies. According to Silvano Anselmi, Italians dubbed the legendary rebel leader, Abebe Aregai, the “Garibaldi of Abyssinia.”<sup>26</sup> Ettore Formento’s irregular band spent a year hunting down a group of rebels under Banti Goro, who even addressed letters to Formento wishing the Italian commander good health and promising him a gruesome demise upon their next meeting.

Banti seemed elusive: traps, informants, assassins, clashes, a reward of twenty thousand lire placed on his head by Sector Command, did not work; one night he was killed by a few villagers [*balagher*] that lay in wait along a wooded path for some thieves that had been reported there. Banti Goro at the head of a little group of five or six men, with a light machinegun on his back, was hit by the only gun shot fired on that occasion.

For all of us it was almost a day of mourning, we felt deprived of something that belonged to us, not to mention that we had always admired his courage and character. We were sorry then that he had died in such a banal way because he did not deserve it.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See the Duke of Aosta’s daily bulletins from 11 and 13 September 1938, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

<sup>24</sup> Official Italian lists of combat events reported for the year 1938, tabulated by region and day, demonstrate the persistent level of activity maintained both by Ethiopian Patriots and Italian counterinsurgency forces in all seasons. See “Operazioni polizia coloniale: Riassunti avvenimenti 1938,” ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 206. Together, Cavallero and Mezzetti planned extensive series of operations up to eight months in advance, covering the whole of Amhara. Mezzetti to Amedeo di Savoia, n.d., and “Verbale della riunione tenuta il 17 settembre in Addis Ababa fra S.E. Comandante Superiore delle Forze Armate A.O.I. e S.E. Governatore dell’Amara,” 17 September 1938, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 214.

<sup>25</sup> For example, Nasi offered 10,000 lire to whoever brought in any of five rebel leaders, dead or alive. Nasi to Bertoldi, 27 October 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 168.

<sup>26</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 283.

<sup>27</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 119.

The escapades of guerrilla leaders, subject to exaggerated storytelling and combined with an often heavy-handed Italian response, helped the rebels gain sympathy and support from local populations.

When they found spontaneous loyalty lacking, Ethiopian guerrillas also intimidated populations by assassinating or kidnapping collaborators and burning villages that had submitted to Italian rule. Italian authorities recognized the level of coercion employed by the rebels, and the fact that many villagers were forced to leave their homes “in fear of sanctions.” However, more generally, Italian commanders took abandoned villages as “proof of their connivance with rebels.”<sup>28</sup> In this way, it became increasingly difficult for populations in zones subject to guerrilla activity to remain neutral. The inability of Italian authorities to guarantee the safety of villages dealt a serious blow to their pacification efforts. By 1939, the Italian presence in the more isolated parts of Amhara had become so limited that rebels had complete freedom to terrorize local populations. Whereas in 1936 and 1937 the rainy season provided a challenge for the Italians — unable to manoeuvre their larger forces and bring to bear their superior weaponry — by 1939, the monsoon brought a welcome respite from rebel activity.<sup>29</sup>

For Italian commanders, the nature of guerrilla warfare in Amhara and Shewa after 1937 was particularly frustrating. In times of Italian success, local populations would provide intelligence on rebel movements and help capture and butcher those that fled. But in times of rebel success — for example, if they managed to besiege an Italian garrison or block an Italian column — villagers and peasants would spontaneously join with rebel forces, confident in victory and easy spoils. These “occasional rebels” were armed mostly with spears or hunting rifles but were, according to Formento, merciless.<sup>30</sup> Other Italian memoirists shared Formento’s frustration. Walter Pierelli, an officer in a

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<sup>28</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 21 October, 2, 4, and 21 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a. “Relazione sui fatti d’arme più importanti,” 29 October 1938, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

<sup>29</sup> In 1936 and 1937, Italian commanders saw the rainy season as the most likely period for rebel activity. “Attività militare durante il period delle piogge,” 7 October 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171; “Operazioni Arussi,” 3 December 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 169; and, “Disposizioni per la stagione delle piogge,” 3 July 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62. By October 1939, Amhara’s Governor Frusci noted that the dry season in fact was favourable to insurgents, since it permitted them to move freely and threaten local populations. “Relazione politica del mese di Ottobre 1939,” 1 November 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>30</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 156–57, 166.

colonial battalion, complained that “both native subjects and native rebels dressed the same way; they all had the same faces and we distinguished between them only whether they were armed or not. But they were able to hide any weapons beneath their *shammas* [robes].”<sup>31</sup> Anselmi, a medical officer, found it hypocritical when villagers sought the services of Italian doctors: “At least in this respect faith in us was complete and people who gladly had fired upon us had no qualms over begging for our help.”<sup>32</sup> Such attitudes of mistrust were shared by the Italian military leadership. After the assassination attempt of February 1937, Graziani repeatedly lamented the hypocrisy and falsity of the Ethiopian people: “To the generosity and kindness I showed them in every shape and form for a year they have responded with treason and bombs.”<sup>33</sup> In this atmosphere, it was difficult for cooler and more objective heads to prevail.

By the end of the Italian occupation, all the dynamics of a classic guerrilla war were at play in Ethiopia. The Italians faced an elusive enemy that employed hit-and-run tactics against isolated and vulnerable targets, melting away before the Italians could respond. The ability of guerrillas to avoid pitched battle and to seek cover in difficult terrain and among indigenous populations invited harsh reprisals from exasperated Italian troops that too often fell upon unarmed villagers. The impossibility of neutrality in such a situation forced the population to take sides and made collateral damage difficult to avoid. All these factors contributed to Italy’s military policy and behaviour in East Africa.

However, Italian practices cannot be viewed as a proportionate military response to local conditions of insurgency. It is significant that true guerrilla warfare was slow to take root in Ethiopia; although the resistance adopted elements of a guerrilla-style insurgency from the outset, their application did not become sophisticated or widespread until after the failed revolt of 1937. Up to that point, Italian commanders confronted either large conventional forces that were relatively easy to identify or small bands that posed only a limited security threat. Harsh measures of repression targeting non-

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<sup>31</sup> Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:330.

<sup>32</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 215.

<sup>33</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 11 May 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1b.

combatants predated the maturation of guerrilla warfare in Ethiopia. Italian military violence developed and peaked well before the establishment of a mass guerrilla movement.

## Repression and Reprisals

From the first days of the occupation, Italian authorities and security forces responded to resistance with violent repression aimed at obtaining the population's obedience and loyalty through terror. In part, this policy was the result of Fascist directives from Rome, but the eagerness with which Italian military authorities pursued it reveals that it also emanated from and conformed to Italian military culture and tradition. In the context of establishing a Fascist empire — with political leaders not only permitting military violence to go unchecked but actively encouraging its escalation — Italian commanders in Ethiopia applied the brutality of the Brigands' War of the 1860s and the more recent "reconquest" of Libya with extra vigour. Italian officers widely accepted the application of force as an effective means of persuading populations not to join the rebel cause, and it may have helped prevent early resistance movements from gaining popular support.<sup>34</sup> However, in Ethiopia the Italian regime's repression became so indiscriminate and uncompromising as to render it counterproductive.

The arbitrary nature of Italian policy began with blanket declarations from the *Duce* himself, which provided little room for subtlety. Less than a month following the declaration of empire, Mussolini ordered that "all rebels taken prisoner must be shot by firing squad." A month later, he authorized Graziani "to initiate and conduct systematically a policy of terror and extermination against the rebels and complicit populations."<sup>35</sup> These brief orders provided the basis for the Italian army's treatment of

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<sup>34</sup> Bahru Zewde blames the public fear of Italian reprisals for the failure of the "Black Lion" resistance organization to gain mass support in 1936. Bahru Zewde, "The Ethiopian Intelligentsia and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 281.

<sup>35</sup> Mussolini to Graziani, 5 June 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32. Mussolini to Graziani, 8 July 1936, in Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 170.

prisoners in Ethiopia. For any officers that wavered between offering insurgents the carrot or the stick, Graziani affirmed the need to follow the *Duce*'s orders that

all those in any way responsible for rebellion in any form must immediately be shot. Continuing in current demonstrations of uncertainty or reserve will result in the immediate repatriation of the commanders responsible. It is time to put an end to weakness of any sort when our fallen soldiers continue to be barbarically emasculated.<sup>36</sup>

When Pirzio Biroli reported taking sixty-three prisoners in December 1936, Graziani rebuked him with a reminder of Mussolini's policy. Less than a week later, Pirzio Biroli conveniently made amends, reporting that all sixty-three prisoners had been shot en route to their trial when they allegedly displayed signs of resistance.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the Italians took very few prisoners between 1936 and 1940. Officially, they reported 76,906 rebels killed, compared to just 2,847 taken prisoner.<sup>38</sup>

Although they took few prisoners in battle, the Italians did establish concentration camps for politically suspect individuals and their families. During operations, governors set up temporary camps to detain civilian populations suspected of supporting the rebels. In some cases women and children whose villages were destroyed in reprisals were deported or redistributed to other regions of the empire.<sup>39</sup> The most infamous Italian camp was situated at the coastal site of Danane, south of Mogadishu in Somalia. Originally established in 1935 to hold Ethiopian prisoners of war, the site was later transformed into a concentration camp administered by the *Carabinieri*.<sup>40</sup> After the attempt on Graziani's life, Italian authorities interned Amhara notables and clerics at Danane with their families. By December 1937, according to official Italian records, the

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<sup>36</sup> Governors passed on Graziani's orders verbatim to their subordinates. Pirzio Biroli to subordinate commands, 22 October 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171.

<sup>37</sup> See the correspondence between Pirzio Biroli and Graziani, 12–19 December 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171.

<sup>38</sup> "Specchio numerico delle perdite ribelli quali risultano dai telegrammi operativi pervenuti dall'A.O.I. dal 6 maggio 1936-XV alla data odierna," 10 June 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 205.

<sup>39</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 20 June 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255; Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 8 July 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62.

<sup>40</sup> Centro Furio Jesi, *La menzogna della razza*, 285. Gustavo Ottolenghi, *Gli italiani e il colonialismo: I campi di detenzione italiani in Africa* (Milan: Sugarco, 1997), 164–66.

population of the camp reached 1,753.<sup>41</sup> As many as 6,500 Ethiopians passed through the camp. Half of them died due to shortages of food and drinking water, unhygienic conditions, dysentery, and the brutality of camp personnel.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike his initially lukewarm response to Mussolini's policy of "no power to the *ras*," Graziani offered no objection to executing anyone that could be defined as a "rebel." The definition was intentionally vague and Italian authorities adopted the same euphemisms used in Italian propaganda for official discourse. During Graziani's term as viceroy, Italian correspondence most frequently referred to partisans as "rebels" or "brigands." Under the Duke of Aosta, the term "raiders" became more prominent among dispatches to Rome.<sup>43</sup> For the most part, the Italians used the terms interchangeably. Within the colonial battalions, officers and men referred to anyone that took up arms against Italy as *shifta* [bandits], regardless of their actual status.<sup>44</sup> Even partisan formations flying the Ethiopian colours were reported as "raiders."<sup>45</sup>

The use of these terms was closely connected to Italy's premature declaration of victory in Ethiopia and had important legal ramifications. Italian diplomats recognized that the formal cessation of war would "reassure the pacifists that the horrors of war have ceased, without hurting us in the meantime since it would permit the continuation of military police operations."<sup>46</sup> A consequence of this diplomatic move to avoid sanctions was to place Ethiopian resistance further outside the bounds of international rules of war. It ensured that the army had no legal obligation to treat resisters as legitimate combatants.

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<sup>41</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 28 February 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1b. Graziani to Teruzzi, 21 December 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>42</sup> The limited information available on conditions in the Danane concentration camp comes from the affidavits of survivors, submitted to the United Nations War Crimes Commission. See DIWC, I, 69. See also the material compiled as part of the research project, *I campi fascisti*, available at [http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda\\_campo.php?id\\_campo=49](http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_campo.php?id_campo=49).

<sup>43</sup> See ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 208, "Operazioni polizia coloniale, telegrammi 1940."

<sup>44</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 71. Although the term was intended to deligitimize Patriot fighters, in Ethiopia *shifta* implied rebellion against authorities who had failed to render justice. The label became a badge of honour for many Ethiopians. Aregawi Berhe, "Revisiting Resistance in Ethiopia," 95–96.

<sup>45</sup> "Relazione militare relativa al mese di dicembre 1939," 15 February 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 223.

<sup>46</sup> Pompeo Aloisi to Mussolini, 28 April 1936, DDI 8, III, 785.



“Rebels,” even if they had never submitted to Italian rule in the first place, were deemed traitors, and for Italian generals “treason against Italy must be punished inexorably.”<sup>47</sup> Although Italy’s military penal code officially respected the rights of prisoners and hostages, such language “exploited the ancient inapplicability of the European and international rules of war to its farthest limits when confronting non-European forces.”<sup>48</sup>

In the early phases of the occupation, the Italians made particular example of captured rebel leaders. Previous experience in Libya and Eritrea convinced Italian generals that the elimination of indigenous leaders rendered the masses obedient.<sup>49</sup> However, if not conducted properly, the killing of prestigious chiefs instead could feed anti-Italian sentiment amongst fellow elites and the populations of their fiefdoms. The mishandled execution of the Kassa brothers in December 1936 had major repercussions on Italian pacification efforts during the next four years. Wondosson Kassa, who had stirred up revolt in Lasta, was captured and executed on 10 December, but Graziani offered his younger brothers, Aberra Kassa and Asfawossen Kassa, clemency if they turned themselves in. On 21 December, the brothers surrendered to General Ruggero Tracchia who, after offering them coffee, immediately had them shot. Tracchia claimed that the government had given the Kassa brothers until the 19th to surrender; they had failed to meet the deadline.<sup>50</sup> In fact, Italian authorities had determined months earlier that “the name of Kassa must disappear from the vocabulary in Lasta.”<sup>51</sup> In the short term, the death of the Kassa brothers dealt a crippling blow to the Ethiopian resistance movement. In the long term, it made the Italian regime appear untrustworthy and arbitrary.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Sekota Garrison Command, 13 September 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171.

<sup>48</sup> Nicola Labanca, “Colonial Rule, Colonial Repression and War Crimes in the Italian Colonies,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 304, 307.

<sup>49</sup> “Psicologia indigena e contegno imperiale,” 12 March 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

<sup>50</sup> 2nd Native Brigade war diary, 21 December 1936, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1a.

<sup>51</sup> “Lasta,” 13 September 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171.

<sup>52</sup> Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 152. Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 184–86.

Although he intervened to spare the life of *Ras Imru*, who was deported to Italy, Mussolini approved of the exemplary shootings and demanded that “all rebel leaders that from now on fall into our hands will immediately be shot by firing squad.”<sup>53</sup> This included *Ras Desta*, who was captured and executed the following February. But Italian generals had demonstrated that they did not need Mussolini’s encouragement. Through 1937, Italian military authorities remained convinced that the deaths of rebel leaders made a strong impression on indigenous populations and discouraged them from joining in revolt. Under Graziani, notables sometimes were executed by public hanging in native markets to maximize the impact of their punishment.<sup>54</sup>

In the case of Hailu Kebede, the leader of another major uprising in Lasta who was killed in combat, the Italians paraded his severed head through nearby towns and villages to spread word of his demise. Anselmi, whose unit participated in the operations, later commented:

It was a macabre barbaric ancient practice, that we could abhor in our hearts, but that was maybe a necessity, given the mentality of the Amharic populations and the usefulness of giving an impression of force, the sole quality truly appreciated by the former subjects of the Negus.<sup>55</sup>

Other Italian personnel kept photographs of Hailu Kebede’s head, and of other dispatched Patriots, as reassuring mementos of their superiority and control.<sup>56</sup> Italian intelligence reports credited Hailu Kebede’s death for “producing disillusionment and detachment among the populations that had followed him.”<sup>57</sup> However, the Italians had already lost the trust of the indigenous populations. In November 1937, the Tosti Column found villages around Sekota and Lalibela abandoned by populations that recalled “with terror

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<sup>53</sup> Mussolini to Graziani, 31 December 1936, and Lessona to Graziani, 4 January 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

<sup>54</sup> Nearly one thousand chiefs and natives were present to witness the hanging of a noble “brigand” and four of his followers in the market of Debre Tabor. Graziani to Lessona, 20 May 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 29. Early on in the occupation of Amhara, Pirzio Biroli spared some captured rebels from summary execution in order to hang them in public markets. Amhara Armed Forces Command war diary, 20 August 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171.

<sup>55</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 70.

<sup>56</sup> Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins*, 119–33.

<sup>57</sup> “Notiziario politico e relazione mensile mesi agosto e settembre 1937,” 21 November 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. De Feo to Graziani, 25 September 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

the numerous shootings carried out the past year that they claim were conducted despite having promised a pardon.”<sup>58</sup>

Executions became commonplace during the first years of the occupation. The Italians employed several euphemisms to refer to executions. Official telegrams, as well as speaking of rebels “shot” [*passati per le armi*], commonly noted the application of “disciplinary measures” [*provvedimenti di rigore*] or spoke of “giving a firm lesson” [*dare dura lezione*] to rebellious populations.<sup>59</sup> The language and tone of Italian telegrams and reports leaves little doubt that all three terms involved executions. In less formal discourse, Italian personnel referred to “doing someone in” [*far la festa*].<sup>60</sup>

The banality of violence in the first years of the occupation undermined Italian claims to bring a more just and less arbitrary administration to Ethiopia. Most executions were carried out by firing squads. In theory, these were supposed to be conducted according to solemn ritual, providing the sensation of “the most complete justice,” both swift and consistent. Arrests of “suspects” in the field were to be followed by a “trial conducted with speed but with all form and pomp by means of an improvised court martial” with the collaboration of local indigenous elites.<sup>61</sup> However, Italian officers often did away with such formalities. Walter Pierelli’s vivid description of the botched execution of a man, accused of inciting villagers to flee from the Italians, provides an indication of the haphazard nature that executions could take in the field.

I summoned a squad of scouts; I had the unfortunate man seized (he was about 35 years old) and took him away, in search of a suitable spot, until I found a hole in the ground, rather large, about a metre deep; I deployed the squad in front of the condemned man and ordered them to fire. A volley of shots hit the wretch [*disgraziato*]; one bullet struck him in the middle of the forehead; the frontal bone split in half, with a vertical fracture that, incredibly, changed his features. If I had not personally followed the scene I would have said that they switched men on me: before he had a normal face, I would say not ugly [...] Afterwards he seemed

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<sup>58</sup> De Feo to Graziani, 7 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>59</sup> See “Segnalazioni a Roma (Ministero A.I.) dei provvedimenti di rigore attuati,” ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 29; and, Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 24 September 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>60</sup> Poggiali diary, 12 July 1936.

<sup>61</sup> “Relazione delle operazioni di sottomissione e disarmo dell’Ermacciò 15 aprile – 3 maggio 1937,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31.

like a wrinkled and pale old man. I was horrified [*Rimasi impressionato*]. The man still moved and I, not wanting him to suffer, ordered that he be given the *coup de grace*. An *askari* shot him, but the man still thrashed about. I ordered another shot and the man continued to move because the *askari* fired the so-called death blow [*colpo di grazia*] at his body instead of his head. So I took the barrel of an *askari*'s rifle and pointed it directly at the head, almost close enough to touch it and I told him to fire. The *askari* fired. The man still moved. I did not know what else to do, so I told all fifteen of the *askari* in the squad to fire another shot and the *askari* fired. The man, who seemed immortal, this time did not move anymore. I felt almost responsible for his death.<sup>62</sup>

This episode reinforces the fact — often absent from official bulletins and reports — that killing can be messy. Many executions in Ethiopia were carried out under the supervision of young reserve subalterns like Pierelli in the midst of colonial operations where time and patience were short, and where propaganda and directives consciously transgressed moral, ethical, and legal limits.

Executions extended beyond actual rebels caught bearing arms against Italian forces. Italian reports of combat casualties did not include all summary executions or those shot in reprisals; as a result, the overall figures of civilians killed during the occupation are not known.<sup>63</sup> There were several criteria according to which non-combatants could receive the same fate as rebels. One of the most common charges resulting in execution involved the illicit possession of firearms. Italian colonial doctrine considered the complete disarmament of local populations a necessary prerequisite to pacification.<sup>64</sup> Natives caught with guns, or even bullets, on their persons or in their homes could be shot. Although a policy of disarmament was a normal precaution for a regime of occupation, it became problematic in Ethiopian society and ultimately contributed to wider revolt against Italian rule. For many Ethiopians, rifles were a “sign of virility[,] of strength[,] of prestige.”<sup>65</sup> Some Italian officers recognized that for the populations in particularly isolated regions,

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<sup>62</sup> Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:324–25.

<sup>63</sup> Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 145, 271.

<sup>64</sup> Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 176. AUSSME, L-3, b. 79, fasc. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Poggiali diary, 7 July 1936.

the rifle[,] more than a sign of prestige, is considered an indispensable means of living to perform raids and robberies and to defend their constantly threatened property. Nothing more logical than that the population was reluctant to turn in their arms so long as they had not seen that our local garrisons and posts guaranteed their security.<sup>66</sup>

Ethiopian populations thus viewed arms bans as unjustified assaults on their masculinity and livelihood. Occasionally, they revolted in direct response to Italian disarmament campaigns.<sup>67</sup>

After the conquest of the western territories and the establishment of an Italian administrative apparatus at the beginning of 1937, the Italians accelerated their policy of disarming the indigenous populations.<sup>68</sup> Despite the policy's unpopularity, Graziani insisted on its implementation without prevarication. He asked his governors to

make it well understood by the populations that the only way to live in peace is by consigning firearms to the government that alone has the right to possess them and that will provide with its troops for the defence of all. The supreme aim of disarmament must, that is, be achieved through forceful action accompanied by sensible propaganda and persuasion. [...] Punitive measures [*provvedimento rigore*] against transgressors and holders [of arms] naturally must be applied with wisdom and complete justice.<sup>69</sup>

Reflecting the limits of his concept of persuasion, Graziani insisted that “political action must not slide gradually into apparent negotiations. [...] The government commands, it does not negotiate.” Column commanders received orders that in carrying out “political actions” they must not “come to pacts with the population but impose our will by any

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<sup>66</sup> “Relazione delle operazioni di sottomissione e disarmo dell’Ermacciò 15 aprile – 3 maggio 1937,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31.

<sup>67</sup> “Ribellione nel territorio del Governo Amara,” 25 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c. Dominioni argues that, although recourse to decrees against the circulation of arms was a necessary measure for maintaining public order in a state of war, the problem was their application throughout the empire rather than focusing on actual areas of insurrection. Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 134.

<sup>68</sup> Pirzio Biroli was slow to impose the policy in Amhara; however, once all Italian district offices had been established, he ordered total disarmament to begin before the rainy season of 1937, with any opposition to be met with executions and the destruction of villages. “Disarmo delle popolazioni,” 17 March 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

<sup>69</sup> Graziani to Pirzio Biroli, 7 September 1937, ACS, FG, b. 29, fasc. 29, sf. 33c.

means.” Graziani interpreted the reluctance of the population to turn in their firearms as an act of rebellion.<sup>70</sup>

Given the nature of the messages and orders issued by the viceroy, it is not surprising that searches and sweeps for firearms resulted in excessive violence by Italian forces. Village leaders who denied the presence of firearms were held hostage and shot when the first gun was found, as proof to the population that the Italians did not abide liars.<sup>71</sup> Italian forces conducted “exemplary shootings” for the illegal possession of firearms throughout the empire against all populations, including in Harar.<sup>72</sup> By 1938, after Graziani’s departure, Nasi felt compelled to reprimand his officers for resorting to torture as a means of unearthing hidden weapons: “I have said that I would prefer that a hundred rifles remain hidden, rather than passing into history like Torquemada.”<sup>73</sup>

If they were not shot summarily, villagers caught with weapons had to appear before a military court. To provide the impression of Roman justice, executions were carried out after “theatrical” public trials, often involving more than one defendant at a time.<sup>74</sup> However, in the trials witnessed by war correspondent *Ciro Poggiali*, the treatment of arms bans violations proved arbitrary. Early in the occupation, an Italian court sentenced four natives to death for illegal possession of firearms, even though they claimed to have been sent by their chief to sell the rifles to Italian authorities. The court responded that “in Addis Ababa rifles are paid for with life and not with Thalers.” To *Poggiali*, the judges seemed “lazy, tired, distracted: the sentence was written before the

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<sup>70</sup> Graziani to De Feo, 2 November 1937; and, De Biase to Graziani, 8 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>71</sup> “Norme per la prosecuzione dei rastrellamenti onde raggiungere il disarmo completo delle popolazioni dell’Ermacciò–Ciakò–Daua,” 3 May 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31. The same orders were exported for use in other sectors. See “Sottomissione, disarmo e pacificazione del Beghemeder,” 16 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31.

<sup>72</sup> “Relazione sull’attività del mese di luglio,” 17 August 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>73</sup> “Sistemi negussiti,” 27 May 1938, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Nasi to Graziani, 25 June and 15 July 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170. Not all sentences resulted in death. A trial in Harar sentenced seven men to imprisonment and absolved another five, executing only one man as an example for the population. Nasi to Graziani, 27 September 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170.

trial.”<sup>75</sup> A year later, Poggiali recorded a similar tale of a man who had come to the capital in response to an Italian offer to pay for arms turned in. The man had hidden his rifles in his cart so he would not be shot as a rebel on his way into town. However, he was arrested upon his arrival. In the morning, when Graziani was told merely that another native had been caught bearing arms, the exasperated viceroy ordered an immediate trial and hanging. According to Poggiali, “the court martial supinely obeyed.”<sup>76</sup>

Between 10 June 1936 and 31 December 1939, the Italians confiscated 345,514 rifles, 1,960 pistols, 808 machine guns, 19 cannons, and 18,145 hand-to-hand weapons.<sup>77</sup> These figures demonstrate one of the major obstacles facing the Italian occupation — a population with a tradition of and ready access to firearms — as well as the tenacity with which Italian authorities conducted their policy of disarmament. Even so, the policy failed. Many of the rifles sequestered and counted were obsolete models or hunting rifles.<sup>78</sup> By mid-1939, the Italians estimated that 100,000 rifles remained unaccounted for in Amhara alone, leaving the region “at the mercy of a match.”<sup>79</sup> The Duke of Aosta was more lenient and pragmatic than Graziani over total disarmament. He never convinced the Ministry of Italian Africa to abandon the policy altogether, but he managed to delay its implementation in regions where it risked sparking revolt.<sup>80</sup>

In the aftermath of the assassination attempt on Graziani, civilians more frequently became targets of Italian repression. Massacres in Addis Ababa and Debre Libanos were the most overt manifestations of Fascist terror. Graziani’s injuries prevented him from organizing a coordinated response to the assassination attempt on 19 February 1937. During the first forty-eight hours after the incident, Fascist Blackshirts

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<sup>75</sup> Poggiali diary, 15 July 1936.

<sup>76</sup> Poggiali diary, 22 July 1937.

<sup>77</sup> Dominiononi, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 270. Most of the heavy weapons were taken in the first phase of operations against regular Ethiopian forces that refused to surrender.

<sup>78</sup> Nasi complained that the weapons counts sent in by his subordinates failed to distinguish between modern and older types of firearms, which made it difficult for him to determine the true effectiveness of disarmament. “Rastrellamento armi,” 31 December 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 169.

<sup>79</sup> “Verbale in data 15 giugno c.a. delle conversazioni tenute fra S.E. Nasi e S.E. Frusci,” 18 July 1939, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 1.

<sup>80</sup> “Abebè Aregai,” 22 January 1940, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 214.

and Italian civilians went on a murderous rampage through the capital, burning 4,000 huts, killing anywhere between 1,000 and 6,000 natives, and arresting thousands more.<sup>81</sup> Graziani put an end to the uncoordinated Fascist vendetta in the capital without fully condemning it. “The natives,” he said, “know perfectly well that every form of punishment that can befall them today is deserved but on the other hand I cannot machinegun them en masse or put the entire city to the flame[,] forced to concern myself with repercussions abroad.”<sup>82</sup>

Graziani blamed the assassination plot on “Abyssinian notables” and the Orthodox clergy. After executing or deporting much of the Ethiopian intelligentsia, which by 1941 “virtually ceased to exist,” he turned on the Church.<sup>83</sup> Graziani dispatched a column under his trusted collaborator Maletti to the prestigious monastery of Debre Libanos, which he considered “a den of criminals, thieves, and assassins.” On 20 May, Graziani ordered all the monks executed for their supposed role in the plot on his life, but undoubtedly also to send a message to the Ethiopian population in general. The executions ran through the night and continued over the course of the following week, extending to deacons and lay people, as a “Roman example of prompt, inflexible punishment.”<sup>84</sup> Although Graziani reported 450 victims, recent investigations have determined that the final death toll likely numbered between 1,800 and 2,200, virtually the entire congregation of the monastery.<sup>85</sup>

These two incidents were part of a general escalation of violence in the months leading up to the outbreak of major revolt in Shewa and Amhara. During this time, the

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<sup>81</sup> Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 190–94; Del Boca, “I crimini del colonialismo fascista,” 243–46; Poggiali diary, 19 February 1937.

<sup>82</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 28 February 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1b.

<sup>83</sup> Ian Campbell, *The Massacre of Debre Libanos, Ethiopia 1937: The Story of One of Fascism’s Most Shocking Atrocities* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2014), 68–69. Bahru Zewde, “The Ethiopian Intelligentsia,” 271.

<sup>84</sup> Graziani to Maletti, 7 and 8 April 1937; and, Maletti report, n.d., ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 33c.

<sup>85</sup> Campbell’s investigations involved field research and eye-witness interviews. Campbell surmises that Graziani intentionally under-reported the number of deaths, fearing that his superiors in Rome would think he had gone mad after the attempt on his life. Campbell, *Massacre of Debre Libanos*, xxxi, 168–73. Even this unprecedented attack on religious elites failed to illicit a response from the Holy See. Lucia Ceci, *L’interesse superiore: Il Vaticano e l’Italia di Mussolini* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2013), 188.



Italians targeted different segments of Ethiopian society and did not reserve punitive measures only for those caught with weapons. Graziani regularly sent Rome telegrams recording headcounts by category, which reveal how Italian violence became ever more commonplace and arbitrary through the response to the assassination attempt. While Italian authorities continued to execute “rebels” and those caught with firearms, they now extended capital punishment to common criminals [*delinquenti*], spreaders of false news or anti-Italian propaganda, former Ethiopian army officers, native traitors [*traditori*], witch doctors [*stregoni*], and those deemed generally untrustworthy [*infidi*].<sup>86</sup>

Between March and July 1937, Graziani reported 1,918 executions conducted in response to the assassination attempt. Excluding the monks of Debre Libanos, the single largest group targeted were common criminals, such as thieves, who normally would not have been sentenced to death. Some were taken from Italian prisons and shot; others were grabbed off the street and executed because they had scars on their back, indicating that they had been flogged as criminals by the previous Ethiopian regime.<sup>87</sup> Contraveners of the Italian arms ban remained the second largest group subject to executions, followed by witch doctors, diviners [*indovini*], and storytellers [*cantastorie*].

The use of Orientalist terminology such as this reinforced the narrative of Ethiopian backwardness that served to justify harsh Italian measures as part of Fascism’s civilizing mission. The so-called “witch doctors” likely referred to non-Christian village elders.<sup>88</sup> Graziani blamed them for spreading destabilizing rumours among the “primitive, ignorant, and superstitious populations.” Later, Graziani added hermits to his list, issuing decrees that prohibited them from making prophesies. The persecution of witch doctors began in Addis Ababa but quickly extended throughout the empire. In response to Graziani’s orders, Nasi had all the notables and witch doctors held in concentration

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<sup>86</sup> Graziani’s telegrams to Lessona are preserved in ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 29.

<sup>87</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 2 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 29.

<sup>88</sup> Saheed A. Adejumobi, *The History of Ethiopia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), 80.

camps in Arsi shot.<sup>89</sup> Most victims were men, but the Italians executed at least one female witch doctor.<sup>90</sup>

In 1937, the Italians targeted these groups on a daily and steady basis. Their arrest and execution became routine and reinforced the high-handed image that the Italian regime established for itself in the first two years of occupation. Criminals, priests, witch doctors, and intellectuals were executed not for what they had done but because of their social standing. If the cleansing of these strata fit into Fascist plans of socio-cultural engineering, the main impetus came from the military leadership's own obsession for security. The persecution of all these groups was based on flimsy evidence, but Graziani and his officers considered criminals, notables, and elders to be real or potential sources of rebellion and disorder. That few of the executions were subject to proper trial amplified the arbitrary character of Italian repression. Privileging the swiftness and harshness of Roman justice over fairness, Graziani ordered that the executions be carried out summarily.<sup>91</sup> The practice later was deemed counterproductive. One of the Duke of Aosta's first acts as viceroy was to grant an amnesty to clerics and witch doctors, who he believed had been arrested merely because of their position rather than on the basis of actual anti-Italian activity.<sup>92</sup>

Italian disarmament policy was unpopular with the indigenous population and the arbitrary targeting of notables, monks, witch doctors, and supposed delinquents undermined the legitimacy of Italian rule. However, the lives and livelihoods of ordinary civilians — especially in the countryside of Amhara and Shewa — were most threatened by reprisal actions conducted by local Italian garrisons or by mobile columns in operations. Unable to come to grips with armed guerrillas and considering the population

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<sup>89</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 19 March and 7 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1b. Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 39–40. Nasi to Graziani, 8 May 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170.

<sup>90</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 15 July 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 29. Nasi also reported the execution of a brigand leader along with his wife and entourage. Nasi to Graziani, 12 May 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170.

<sup>91</sup> Graziani reprimanded Nasi for making 58 rebel chiefs and 170 priests, diviners, and witch doctors wait for a trial instead of executing them immediately. He ordered Nasi to shoot them without delay, excluding the priests, who were sent to Danane. Graziani to Lessona, 22 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1b.

<sup>92</sup> Amedeo di Savoia to Teruzzi, 28 January 1938, and Teruzzi to Amedeo di Savoia, 1 February 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

as a whole to be hostile, the Italians allowed their punitive measures to fall collectively upon villages that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Italian military courts heard dozens of trials against entire communities of hundreds of civilians, charged with “attacking the integrity of the state” [*attentato all’integrità dello Stato*].<sup>93</sup> Hundreds more villages were burned and suspect inhabitants shot without trial by Italian columns in the field.

In conjunction with Mussolini’s orders for harshness and the military dynamics of counter guerrilla warfare, racist thinking also fuelled the violent colonial repression in Ethiopia. Even while condemning Corvo’s arbitrary violence in Bahir Dar, Cerica acknowledged the necessity of “summary and severe justice, to which the simple and primitive mentality of the native bows.”<sup>94</sup> Pirzio Biroli agreed that the populations of Amhara were “always inclined to respect force.”<sup>95</sup> Graziani himself advised that Ethiopian populations responded best to “talion law: eye for an eye[,] tooth for a tooth.”<sup>96</sup> In practice, through its increasing reliance on collective punishment, Italian repression often conformed more closely to the rule of a head for a tooth.

Collective reprisals usually involved the burning of homes or entire villages as well as seizures of food, money, and livestock.<sup>97</sup> These punitive acts were meant to starve rebel forces of resources and to dissuade populations from supporting them. Italian authorities resorted to these measures almost instinctively; their use preceded the rise of major revolt in Ethiopia. In September 1936, deeming Lasta to be a “stronghold” of the Kassa brothers and therefore “irreparably” rebel territory, Pirzio Biroli ordered the systematic destruction of villages in reprisal to Wondosson Kassa’s efforts to stir up the

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<sup>93</sup> Dominioni, “I tribunali militari,” 33.

<sup>94</sup> Cerica report to Graziani, 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c.

<sup>95</sup> “Notiziario politico mese di maggio 1937,” 14 August 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>96</sup> “Stralcio di telegrammi relative all’azione politica del Governo Generale,” n.d., ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 213.

<sup>97</sup> Pipitone, “Le operazioni di polizia coloniale,” 484. Seizure of livestock was a normal procedure during punitive operations in Amhara. “Relazione delle operazioni di sottomissione e disarmo dell’Ermacciò 15 aprile – 3 maggio 1937,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31. Around the same time, an operation in Harar sequestered 2,266 heads of cattle and 6,411 sheep. Quasimodo to Nasi, 4 and 17 May 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170.

locals against Italian authority.<sup>98</sup> Likewise, Pirzio Biroli responded to what he considered simple brigandage outside Gondar by ordering that all villages within ten kilometres of the affected roads be “razed to the ground without quarter.”<sup>99</sup> On the eve of the great rebellion of summer 1937, still without any inkling of the widespread resistance that was to follow, Italian authorities in Begemder executed seventy-nine notables and natives who they suspected of involvement in sedition and burned five villages to the ground after a “hostile demonstration” against the local administration.<sup>100</sup>

When resources permitted it, local political authorities and garrison commanders could conduct their own round-ups, “shooting by firing squad all natives suspected of having taken part in rebellion” and burning villages deemed to have helped the rebels.<sup>101</sup> However, most reprisals occurred during counterinsurgency operations carried out by mobile columns. Even in 1936, “police operations,” “repressive actions,” and “combing operations” [*rastrellamenti*] made up a significant proportion of Italian military activity.<sup>102</sup> These types of operation — where Italian forces cordoned off an area and multiple columns converged to eliminate or capture any remaining rebels — were most likely to involve collateral damage against the local inhabitants, confronted by soldiers exhausted from marching and perhaps recently having suffered casualties in battle.

In the midst of large-scale operations, whole populations could be deemed partisan helpers [*favoreggiatori*] in order to justify their internment or execution and the destruction of their homes. Italian operational orders emphasized the need to shoot all those deemed to have “supported” the rebels.<sup>103</sup> Before one such action, Pierelli recalled that Italian officers distributed boxes of matches to their *askari* and ordered them to burn

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<sup>98</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Sekota Garrison Command, 13 September 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171.

<sup>99</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Gondar Military Zone Command, 15 January 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

<sup>100</sup> “Notiziario politico mese di giugno 1937,” 13 September 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>101</sup> Scibelli to Pirzio Biroli, 2 September and 9 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>102</sup> Approximately thirty percent of combat events recorded in 1936 fit these criteria. See “Elenco cronologico avvenimenti dall'occupazione della capitale al 31 marzo 1937,” April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 30.

<sup>103</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 20 June 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255; Felsani to Graziani, 2 July 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62.

all the huts they found, “because these *tukuls* [Ethiopian mud huts with thatched roofs] were the homes of the rebels.” This supposition seemed confirmed when the *askari* found most of the homes deserted. Pierelli later claimed that the whole operation gave him a feeling that the Italians had preyed on weak families instead of the strong rebels that threatened them.<sup>104</sup>

Operations in 1937 reached unprecedented levels of devastation. The figures from Maletti’s punitive expedition in Shewa, which included the massacre at Debre Libanos, were horrifying. With 11 colonial battalions and 5,000 irregular troops under his command, Maletti killed or executed 15,078 “rebels” and destroyed 56,865 dwellings, all at the cost of 262 killed and 451 wounded.<sup>105</sup> Reprisal activity became barely worthy of mention in telegrams from column commanders, whose language was chillingly dispassionate.

July 1937: “Burned all villages in the beaten zone abandoned by the population.”<sup>106</sup>

September 1937: “Both marches undisturbed. Population fled. Villages encountered destroyed. No other news.”<sup>107</sup>

November 1937: “Burned all villages and destroyed all crops.”<sup>108</sup>

More uncommon were reports like that from the Piumatti Column: “Since no hostile act, no one shot.”<sup>109</sup> In a single day of operations in Gojam in early December 1937, Italian forces “destroyed” fifty villages.<sup>110</sup>

Some commanders recognized the counterproductive nature of excessive violence, without managing to avoid it. The need to issue swift and decisive punishment to rebels trumped the desire to avoid collateral damage. Giuseppe Pirzio Biroli — the

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<sup>104</sup> Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:302–305.

<sup>105</sup> “Il secondo anno dell’Impero,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 33c.

<sup>106</sup> “Notiziario del giorno 4 luglio,” 5 July 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62.

<sup>107</sup> De Biase to Graziani, 26 September 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>108</sup> De Feo to Graziani, 10 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>109</sup> De Feo to Graziani, 7 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>110</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 5 December 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

brother of the governor of Amhara and commander of a colonial brigade in the same region — tried to achieve both objectives, demanding “iron, fire, [and] terror” against brigands and rebels while counselling “humanity [and] justice” for the ordinary population. His futile efforts reveal the contradictions at play in many counterinsurgencies. While he considered colonial police actions to be “true and proper operations of war and therefore [to be] conducted thoroughly with rigour and without quarter,” he warned that “a few rifle shots by isolated rebels, in proximity of villages, especially if without consequences, can never justify unleashing an exaggerated reaction that involves the population[,] generating terror among them.” Efforts to limit the level of violence in operations were riddled with exceptions or contradictions, and they left much decision-making to the officer on the spot. The burning of entire villages had to be approved by higher command, *except* in cases where actual combat occurred against rebels. Requisitioned livestock had to be paid for at fair market value, *unless* it was the property of rebels or suspect notables. Officers should try not to harm innocents, women, and children, *but* certain groups must “of course be killed” [*vengano senz’altro soppressi*].<sup>111</sup>

Italian commanders understandably were reluctant to restrict the independence of junior officers in the field — such autonomy is indispensable in counterinsurgency warfare, where small units of men must respond to circumstances in a constant state of flux. That these officers frequently opted to respond with violence and force was consistent with their institutional culture. During the first two years of the occupation, directives from Mussolini and Graziani gave Italian officers the green light to conduct reprisals. Italian policy sought to treat rebels as traitors and condoned summary executions in order to stifle the spread of resistance. Operational orders called for the “totalitarian” [*totalitaria*]

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<sup>111</sup> Groups destined for execution included: anyone caught bearing arms; anyone wearing military garments or found in possession of government property, including equipment and livestock; any able-bodied individuals living in *tukuls* where firearms or government property were found; and, all notables named on lists issued by high command. “Sottomissione, disarmo e pacificazione dell’Ermacciò,” 10 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31. Government property could include telephone wire, which some natives stole for practical use, rather than as an act of rebellion. De Biase to Graziani, 23 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

disarmament of populations and the eradication of rebel movements.<sup>112</sup> Racist notions insisted that the indigenous populations could be persuaded only by force.

If Italian commanders paid lip service to the adverse effects of excessive reprisals — as Graziani himself did shortly before his removal as viceroy<sup>113</sup> — at the same time they fostered an atmosphere in which allowing rebellious acts to go unpunished became a greater sin than punishing those who did not commit them. In fact, field officers and governors could be scolded or disciplined for being excessively lenient towards “rebels.”<sup>114</sup> As a rule, military courts did not punish Italian officers or soldiers for acts of excessive violence committed as reprisals. Drunkenness, poaching, the private use of military transport, and looting for personal gain were considered breaches of military discipline, but not killing, burning, or requisitioning.<sup>115</sup> In the case of Second Lieutenant Natalino Verdeggiati — responsible for a reprisal action during which his platoon of Italian grenadiers burned a village, killed twenty-six natives, looted property and livestock, and kidnapped and raped two women — the *carabinieri* charged him only for armed robbery. Even this charge did not stick, because Verdeggiati claimed to have acted under orders with the intention of turning over sequestered property to higher authorities. Although the court found his behaviour “morally reprehensible,” it did not find that Verdeggiati had committed any criminal act.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Graziani to De Feo, 31 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>113</sup> Graziani harangued his men on the “need to make everyone understand that abuse, thoughtless violence, etc. are not the elements necessary to affirm our supremacy but rather the rigid application of the rule of law, the respect of the right to life [*diritto altrui*], to families, to women, to property.” Graziani’s orders were forwarded by Giuseppe Pirzio Biroli to his subordinates, 8 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31.

<sup>114</sup> Graziani scolded the governor of Eritrea, Vincenzo De Feo, for not shooting captured rebels on the spot and demanded that the governor’s excessive optimism be “abolished.” Graziani to De Feo, 22 April 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255. In another case, Graziani came to the defence of a lieutenant whom Rome wanted repatriated for failing to carry out executions. Upon further investigation, Graziani determined that the officer in fact had “always distinguished himself with utmost energy in the repression of rebellion conducting executions by firing squad of numerous rebels captured with arms in hand.” Graziani to Lessona, 30 October 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 220.

<sup>115</sup> Dominiononi, “I tribunali militari,” 32–33. Nasi tried to clamp down on cases of unsanctioned looting. “Razzie,” 14 July 1938; and, “Furti, prepotenze, soprusi,” 21 July 1938, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>116</sup> The original text of the court’s judgement is reproduced in Dominiononi, “I tribunali militari,” 48–57.

Combined with the frustrations of fighting an increasingly adept guerrilla enemy, these conditions led many officers to disregard the possible ill-effects of collateral damage. Silvano Anselmi became convinced that in Ethiopia, civilians were merely “rebels in feigned peaceful attitude” [*ribelli in finto atteggiamento pacifico*].<sup>117</sup> Another officer, confronted with the fact that he had just executed four innocent bystanders, allegedly responded “one more, one less, [...] the Abyssinians are many and they are all equally dangerous.”<sup>118</sup> It is not surprising that calls for tact and restraint, when they came, often went unheeded.<sup>119</sup>

The brutalization that resulted from Italian military policy proved a major obstacle to the Duke of Aosta’s efforts to establish a new mode of conduct in East Africa after 1938. One of the new viceroy’s major contributions to Italian pacification efforts was his willingness to negotiate with rebel leaders to obtain their submission through compromise. The policy saw some positive results, but negotiations largely failed because of a lack of trust between rebel leaders and Italian authorities, worldwide geopolitical developments, the continuation of large military operations, and insufficient support from Italian field commanders.<sup>120</sup> The most important series of negotiations conducted between 1938 and 1940 involved Abebe Aregai, who the Italians considered to be the leader of the Patriot movement in Shewa. Teruzzi’s ministry supported the

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<sup>117</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 148.

<sup>118</sup> In his diary, Poggiali recounted the second-hand story of a mass execution conducted by the troops of Ruggero Tracchia. The Italians marched forty-three rebels through a busy town market on their way to be executed. In the process, four bystanders got mixed in with the column. After the execution, the Italians counted forty-seven bodies instead of forty-three. Poggiali diary, 31 August 1937.

<sup>119</sup> Giuseppe Pirzio Biroli’s after-action report for an operation in November 1937 again noted that, despite his written orders and verbal reminders, Italian units persisted in the indiscriminate destruction of villages and requisitioning of livestock. “Sottomissione, disarmo e pacificazione del Beghemeder. Condotta della truppa verso la popolazione,” 10 December 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31. Telegrams from the operation confirm that, as a rule, when Italian forces came under fire — even without resulting in casualties — they burned any villages in their line of march. They justified the destruction by claiming that the populations had fled with their livestock. See, for example, Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 22, 27 October, and 8 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>120</sup> When negotiations succeeded, Patriot leaders had to swear oaths of loyalty in the presence of religious relics, promising to serve the Italian government. See, for example, “Notiziario ventitre febbraio,” 24 February 1939, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.



negotiations by offering cataract surgery in Italy for Abebe Aregai's father.<sup>121</sup> The partisan leader was willing to treat with Sebastiano Castagna, an Italian surveyor who had spent most of his life in Ethiopia and now traversed the unoccupied parts of Shewa speaking to various rebel chiefs on behalf of the Italian government. Castagna felt that Abebe Aregai's reluctance to surrender derived from his fear of being shot like the Kassa brothers before him.<sup>122</sup> Despite guarantees from the viceroy and his governors, they never overcame the stigma created by Graziani's early executions.

Negotiations in 1938 came to an abrupt end when Castagna himself was executed by rebels in Amhara after he attempted to initiate talks in that region. The rebel leader, Gurassu Duke, justified the execution by referring again to the fate of the Kassa brothers and his inability to trust the Italians. Castagna's death prompted the Duke of Aosta to sanction military operations and assassination attempts against Gurassu. The rebel leader managed to escape, but Italian troops remained in the area for weeks "to impose our prestige on the population among whom signs of repentance [*resipiscenza*] begin to manifest themselves."<sup>123</sup> The failure of negotiations typically ended in Italian offensive military operations that at least appeared to bring more immediate and tangible local results.<sup>124</sup>

After the removal of Ugo Cavallero as commander of troops in April 1939, the Duke of Aosta was able to exercise greater influence in military affairs. Reports to Mussolini corroborated the view of the new viceroy that, excluding traditional brigandage, rebellion in Ethiopia was fed

by the poorly restrained action of the troops who during their operations against very mobile and shifty rebel formations inevitably end up, despite variation according to their discipline and the energy and authority of their commanders, badly harming as well largely non-hostile populations which, as an immediate

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<sup>121</sup> Teruzzi to Amedeo di Savoia, 6 August 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>122</sup> Cerulli to Teruzzi, 20 May 1938, and Amedeo di Savoia to Teruzzi, 22 August 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>123</sup> See Amedeo di Savoia's bulletins dated 10 October, 7 November, and 3 December 1938, as well as Amedeo di Savoia to Teruzzi, 29 October 1938, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

<sup>124</sup> Negotiations in Gojam and Lasta in early 1939 similarly ended in bloodshed. See "Direttive politiche," 21 June 1939, and "Relazione sulla missione presso il ribelle Degiac Dagnò Tesemmà," n.d., ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

consequence, do not find a better or more logical solution than passing to the enemy camp.<sup>125</sup>

In May 1939, the viceroy named General Nasi his vice-governor. Together, they remodelled Italian policy around three main tenets: an end to major operations [*grandi operazioni di polizia*]; patient but persistent work of political attraction towards indigenous chiefs; and, the recourse to force only when political means had been exhausted.<sup>126</sup> The viceroy could count on support from Nasi as well as from the like-minded General Luigi Frusci, the new governor of Amhara.<sup>127</sup>

However, many operational commanders — senior and junior officers that commanded troops in the field on a year-round basis — did not approve of the new policy. In a private letter to his old colleague Graziani, Pietro Maletti criticized the Italian leadership for appearing weak and pointed out the plight of the Longhi mission, which in the process of negotiations in 1939 was taken hostage by rebels in Amhara.<sup>128</sup> For officers in combat units, like Silvano Anselmi, the viceroy's orders to avoid aggression only seemed to make their task more difficult.

It was our own sort of Sisyphian task, in the delicate situation in which we found ourselves, right in the middle of enemy territory and given the orders imparted by the new viceroy, Amedeo the Duke of Aosta, not to assume independent initiatives, to respond with arms only if attacked and never to commit reprisals or indiscriminate repression.

While Anselmi claimed that he and his colleagues saw Amedeo's policies as humanitarian in theory, their own experience in Ethiopia convinced them that they were utopian and unrealistic when dealing with indigenous populations that, in Italian eyes, remained wedded to barbaric notions of vendetta, xenophobia, and tribal or racial hatred.

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<sup>125</sup> “Relazione al Duce sul viaggio compiuto nell’Impero,” 31 January 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207.

<sup>126</sup> “Verbale in data 15 giugno c.a. delle conversazioni tenute fra S.E. Nasi e S.E. Frusci,” 18 July 1939, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 1.

<sup>127</sup> Frusci's reports voiced complete approval of the viceroy's policy to base Italian measures more on negotiation and persuasion rather than military force. See, for example, “Direttive politiche,” 21 June 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>128</sup> Maletti to Graziani, 6 December 1938, in Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 203–204. On the Longhi mission, see the Duke of Aosta's daily bulletins from 10 and 17 February and 17 March 1939, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

For Anselmi, the indigenous populations “appeared to us as a people in which the only, universally recognized, value was force and only to it did they owe respect, admiration, absolute obedience.”<sup>129</sup>

Ettore Formento shared a similar opinion; engaged in combat with rebels since 1936, officers like him were convinced that the only reason rebel leaders might appear willing to negotiate was because of the pressure they were under from Italian combat operations.<sup>130</sup> Even Frusci had to admit that, while the use of force was best avoided, it remained necessary when persuasion failed.

It is evident that in some parts of Gojam, Begemder, Ermaccio, and the lower Semien, where we are not talking about groups of bandits, but of hostile populations well protected by inaccessible nature, by a considerable armament and by the self-assuredness of a supposed immunity, political action will not be able to substitute, but [only] supplement that of the troops.<sup>131</sup>

The Duke of Aosta’s efforts at negotiation thus never enjoyed complete adherence by subordinate officers and never completely negated the need for military operations.

These challenges came to a head in 1940, when the Italians renewed their negotiations with rebels in Shewa. This time, Teruzzi authorized a purse of fifty million lire to bribe Abebe Aregai and his followers.<sup>132</sup> In addition, the viceroy offered rebel chiefs the position of *meslenié* and allowed their men to keep their weapons and enroll as irregular bands in Italian pay.<sup>133</sup> Discussions between the two parties resulted in a state of ceasefire in Shewa — Amhara remained in flames — without achieving the formal submission of Abebe Aregai. Likely, news of war in Europe and the heightened probability of Italian conflict against Britain and France buoyed rebel intransigence. Moreover, rebels once again provided the case of the Kassa brothers and other executed

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<sup>129</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 147–48.

<sup>130</sup> Formento further noted that combat officers resented that fact that the viceroy lavished rewards upon officers tasked with negotiations. Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 228–37. Bahru Zewde agrees that Abebe Aregai pursued negotiations with Nasi only to buy time to replenish his forces. Bahru Zewde, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, 172–73.

<sup>131</sup> “Relazione politica del mese di Settembre 1939,” 30 September 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>132</sup> Teruzzi to Amedeo di Savoia, 28 January 1940, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 214.

<sup>133</sup> “Abebe Aregai,” 22 January 1940, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 214.

notables as justification for their reluctance to submit. This was not helped by incidents in the midst of negotiations where Italian field commanders executed rebels that had surrendered.<sup>134</sup> Eventually, even the Duke of Aosta had to admit that the indefinite ceasefire threatened Italian prestige. He gave the rebel leader a firm deadline of 14 March 1940. When this passed, Mussolini — who now claimed always to have harboured doubts about the negotiations and voiced his conviction that Abebe Aregai was a French agent — concluded that the rebels were merely trying to buy time and ordered immediate military operations, resorting if necessary to the use of poison gas. It took the rest of the month for Italian forces to come to grips with Abebe Aregai, who managed to escape after a bitter fight.<sup>135</sup>

As with colonial policy, the contribution of the Duke of Aosta's term as viceroy to military policy was enigmatic. By 1939, authorities in Rome accepted that the methods of Graziani and Cavallero, based on costly and constant punitive operations, had failed.<sup>136</sup> Negotiations and moderation gained the tacit, if not wholehearted, blessing of the Fascist leadership, but the viceroy and his collaborators had difficulty convincing their own officers of the new policy. New military operations were supposed to be small and limited, based on the

utmost economy of personnel, equipment, and quadrupeds, and guided by the concept of making our strength seen, heard, and felt covering the greater part of the territory, developing at the same time an action of intimidating and punitive character and forcing the submission and disarmament of hostile populations and rebels.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> “Che giunga a Ras Abbebè,” 23 February 1940, and Teruzzi to Mussolini, 2 March 1940, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 214.

<sup>135</sup> “Giunga all'onorato Abbebè Aregai,” 2 March 1940; Franca to Nasi, 14 March 1940; Teruzzi to Mussolini, 14 March 1940; and, Mussolini to Teruzzi, 15 March 1940, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 214. “Relazione militare relativa al mese di febbraio 1940,” 15 March 1940; and, “Relazione militare relativa al mese di marzo 1940,” 15 April 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 223.

<sup>136</sup> By the time that Cavallero was recalled in April 1939, the Italian political and military leadership unanimously had judged his work a failure. Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 216.

<sup>137</sup> “Operazioni di polizia coloniale nell'Amara nel periodo ottobre 1939 – maggio 1940,” 30 October 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207.

Although the Italians reported far fewer executions and burned villages in 1940 than they had in 1937, operations defined as “punitive” always remained open to excess.<sup>138</sup>

Officially, the Duke of Aosta put an end to reprisals, but Italian forces still launched operations with the aim of “punishing hostile populations,” and when officers fell in ambushes, the Italians responded with “exemplary” measures against local populations.<sup>139</sup>

Combat between Italian colonial troops and partisans remained brutal. Even with the Duke of Aosta in charge, the numbers of rebels killed vastly exceeded those captured and remained disproportionately high when compared to statistics of Italian losses and rifles captured.<sup>140</sup> The habit of summarily executing all rebels captured bearing arms proved difficult to shake off. For the operations against Abebe Aregai in 1940, Nasi ordered concentration camps established to hold rebel prisoners. He urged commanders not to execute captured rebels, but rather to send them to the camps in order to “extinguish the myth that our troops do not even spare those who surrender.”<sup>141</sup> Just three months before Italy’s entry into the Second World War, these orders came far too late to make a difference. The Italians did not have time to eradicate the “myth” that had come to characterize their policy of repression in East Africa. After Mussolini’s first orders in 1936 to shoot all rebels, the army had enthusiastically obeyed. This policy undoubtedly hardened resistance and resulted in counterproductive collateral damage that brutalized the nature of warfare in Ethiopia. The Duke of Aosta inherited this system along with a deteriorating international situation, both of which limited the success of his measures. Given the failure of negotiations and the continued brutality of guerrilla warfare, Amedeo

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<sup>138</sup> For combat reports from 1940, see ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 208, “Operazioni polizia coloniale, telegrammi 1940.”

<sup>139</sup> “Attività operativa nel Governo dell’Amara,” 20 January 1940, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111., fasc. 11. “Relazione politica del mese di Agosto 1939,” 31 August 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>140</sup> See, for example, the Duke of Aosta’s bulletins from 4 July and 28 September 1938, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86. For overall figures, see “Specchio numerico delle perdite ribelli quali risultano dai telegrammi operativi pervenuti dall’A.O.I. dal 6 maggio 1936-XV alla data odierna,” 10 June 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 205.

<sup>141</sup> “Prigionieri,” 17 March 1940, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

di Savoia's programme did not bring about a wholesale shift in attitude for the Italian army as an institution.

## Intelligence

Italian repression policy was based partly on racially charged assumptions concerning the mentality of the indigenous populations. A good intelligence service needs to be humble and take its enemy seriously and without prejudice, understanding its culture.<sup>142</sup>

However, official interpretations of indigenous mentalities and rebel behaviour differed little from the way Ethiopians were depicted in Fascist propaganda. Italian commanders and intelligence officers considered the local populations in general to be primitive, ignorant, and superstitious.<sup>143</sup> While they accounted for some variation between the different ethnic and religious groups within the empire, their evaluations remained wedded to racial stereotypes and martial race theory.

Italian officers believed that the Amhara were “ethnically superior” and more “intelligent” than other groups, making them “intrepid” fighters. Maletti attributed their unwillingness to bow to Italian authority to their social code of silence, which — echoing Liberal-era rhetorical linkages between imperialism and meridionalism — he likened to southern Italy's *omertà*. Moreover, Maletti added, Ethiopian peasants fatalistically accepted “medieval” traditions of brigandage as a natural part of life.<sup>144</sup> Other groups, like the Oromo, were seen as less adept fighters but strong workers. Like the Amhara, Formento considered them “false, deceitful, [and] untrustworthy, but it would have been difficult to find someone who was not in similar circumstances.”<sup>145</sup> Conditions of

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<sup>142</sup> Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 154.

<sup>143</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 19 March 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1b.

<sup>144</sup> “Il secondo anno dell’Impero,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 33c. Wong identifies similarities between Liberal-era discourses on imperial expansion and the Southern Question. Aliza S. Wong, “Civilizing the Southerner, Taming the African: Imperial Endeavor and Discourses of Race,” chap. 4 in *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy*.

<sup>145</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 199.

guerrilla warfare seemed to corroborate many of the racial stereotypes applied to the populations.

The tendency of Italian generals to view resistance as an extension of endemic brigandage contributed to a major intelligence failure in the summer of 1937. While traditional banditry was a real problem in many parts of the empire — in Danakil, the Italians had to deal with camel rustlers — the fixation on the campaign against “brigands” and “raiders” effectively blinded Italian commanders to the political character of the rebellion.<sup>146</sup> Italian officials shrugged off signs of broadening resistance in Amhara in early 1937 as mere brigandage. Pirzio Biroli was convinced that such brigandage caused little need for alarm, and that the execution of a few brigand leaders would sway the population towards Italy’s strength.<sup>147</sup> Even after the outbreak of revolt, Pirzio Biroli failed to see any unifying motive behind the various uprisings throughout his governorate, which he claimed were “almost exclusively provoked by brigand chiefs.”<sup>148</sup> Revolt in July and August 1937 therefore took Italian commanders by surprise. Hailu Kebede called for “holy war” against the Italians and his forces were able to cut off and destroy a number of isolated Italian garrisons before Pirzio Biroli and Graziani could organize major operations to relieve them. Graziani, who through July had continued to report that the empire was tranquil, blamed Pirzio Biroli for leaving him in the dark.<sup>149</sup>

Italian commanders did not place great value in the intelligence of their colonial subjects. General Luigi De Biase blamed the Italian army’s lack of knowledge of the

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<sup>146</sup> Nasi to Graziani, 27 September 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170. “Organizzazione difensiva del territorio,” 4 October 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171. “Organizzazione economica dell’Impero,” 15 May 1937, ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 19.

<sup>147</sup> “Notiziario politico mese di maggio 1937,” 14 August 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>148</sup> “Notiziario politico e relazione mensile mesi agosto e settembre 1937,” 21 November 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>149</sup> “Notiziario politico e relazione mensile mesi agosto e settembre 1937,” 21 November 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. “La rivolta nel territorio dell’Amara,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 29, fasc. 29, sf. 33c. See also, “Direttive politico-militari e loro sviluppo,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1d. See also Cerica report to Graziani, 28 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c. As late as May and June 1937, Pirzio Biroli reported that his governorate remained calm. See his political reports for May and June 1937 in ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. According to Poggiali, Graziani denied the existence of a state of emergency in the empire through July. Poggiali diary, 5 and 8 July 1937.

whereabouts and strength of rebels in Lasta on the poor quality of its native informants who, he claimed, were not capable of making basic approximations of rebel force size.

It is known that the natives have limited faculties of counting and they do not know how to appreciate, numerically, the strength of a mass of men. Concluding: need always to take the size of rebel forces with a grain of salt. [...] Intelligence, very difficult to gather anywhere, is particularly so in Africa, because of the mentality of native informers who do not know how to explain themselves with precision or with clarity.<sup>150</sup>

De Biase's report reflects the prejudice of the Italian officer corps as well as the difficulty the Italians had gaining even basic information on their enemies. The Italians tried to establish large networks of informants to gather information. While they enjoyed some successes, the frequency of ambushes in close proximity to Italian bases suggests that operational intelligence often remained limited.<sup>151</sup>

This lack of comprehension and underestimation of the indigenous intellect was extended to include Italy's enemies in rebellion. Italian commanders could not believe that Ethiopian rebels had the organizational capacity to pose the threat that they did without foreign — specifically European — guidance. In his reports to Lessona, Graziani blamed continued resistance in Shewa on the spread of propaganda messages from the exiled emperor, Haile Selassie, transmitted to Ethiopia by hostile foreign nations.<sup>152</sup> Likewise, the official inquiry into the assassination attempt on Graziani determined that, although the main conspirators were Ethiopian notables and clerics, the attempt was so well-conceived and well-organized that “only through a coordinating European mentality could they synchronize their movements.” The investigation concluded that the British, and possibly the French, were behind the attack.<sup>153</sup> While it is true that Haile Selassie

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<sup>150</sup> “Le operazioni nel Lasta del settembre – ottobre 1937,” n.d. [1937], ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>151</sup> Italian commanders credited the relative success of an operation in northern Amhara on the accuracy of their intelligence, noting that it “gave the populations the impression that we — so far away until then — had knowledge of everything.” “Relazione delle operazioni di sottomissione e disarmo dell’Ermacciò 15 aprile – 3 maggio 1937,” n.d., ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31. Frustrated by a series of small military failures, in 1939 Nasi questioned the effectiveness of local intelligence gathering. “Resistere... non ripiegare,” 10 August 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207.

<sup>152</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 24 July 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

<sup>153</sup> “Relazione riassuntiva circa l’attentato del 19 febbraio,” 19 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1a.



maintained contact with resistance groups in East Africa after 1936 and that the British and French intelligence services had a presence in the region, Italian authorities overemphasized their role in the revolt.<sup>154</sup> This contributed to the tardiness of the Italians to appreciate the national or patriotic character of the rebellion against their rule. They tended to view most revolts as “localized” and they blamed foreign agents and propaganda for the spread of rebellion to other areas.<sup>155</sup> This conviction spread through the ranks and found an echo in postwar memoir literature.<sup>156</sup>

Only at a late stage did Italian authorities begin to consider the possibility that the core of the rebel movement in Ethiopia had national objectives and was opposed to any form of foreign occupation. After 1938, reports from Italian emissaries conducting negotiations with rebel leaders provided new sources of intelligence on rebel organization, motivations, and behaviour. At this point, the Italians began to admit that rebellion in regions like Gojam — previously understood as the extension of brigandage — had assumed a “political hue.”<sup>157</sup> However, Italian prejudice and contempt for the Ethiopian partisans continued into the Second World War. Even with Commonwealth forces pressing from all sides, the Italian command did not foresee full-blown revolt in

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<sup>154</sup> The emissaries sent by the Duke of Aosta to negotiate with rebels after 1938 confirmed the presence of “Intelligence Service” agents among the partisans. “Relazione sulla missione presso il ribelle Degiac Dagnò Tesemà,” n.d. [June 1939], ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. There is evidence that one supposedly French agent, traveling under the guise of Paul Langlois, was in fact a renegade Italian anti-Fascist sent by the Italian Communist Party to help organize resistance against the occupation. Matteo Dominioni, “La missione Barontini in Etiopia: La singolare vicenda di un anomalo fronte popolare antifascista,” *Studi piacentini*, no. 35 (2005): 93–96. Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 292. See also Frusci’s political reports for May and June 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>155</sup> Pankhurst, “La storia della resistenza,” 430. “Notiziario politico relazione mensile del mese di luglio 1937,” 10 October 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>156</sup> Pierelli explained the revolt in Gojam, a region previously “tranquil and favourable to Italy,” as having been “instigated and armed by the English and French that provided them with money and modern weapons, across the border between Ethiopia and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.” Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:517. Corazzi accused Italy’s British “friends” of supplying the Ethiopian rebels with modern arms. Corazzi, *Etiopia, 1938–1946*, 43. Operational commanders recorded when they recovered British rifles from rebels, but the numbers in fact were insignificantly small. See, for example, Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 7 and 21 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>157</sup> Cerulli to Teruzzi, 20 May 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247. “Relazione sulla missione presso il ribelle Degiac Dagnò Tesemà,” n.d. [June 1939], ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. “Verbale in data 15 giugno c.a. delle conversazioni tenute fra S.E. Nasi e S.E. Frusci,” 18 July 1939, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 1.

Shewa “because the local chiefs fight for themselves and not for the glory of the Negus or for the advantage of the English.”<sup>158</sup> As a rule, throughout the occupation, Italian military authorities understood the revolt as the result of unruly chiefs and clerics — upset at the loss of their feudal privileges — fuelled by foreign propaganda, endemic brigandage, and an ignorant and gullible indigenous population. Italian analysis of the causes of rebellion and of the indigenous mentality was simplistic and racist and, as a result, failed to appreciate the strength of anti-Italian resistance in Ethiopia.

## Counterpropaganda

Italian propaganda directed towards the indigenous populations and against rebels in areas of operations reflected the same prejudices and assumptions that Italian intelligence services did. The conviction that the African mind was too simple and irrational to comprehend abstract arguments and that the populations responded most positively to overt displays of force resulted in unsophisticated propaganda that was, however, distributed by relatively sophisticated means. LUCE “autocinemas” provided free showings of propaganda films for natives. The propaganda office selected films that emphasized the power of Italy’s armed forces, the physical strength of the Italian race, the beauties and wonders of Italy, and the adoration of Italians for their king and *Duce*.<sup>159</sup> The technology and spectacle of the cinema made it an effective demonstration of white superiority, but the lack of subtitles or dubbing prompted Ethiopians to write their own scripts, often mocking Italian actors or rooting for the “wrong protagonists” as a form of resistance.<sup>160</sup> Native cinemas and even the “autocinemas” were only able to reach populations in urban centres and peaceful regions. Cinema therefore had no direct

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<sup>158</sup> “Situazione nello scacchiere nord,” 27 January 1941, in *Diario storico del Comando Supremo: Raccolta di documenti della seconda guerra mondiale* [DSCS], edited by Antonello Biagini and Fernando Frattolillo (Rome: USSME, 1989), 3/II:18 (cited as volume/tome: page number).

<sup>159</sup> “Compiti della Stampa e Propaganda in Etiopia,” n.d. [1936], and “Propaganda cinematografica nell’A.O.I.,” n.d. [1938], ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 72, fasc. “Africa Orientale Italiana.” “La propaganda figurative in A.O.I.,” 17 June 1937, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 115, fasc. “Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda in A.O.I.,” sf. “Organizzazione e attività.”

<sup>160</sup> Ben-Ghiat, “Italian Colonial Cinema,” 184–87. Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism’s Empire Cinema*, 60–61.

military application. In areas without a strong Italian presence, the air force dropped leaflets and the political affairs office of each governorate tried to coordinate sympathetic local elites to spread Italian propaganda by word of mouth or through written letters to hostile chiefs.<sup>161</sup>

The main objective of colonial propaganda was the maintenance of Italian prestige, particularly military prestige [*prestigio guerriero*].<sup>162</sup> Nasi's prewar treatise called for little more in the field of propaganda than spreading the word of Italian military successes and conquests.<sup>163</sup> In Ethiopia, viceroys also were hamstrung by Fascist indigenous policy, which offered few opportunities to employ more positive themes in their propaganda. As Giuseppe Finaldi has pointed out, "the leverage available to win consensus among the population of Ethiopia during and after the Italian invasion was slight." The influence of the few collaborating Ethiopian intellectuals, who penned articles in pro-Fascist Amharic weeklies, appears to have been slight.<sup>164</sup> Graziani concluded that the only way to counter enemy propaganda was with force; a "policy of rigour" [*politica di rigore*] was his main tool to prevent the populations from siding with the rebels.<sup>165</sup> Italian propaganda, paired with repression and reprisals, thereby aimed at terrorizing the local populations. As Graziani put it, "better a pinch of fear than a hundred quintals of good words."<sup>166</sup>

Early propaganda in Shewa and Amhara focused on countering harmful rumours and promoting the image of Italy as a superior and civilized conqueror. Ceremonies

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<sup>161</sup> Nasi to Settore Aeronautico, Dire Dava, 12 October 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 168. On the use of local elites, see, for example, "Notiziario politico e relazione mensile mesi Dicembre e Gennaio," 10 March 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. "L'azione politica per il consolidamento della conquista e per l'occupazione dell'ovest," n.d., ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 22.

<sup>162</sup> Graziani to Maletti, 7 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 29, fasc. 29, sf. 33c.

<sup>163</sup> Nasi, "Operazioni coloniali," 270. AUSSME, L-3, b. 79, fasc. 5.

<sup>164</sup> Giuseppe Finaldi, "Mussolini and the Italian Empire, 1935–41," in *The Cult of the Duce: Mussolini and the Italians*, edited by Stephen Gundle, Christopher Duggan, and Giuliana Pieri (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 152–56. Chief among the collaborating authors was Afewerki Gebre Iyesus, who had spent much of his prewar career in Italy and was a convinced Italophile. Bahru Zewde, "The Ethiopian Intelligentsia," 276–78, 285–86.

<sup>165</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 24 July 1936, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

<sup>166</sup> Graziani to De Feo, 1 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

involving the public submission of Ethiopian elites to Italian rule provided a form of propaganda and spectacle of their own, conducted with the “utmost solemnity” and with the presence of dignitaries and honour guards.<sup>167</sup> The continued presence in exile of Haile Selassie provided Ethiopian partisans with a useful source of propaganda; they frequently claimed that the emperor was about to return at the head of a vast host. Graziani responded to such rumours with his own decree.

The truth is that Tafari is not here because he prefers to take his baths in England in the company of pretty women and he does not give a damn [*strafregarsene*] for the Ethiopian people. We Italians tell you the truth because it is in our interest that the Ethiopian people are not deceived and that you collaborate willingly with us towards the pacification of the country and to the advancement of Ethiopia.<sup>168</sup>

Through 1936, Italian propaganda tried to convince Ethiopians that they were a conquered people and that further resistance was futile, while offering vague promises of civilizing progress, modernization, and economic well-being in a peaceful empire.

In the western territories, these themes were complemented by an effort to win over minorities through a policy of “divide and conquer.” The Italians used more positive forms of propaganda here, assuring religious freedom while proclaiming an end to servitude under the Amhara oppressor.<sup>169</sup>

Galla populations, listen!

For fifty years you have been slaves to another race that, although numerically inferior to you, has crushed you, forced you from your villages, made you live in misery and in a state of inferiority.

Today the Italian government, that by God’s will and the strength of its arms has taken over the lands of Ethiopia, brings you freedom[,] civilization[,] peace[,] and well-being under the protection of its glorious flag.

Are you maybe less intelligent for being considered inferior to the other races that populate Ethiopia?

Today your old rulers try to delude you by speaking of fraternity and equality, but you know well, having experienced it, what fate they would have in store for you.

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<sup>167</sup> Caccia Dominioni describes such a ceremony in Gondar in 1936. In smaller localities, operational commanders gave a standard speech, promising “justice and civilization,” followed by the serving of “friendship tea.” Paolo Caccia Dominioni, *Amhara: Chroniques de la Patrouille Astrale* (Paris: Plon, 1937), 30–31, 190.

<sup>168</sup> “L’omaggio plebiscitario dei capi etiopici al Vice Re e l’offerta augurale per il primo festoso giorno del ‘Gran Mascal’,” *Il Giornale di Addis Abeba*, 22 September 1936, in ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 32.

<sup>169</sup> “L’azione politica per il consolidamento della conquista e per l’occupazione dell’ovest,” n.d. [1937?], ACS, FG, b. 46, fasc. 41, sf. 22.

Do not listen then to the delusions of those who after having scorned and tread upon you today ask for your help to their benefit and not for your good. Do not listen to the false rumours and tendentious news that these stirrers [*mestatori*] spread with the sole purpose of deceiving you. You should oppose even with force those who want to invade your country to fight the Italian government, the only [government] today existing in all of Ethiopia, and you should be obedient to the orders it gives you.<sup>170</sup>

Such language was part of a general policy of “persuasion” directed towards Muslim and Oromo populations of Ethiopia in order to develop “an effective counterweight to the Amhara.”<sup>171</sup> Although Graziani’s calls for obedience contradicted his claims to have brought freedom to non-Amhara populations, this type of propaganda may have contributed to the relatively successful pacification of regions like Harar.

In operational zones, Italian leaflets offered partisans and rebellious populations one chance to submit before promising only death and destruction. Nasi did not refrain from such threats.

The war has been over for almost two months and you have still not submitted to the Italian government.  
 What are you waiting for? — Perhaps you hope for help from some European nation.  
 An illusion! — England and France, by now recognizing the great power of Fascist Italy have ended sanctions and live in perfect peace with us.  
 And you, instead, continue in your raids, you kill people and provoke disorder in the countryside.  
 This must cease.  
 If you make the act of submission and lay down your arms, the government promises to be very generous with you.  
 Those that have already submitted to the government can tell you this.  
 You have nothing to fear.  
 You will be free, your families, your religion, your property will be respected.  
 Those that want to enlist under the flag of Italy will be well received.  
 Those that want to work will be able to do so because the government will conduct great works for the good of the country.  
 Those that instead want to return to their villages will be given the necessary means and will find work in their villages.  
 Do not think that rebellion can bring you, as in the past, power and honours; under the Italian government rebellion is punished with inexorable punishment.  
 This is my last word.

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<sup>170</sup> Graziani decree, 5 November 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/55, fasc. 255.

<sup>171</sup> “Questioni politici,” 28 May 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

If you do not listen to it, the government of Italy[,] whose strength and means are known to you, will destroy you, your families and your homes without mercy. Do not hope to avoid the punishment that awaits you as men outside the law, if you choose not to listen to this[,] my last and true offer [*parola*] of pardon and peace.<sup>172</sup>

Through 1936, Nasi urged his subordinates to employ these arguments in their efforts to gain the peaceful submission of hostile populations in Harar. He believed that his policy of “demonstrating force but not employing it” was successful during this period.<sup>173</sup>

After the great revolt of summer 1937 in Amhara, Italian propaganda relied even more on outright terror. Notions of a civilizing mission were all but forgotten as Italian authorities gave rebellious populations the stark choice between submission and death. In September 1937, Italian aircraft dropped 50,000 leaflets over the most isolated parts of Amhara. Their contents focused solely on the threat of force, without much subtlety.

People of Gojam, Lasta, and Begemder. You have given heed to irresponsible leaders and are in rebellion. With what hope? Perhaps you believe yourselves able to resist with poorly armed men the might of Italy who can destroy you all if you offend it? The Government asks you to return to peace and hand in your weapons, returning to your abandoned homes and fields. Obey now and you will be pardoned.<sup>174</sup>

Although Italian messages to rebels continued to include offers of pardon, the frequency of Italian executions and the negative image created by the shooting of the Kassa brothers by this time had made many Ethiopians unwilling to trust Italian promises of clemency.

Other leaflets drew upon the plight of Hailu Kebede as a warning to the general population that resistance was futile.

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<sup>172</sup> “Direttive politico militari per l’operazioni in regione Condudo,” 26 June 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 168.

<sup>173</sup> “Direttive politico militari per l’operazioni in regione Condudo,” 26 June 1936, and “Situazione politico militare dell’Harar al 10 luglio,” 12 July 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 168. Nasi issued a similar decree in western Harar later in the year: “Our soldiers advance without you being able to resist. / You are forced to flee from one village to another. Until when? / If the government wanted to it already could have destroyed you all with its airplanes, but it does not want to spill Christian blood, it does not want to kill your innocent families, it does not want to destroy your livestock. / Now you must end it. Present yourselves immediately to the government and you will be treated with generosity and kindness. You will have saved yourselves, your families and your property.” Nasi decree, 12 October 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 168.

<sup>174</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 9 September 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

God's justice has struck down *Dejaz* Hailu Kebede, who organized the populations of Lasta in rebellion against the government. Hailu Kebede was captured by our troops and punished with death. Do not believe those who try to deceive you by making you believe that Hailu Kebede is still alive. His body was displayed in the market of Sekota and recognized by all the population. Now his head has been displayed in the market of Korem and likewise recognized by all the population. Let me tell you further that areas of Lasta have been punished putting them to fire and sword and that all livestock of those populations have been confiscated. I advise you once again to remain peaceful and not to listen to those who try to drag you into rebellion, otherwise you will meet the same fate as that of the populations of Lasta and their chiefs.<sup>175</sup>

Governors throughout the empire drew upon the propaganda value of Hailu Kebede's death to dissuade Amhara populations from joining in revolt. In Harar, Nasi emphasized the fact that Hailu Kebede had been killed by an irregular Oromo band, playing upon the insecurity of the Amhara minority in Harar.<sup>176</sup>

The overall impact of Italian propaganda leaflets is questionable. Although they were meant to inspire fear, much of the population could not read them and rumour spread that the Italians dropped paper because they had run out of bombs. For his part, the Duke of Aosta never resorted to verbal violence or threats in his decrees.<sup>177</sup> Rather, he consciously presented himself as a more magnanimous viceroy than his predecessor.<sup>178</sup> Similarly, the new governor of Amhara, Luigi Frusci, tried to give the impression of being a gentler and more understanding authority figure.

People of Amhara

Listen.

You all have seen and heard what I have done from the first day that I arrived in Gondar as governor of Amhara up until today to bring peace and tranquility to the entire territory.

Always and in every case I have endeavoured to resolve disputes between chiefs and the government peacefully with good words [and] without recourse to arms. It is a point of fact that I have even sent my officers as ambassadors of peace to rebel chiefs in Begemder to bring them to reason eliminating any motive of distrust towards the government.

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<sup>175</sup> Graziani decree, n.d. [September 1937], ACS, FG, b. 29, fasc. 29, sf. 33c.

<sup>176</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 6 November 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>177</sup> Dominiononi, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero*, 201, 221.

<sup>178</sup> "Riassunto avvenimenti militari secondo telegrammi delle 24 ore precedenti," 18 June 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 206.

If I have been obliged sometimes to resort to arms this was the fault of the rebel chiefs that did not want and still do not want to hear the government's voice, which is the voice of reason and peace.

However, I believe it is important for you to know that my desire for peace remains the same, that I will make every effort and will try every means so that the people who are still rebels, will become loyal populations of the empire like the Eritreans and Somalis so that peace, order, quiet, [and] well-being will reign in Amhara as they do in Eritrea and Somalia.

I know very well that the population all want to be loyal so that they can cultivate their fields in peace and live quietly in their villages without running the danger of losing all their belongings and even their lives because of war.

The only obstacle that prevents the population from moving closer to the government is the rebel chiefs, who, having broken with the government for injustices suffered in the past or for other motives, now fear coming back over to the faithful because they are afraid of being punished and they do not believe [my] promises of pardon.

Now I tell you that this is a big mistake.

On several occasions I have made known by means of decrees and letters that my absolute pardon is for all those that surrender themselves without exception.

And I keep my promises. [...]

You also know how many people I freed from prison that had already been condemned by the courts for being rebels, because there is no punishment for he who surrenders even if he has taken up arms against the *askari* and soldiers of the government.

Moreover, all this can be confirmed to you by a great chief, who has now returned among you, and that is the Honourable *Dejaz* Ayalu Burru, who having travelled widely in recent times and having been to Rome, Eritrea, and Addis Ababa, knows very well the true intentions of Italy towards you.

Chiefs and populations of Amhara, listen.

Many lies have been told and continue to be told against Italy and the Italians.

There are still some people here in Amhara that believe these lies, but he who has been to Italy and Europe knows very well that these are false intentions good for leading astray he who knows nothing, because Italy is a great, ancient, strong, [and] powerful state, that has other powerful states in Europe as friends and so is not afraid of anyone.

Here in Ethiopia we want to govern peacefully because we consider it our duty to give well-being and quiet to the populations of the empire. That which we have done in Eritrea and Somalia Italy wants to and will do here in Ethiopia. [...]

I wanted to say all this to you, people of Amhara[,] because I want you all to know what I am doing and what are my ideas, because I especially want there to be reciprocal trust and sincerity between myself who represents the Italian government and you, chiefs and population of Amhara.

Only thus will I be able with ease to absolve my mission of peace and order among you, examining and resolving, all the problems that affect you in a work of loyal and faithful collaboration with your chiefs.



May God enlighten you and lead you on the right path.<sup>179</sup>

The difference between Frusci's decree in 1939 and those of 1936 and 1937 is remarkable. Its increased length derived from the multiple lines of argumentation employed to convince populations to remain loyal to the government. These arguments appealed largely to the population's sense of reason, assuming a higher degree of intellect among natives than Graziani would have allowed for. Moreover, Frusci acknowledged that the public had genuine grievances and he claimed to have rectified past "injustices." He tried to prove that Italy's promises of clemency were likewise genuine and he pledged not to resort immediately to the use of force.

Ultimately, even after 1938, Italian propaganda continued to rely upon themes of political prestige and military might to cow the local populations. Although Frusci's decree reflected a real shift in attitude within the Italian colonial leadership, by this time the Ethiopian partisan movement had gained the upper hand in the battle of propaganda and had placed Italian authorities on the back foot. The Italians devoted much of their efforts to countering rebel propaganda in the belief that the spread of rumours posed one of their greatest obstacles.

News in Ethiopia spreads among the natives with the speed of wind, their mentality distorts and exaggerates events, the populations are easy to stir up and quick to retaliate; it is all an environment in which sometimes situations can change by the arrival of false news.<sup>180</sup>

The deteriorating international situation after 1938, and the way rebel propaganda exploited it, forced the Italians to respond. They emphasized Britain's formal "recognition of the empire" and highlighted such events as the Italian occupation of Albania in 1939 to demonstrate Italy's diplomatic and military prowess as well as its preparation for a European war.<sup>181</sup>

In conclusion, Italian propaganda tended to be reactionary and unsophisticated, inspired by racist assumptions of the Ethiopian mindset. Its effectiveness was limited by

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<sup>179</sup> Frusci decree, n.d. [June 1939], ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>180</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Mussolini, 12 March 1939, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 213.

<sup>181</sup> "Relazione politica del mese di novembre 1938," 1 December 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. "Relazione sui servizi d'istituto esplicati dalla Questura di Polizia Coloniale del Harar durante il mese di aprile 1939," 1 May 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

the lack of social or cultural policies that might appeal to the local populations. Efforts at “divide and conquer” could only go so far, especially in areas with Amhara majorities where revolt was strongest. Through 1937, Italian decrees escalated their use of terror until it became the main component of colonial propaganda. This dovetailed perfectly with the black-and-white concepts of imperial conquest held by the Fascist regime. Moderation under the Duke of Aosta proved a considerable *volte-face*, but there is no evidence to suggest that it was any more successful. After 1938, Italian propaganda was unable to compete with the realities of insufficient control on the ground and an imminent war with the neighbouring colonial powers of Britain and France.

## Deployment and Tactics

A policy based on terror and the demonstration of force can be effective if offset by calculated offers of clemency and when backed up by effective combat operations targeted against rebels to guarantee safety and economic stability for civilian populations. However, as has been shown, the poorly conceived execution of indigenous elites nullified the potential value of amnesties and the brunt of Italian combat operations tended to fall upon civilians at least as much as upon the rebels themselves. In fact, the deployment of Italian forces in Ethiopia and the techniques they used in combat failed to provide security for subject populations or Italian administrators in certain parts of the empire and made collateral damage against civilians more difficult to avoid.

Although Italian strength in East Africa always amounted to more than 200,000 troops, this was not sufficient to garrison an empire in which much of the territory remained hostile. Based on French and Italian experience in Morocco and Libya, Italian colonial doctrine — as espoused by Guglielmo Nasi — warned against the use of static garrisons. Since these were vulnerable to becoming isolated and besieged, Nasi instead had recommended the construction of a small number of fortified bases, capable of defending themselves indefinitely, between which mobile groups would operate in offensive operations against rebels.<sup>182</sup> However, in Ethiopia, Rome’s policy of “super

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<sup>182</sup> “Organizzazione militare del territorio,” n.d., AUSSME, L-14, b. 111., fasc. 5.

direct rule” demanded direct contact between local populations and Italian administrators and thereby necessitated a broad network of small garrisons.<sup>183</sup> This practice brought the political advantage of asserting Italy’s presence throughout occupied territory, which helped isolate brigands from the population but left Italian forces unprepared and ill-equipped to confront a larger organized rebellion.<sup>184</sup>

The initial rebel successes in Amhara in summer 1937 prompted Italian authorities to question the wisdom of their deployments. Graziani, Cerica, and Hazon were quick to blame Pirzio Biroli for his “flawed practice of pushing weak columns too far” and dispersing his forces among small unfortified garrisons, allowing them to be picked off by rebels one at a time. Even small rebel victories like these could spur the surrounding population to revolt.<sup>185</sup> Ettore Formento recalled the challenges faced by small garrisons in Shewa, including the constant danger of being wiped out by a sudden uprising.

Here and there tiny garrisons, held by [irregular] bands or by Eritrean or Arab-Somali colonial companies, lost in the immensity of space, several days march from one another, isolated for every month of the great rains, tried to maintain peace and order. Miraculously most of the time they succeeded; every so often it could happen, and not so seldom, that a garrison was swept away, like for example that of Gedu, not far from Gibati, by the sudden revolt of a chief. The event was not considered very important: one or two officers less, a few hundred *askari* less, they did not matter much, the thing had to be brushed aside and one did not speak about it. The image of peace and tranquility that the empire had to give of itself to public opinion could not be disturbed.<sup>186</sup>

Nonetheless, Italian commanders insisted that even small garrisons could hold out for an extended time against superior rebel forces, thanks in part to the “special dread of fortifications” that rebel leaders had. Since withdrawals could become costly and

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<sup>183</sup> “Ripartizione territoriale dei Commissariati di Governo dell’Amara,” 15 December 1936, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 221.

<sup>184</sup> Nasi himself spread out his forces in Harar in a network of platoon-sized garrisons — which he intended to withdraw during the rainy season — as a means of spreading order and making the Italian presence felt. “Situazione politico-militare al 23 dicembre,” 23 December 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 169.

<sup>185</sup> Graziani to Lessona, 3 September 1937, ACS, FG, b. 29, fasc. 29, sf. 33c. Cerica report to Graziani, 28 October 1937, and Hazon memorandum, October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c.

<sup>186</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 84–85.

embolden nearby villagers to revolt, Italian units were told to hold their ground and await relief from Italian air support and mobile columns.<sup>187</sup>

Ultimately, military necessity compelled the governors of Amhara gradually to withdraw many of their smaller isolated garrisons, leaving large swaths of territory abandoned to the rebels.<sup>188</sup> This presented Italian commanders with a catch-22 scenario. Italian colonial policy sought to keep rebellion in check by maintaining Italian prestige, which required the constant presence of Italian boots on the ground. However, dispersed troops became susceptible to attack, which could bolster rebel prestige. Pulling garrisons out of vulnerable positions ensured fewer military defeats but made it more difficult to convince local populations that they could rely upon Italian protection, which also enhanced rebel prestige. Cognizant of this situation, Frusci admitted that the withdrawal of garrisons gave the “semblance of truth” to rebel propaganda on Italian weakness, but he concluded that abandoning territory to the partisans was the lesser of two evils. Since small garrisons found themselves in a virtual state of siege, they did not carry out their purpose of imposing Italian prestige through their presence but were instead “dead weight.”<sup>189</sup>

Frusci sought a return to Nasi’s original theoretical precepts. He reorganized the Italian command structure in Amhara by establishing four sector commands, each of which included a reinforced mobile brigade, “destined to act between the links of garrisons constituting pivots of manoeuvre, [whose] military activity must be characterized by a tone of bold dynamism to protect the populations, counter the vain

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<sup>187</sup> “Le operazioni nel Lasta del settembre – ottobre 1937,” n.d. [1937], ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a. “Resistere... non ripiegare,” 10 August 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207.

<sup>188</sup> Mezzetti began the process after replacing Pirzio Biroli as governor in 1938. “Notiziario politico e relazione mensile mesi Dicembre e Gennaio,” 10 March 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. However, by the end of his term as governor, Mezzetti came under similar criticism for his “obsession [*mania*] of studding the entire territory with small garrisons.” Maletti to Graziani, 6 December 1938, in Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 204.

<sup>189</sup> “Soppressione presidi nel territorio dell’Amara,” 2 August 1939, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 5. “Relazione politica del mese di Maggio 1939,” 1 June 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

aspirations of the rebels, ensure communications and allow the construction of new roads.”<sup>190</sup> The withdrawals continued right up to the Second World War.

Given the number of troops available and the unrealistic political objectives of the Fascist regime, the problem of garrison deployment in Ethiopia proved intractable. The situation was not helped by the shortage of qualified combat officers in the theatre. Officers in colonial units came from multiple branches of the armed forces. While governors, their staffs, and column commanders often brought with them years of colonial experience, many junior officers and even some battalion commanders were reservists.<sup>191</sup> In practice, captains sometimes commanded battalions and companies regularly came under the command of second lieutenants.<sup>192</sup> The memoirists Anselmi, Corazzi, and Formento all began their service in Ethiopia as subalterns in their early to mid-twenties. Pierelli was thirty, but still a reservist whose only African experience was a forty-five-day “pre-colonial” course at Civitavecchia that he took before shipping out. When Corazzi was called up at the end of 1938, he had to take a five-month course in East Africa, which included riding lessons and Amharic. This was his first contact with Africans before being assigned to command a half company in the 13th Colonial Battalion.<sup>193</sup>

Junior commanders frequently came under criticism from superiors for their incompetence. Mezzetti blamed the “painful episode” of an engagement in July 1938 — which cost the Italians two officers, twenty-four *askari*, and eight irregulars killed — on the “inexperience of the garrison commander.”<sup>194</sup> Maletti complained that the

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<sup>190</sup> “Verbale in data 15 giugno c.a. delle conversazioni tenute fra S.E. Nasi e S.E. Frusci,” 18 July 1939, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 1. “Direttive politiche,” 21 June 1939, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

<sup>191</sup> Before the outbreak of the Second World War, of the 96 colonial battalions in East Africa, 22 were commanded by reservists, of whom 12 held the rank of captain. “Relazione al Duce sulle questioni militari più importanti concernenti l’Impero,” 6 April 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207.

<sup>192</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 122.

<sup>193</sup> Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 1:15. Corazzi, *Etiopia, 1938–1946*, 12–15. These experiences are typical of the mostly young and unprepared personnel that made up the colonial administration in East Africa. Labanca, “L’amministrazione coloniale,” 382.

<sup>194</sup> “Relazione politica del mese di luglio 1938,” 27 July 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248.

commander of a fort near Gondar, “a fat and placid reservist captain,” failed to come to the aid of an Italian supply convoy that was ambushed just five kilometres away.<sup>195</sup> This episode demonstrated how troops and officers of Italian garrisons could submit to a siege mentality. Nor did Maletti hold his criticism for combat officers in mobile colonial units.

The coloured battalions, poorly organized, even more badly employed, have become a wretched thing. The officers, when they encounter the enemy, open fire and then wait to see what happens. They do not direct the action and do not have any concept of manoeuvre: they shoot and that is it!<sup>196</sup>

At the ground level, Italian combat units frequently were directed by men with little military experience and no special training in colonial guerrilla warfare.

In part, poor leadership was overcome by the relatively high quality of Italy’s colonial troops, whose light armament and willingness to execute rapid marches made them well-suited to guerrilla warfare. During 1936, the high cost of maintaining metropolitan units in the theatre prompted Rome to repatriate most of the Italian personnel that had participated in the invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>197</sup> Over the course of the occupation, the ratio of indigenous troops to Italian soldiers in East Africa steadily increased. By April 1940, Italian strength consisted of 167,763 colonial troops compared to 65,461 Italian soldiers and officers. The Italians had to keep more than half of their forces in Amhara and Shewa alone.<sup>198</sup> As in Libya, Eritrean *askari* bore the burden of colonial police operations. Already by 1935, forty percent of Eritrea’s male labour force had been recruited into the colonial army, placing considerable strain on local agriculture

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<sup>195</sup> Maletti to Graziani, 6 December 1938, in Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 203–204.

<sup>196</sup> Maletti to Graziani, 6 December 1938, in Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 203–204.

<sup>197</sup> Pipitone, “Le operazioni di polizia coloniale,” 472–73.

<sup>198</sup> In November 1937, there were 106,800 Italian and 110,000 native troops in East Africa. The ratio shifted in favour of native forces thereafter. Figures for January 1939 listed 55,000 Italians and 139,000 native troops. See “Appunti e dati orientativi sulla situazione militare in A.O.I. a fine novembre 1937,” December 1937, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 209; as well as “Relazione al Duce sul viaggio compiuto nell’Impero: Parte militare, situazione militare a fine gennaio 1939,” 31 January 1939, and “Relazione al Duce sulle questioni militari più importanti concernenti l’Impero,” 6 April 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207. At the beginning of 1939, 39,000 nationals and 87,000 colonials were deployed in the unruly territories of Amhara and Shewa. “Cenni sulla situazione politico-militare nello Scioa e nell’Amara al febbraio 1939,” n.d. [February 1939], AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 1.

through 1941.<sup>199</sup> From time to time, the Italians employed Blackshirt militia units in operations as well, but these more regularly performed garrison duty or road work.<sup>200</sup>

Traditionally, the *askari* enjoyed a middling position between regular and irregular troops. The Italian military viewed them as auxiliary forces separate from the national army — and therefore never considered for operations in Europe — but whereas irregular bands were formed directly by local authorities, *askari* units came under the direction of the Royal Corps of Colonial Troops [*Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali*].<sup>201</sup> Prior to the conquest of Ethiopia, Italian commanders recognized that the light armament and equipment of the *askari* made them manoeuvrable and adept at guerrilla warfare.<sup>202</sup> A small number of *askari* received specialized training as artillerymen or engineers, but the vast majority were employed in colonial infantry battalions. Italian troops tended to fulfil technical tasks whereas the *askari* provided a body of more expendable riflemen and machine gunners.<sup>203</sup>

Colonial battalions generally comprised 1,000 men divided between 3 rifle companies, a machinegun company, and a command unit with logistical services and a reconnaissance platoon. With 150 to 200 mules to carry supplies and equipment, these formations were more “slender” and flexible than regular infantry, and were capable of autonomous employment. Armament typically consisted of Austrian rifles and machineguns taken as booty after the First World War, supplemented with modern light-machineguns and hand grenades.<sup>204</sup> This level of firepower made them more than a match for most rebel formations. Their suitability for independent action in difficult terrain meant that colonial battalions were in constant demand for counterinsurgency operations.

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<sup>199</sup> Nir Arielli, “Colonial Soldiers in Italian Counter-Insurgency Operations in Libya, 1922–32,” *British Journal for Military History* 1, no. 2 (2015): 52. Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*, 51.

<sup>200</sup> “Impiego VII° battaglione cc.nn. nella zona di Gondar,” 23 January 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

<sup>201</sup> Volterra, *Sudditi coloniali*, 30.

<sup>202</sup> Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 64. AUSSME, L-3, b. 79, fasc. 5.

<sup>203</sup> Volterra, *Suditti coloniali*, 125–30.

<sup>204</sup> Anselmi and Corazzi’s units were armed with Mannlicher bolt-action rifles, Schwartzlose machineguns, Breda 33 light-machineguns, and OTO or “Balilla” hand grenades. Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 122–24. Corazzi, *Etiopia, 1938–1946*, 14.

For the Italian officers and indigenous soldiers in these units, life was “an uninterrupted carousel of combing operations [*rastrellamenti*]” where not even the rainy season provided respite.<sup>205</sup>

The tactics employed in these operations did not change drastically over the course of the occupation. Combing techniques in Ethiopia were little different than those practiced previously by the Italian army in Libya’s Jebel Akhdar or even in southern Italy during the Brigands’ War of the previous century. In areas of relative calm, Italian commanders ordered *rastrellamenti* to make Italy’s presence and strength felt by the local populations. Company-sized patrols would criss-cross regions, making contact with villages, collecting intelligence, and performing searches for hidden arms.<sup>206</sup> Proper combing operations against known guerrillas required considerable forces to cordon off an area. Italian columns tended to range from three to five battalions in size, with some larger operations deploying multiple columns.<sup>207</sup> Every evening, column commanders made radio contact with their superiors to report their position. The following morning, they received orders for that day’s objectives in an effort to coordinate the movement of Italian units to surround rebel areas and converge on a single point, thereby forcing an engagement.<sup>208</sup> Success depended upon the accuracy of Italian intelligence on the whereabouts and size of rebel formations and the ability of all participating units to reach their objectives in a timely fashion. If Italian forces managed to engage and disperse

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<sup>205</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 129. Anselmi’s 34th Battalion found itself constantly employed in operations in Amhara during 1938: first in Lasta and Begemder; then in Gojam; the unit enjoyed a brief rest in Gondar before being sent to recapture a fort in the north; after a month’s rest in Dessie, it returned to Gondar in September to deal with a revolt before transferring back to Begemder; this was followed by a major operation in Belesa; the unit ended the year as part of the Solinas Column near Debre Tabor. Anselmi’s service ended in March 1939 when he was wounded in one of Cavallero’s big operations against Abebe Aregai. With his unit asked to maintain pressure on the rebels even through the rainy season, it seemed to Pierelli that “the generals of the high command in Addis Ababa did not give us any respite.” Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:427.

<sup>206</sup> Nasi to Quasimodo, 26 May 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170.

<sup>207</sup> According to Pierelli, *rastrellamenti* always were conducted with four battalions. Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:321. Official reports confirm this figure as an average number. See, for example, “Costituzione delle colonne operanti nel territorio Uogerat,” n.d. [1937], ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a; “Verbale della riunione fra S.E. Comandante Superiore delle Forze Armate A.O.I. e S.E. Governatore dell’Amara,” 22 December 1938, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 214; and, “Operazione Belesa,” 27 May 1939, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 3.

<sup>208</sup> Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:454.



rebels in combat, column commanders would divide their men into multiple “patrols” [*pattuglioni*] of fifty men each “to comb the ground and prevent the rebels from employing the same tactic of division.” In Maletti’s operations in the summer of 1937, these patrols covered an area twenty kilometres by twenty-five kilometres in size.<sup>209</sup>

Excessive violence against civilians during these operations was, as has been demonstrated, first and foremost the result of Italian reprisal policies and attitudes towards rebellion. Most executions and destruction fell under the category of cold violence sanctioned by authorities, augmented by the lack of discipline of colonial troops. Disciplinary problems stemmed from ethnic hatred and the brutalization of colonial troops by Italian commanders.<sup>210</sup> Italian colonial doctrine sought to exploit tribal and religious rivalries not explicitly to promote ethnic cleansing but as a means of guaranteeing the loyalty of indigenous troops.<sup>211</sup> Regardless of the rationale behind this policy of “divide and conquer,” it promoted violence.

Italian authorities reported difficulties controlling Eritrean *askari* against Amhara populations.<sup>212</sup> Harsh disciplinary measures to maintain unit cohesion further brutalized colonial troops. Deserters were shot in the back after being captured while those accused of drunkenness or insubordination were punished by floggings administered with a whip made from thick hippopotamus leather.<sup>213</sup> At the same time, colonial officers tolerated looting in order to live off the land and maintain the loyalty of their troops. Poggiali

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<sup>209</sup> Maletti to Graziani, 3 July 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62.

<sup>210</sup> Dominiononi, *Sfascio dell’Impero*, 230–31.

<sup>211</sup> Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 75. AUSSME, L-3, b. 79, fasc. 5. Dore argues that Italian officers were fully aware of Eritrean and Somali hatred of Ethiopians and willingly took advantage of it in operations. Dore, “Guerra d’Etiopia e ideologia coloniale,” 483. Graziani’s orders to reinforce Amhara with non-Amhara troops appear to have been intended to ensure the loyalty of those troops rather than to promote violence. Graziani to Nasi, 4 January 1938, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170.

<sup>212</sup> “Relazione delle operazioni di sottomissione e disarmo dell’Ermacciò 15 aprile – 3 maggio 1937,” ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 29. Other colonial battalions, especially later in the occupation, were composed of soldiers from multiple ethnic groups. Corazzi’s 13th Colonial Battalion included Eritrean, Amhara, Gurage, and Oromo *askari*. Corazzi, *Etiopia, 1938–1946*, 15–16. Colonial units took on reinforcements from nearby recruiting centres, adding to their heterogeneous nature. Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:587–88.

<sup>213</sup> Amhara Armed Forces Command war diary, 12–13 November 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171. Volterra, *Sudditi coloniale*, 148–51. Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 22–25; Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 1:211–13.

described the progress of Gallina's colonial brigade: "Everywhere they went they destroyed everything, they took everything; herds of cattle, sheep, trophies of live chickens tied to bayonets."<sup>214</sup> Through 1940, Nasi battled ineffectually against the general assumption among his subordinates that colonial troops could not be kept loyal without plunder.<sup>215</sup> The harsh treatment of colonial troops combined with their constant employment in operations and their commanders' disregard for collateral damage promoted brutality in the field.

Between 1937 and 1939, when Italian authorities became exasperated by guerrilla activity, they launched grand operations involving dozens of battalions. In 1938, Cavallero and Mezzetti planned extensive series of operations months in advance, covering the whole of Amhara.<sup>216</sup> The time required to concentrate such large numbers of troops and supplies usually gave the partisans ample warning for what was to come. These costly operations dealt significant hardship on the impacted populations without necessarily coming to grips with the rebels. In April 1938, Governor Mezzetti led a force of fifty battalions — the equivalent of two army corps — into Gojam. Two powerful groups operated between Bahir Dar and Debre Markos, seeking to trap the rebels between them. However, Mezzetti's massive army was ponderous; it marched in a long column, with a van and rearguard of three battalions each, deployed in a line one kilometre wide. According to Pierelli, whose unit participated in the operation, this formation — which had worked splendidly for Mezzetti a decade earlier in Libya — proved unwieldy in the rough Gojam region. Moreover, the tractors [*caterpillar*] loaded with supplies at the centre of the column could not exceed a maximum speed of three kilometres per hour in open country and subjected the force to significant delays when traversing mountain paths. The column advanced never made contact with the enemy, which fled the area. After this failure, a frustrated Mezzetti broke up his army into smaller groups to punish

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<sup>214</sup> Poggiali diary, 9 July 1936.

<sup>215</sup> "Voglio ascari, non voglio razziatori," 6 March 1940, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 4.

<sup>216</sup> Mezzetti to Amedeo di Savoia, n.d., and "Verbale della riunione tenuta il 17 settembre in Addis Ababa fra S.E. Comandante Superiore delle Forze Armate A.O.I. e S.E. Governatore dell'Amara," 17 September 1938, ASMAE, MAI, Gab-AS, b. 267, fasc. 214.

nearby villages, burning huts, taking livestock, and killing any able-bodied men they came across.<sup>217</sup>

Italian commanders also were hindered by the steady erosion of their colonial units through attrition. The quality of colonial battalions diminished over time, with the recruitment and hasty training of new units and reinforcements throughout the empire. Between 1935 and 1941, half of the eligible male population in Eritrea served as *askari*.<sup>218</sup> Italian authorities had to find recruits in the newly occupied territories as well. Nasi was not impressed by the Oromo units he recruited in Harar. He claimed that “the deficient warlike qualities of the race,” along with their limited intelligence and “brigands’ instinct” made them difficult to train.<sup>219</sup> When the 70<sup>th</sup> Colonial Battalion suffered a significant defeat to the forces of Belay Zeleke in 1939, the commander of troops in Amhara, Quirino Armellini, pointed his finger at the lack of preparation of the unit’s multiethnic *askari*.

The battalion suffered from — it must be said — its shameful origins (it was hastily established in Addis Ababa with — one could say — street urchins [*gente per la strada*]); from having been closed up for about a year in the fortress of Martula Maryam and from having been kept equally immobile in the garrison of Debre Werk.

Armellini added that the newly appointed Amhara non-commissioned officers [*graduati*] lacked authority over their heterogeneous unit which, as a whole, lacked discipline and training. He warned that other units in Amhara suffered from the same limitations.<sup>220</sup>

Failures like those that befell the troops of Mezzetti and Armellini in 1938 and 1939, whether they involved the defeat of Italian forces in battle or simply the inability to locate and dispatch rebel formations, dealt serious blows to the credibility of Italian promises of protection for local populations. Furthermore, the inability of Italian forces to avoid collateral damage in the midst of operations lessened Ethiopian faith in the

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<sup>217</sup> Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:518, 531, 541–50. Mules provided greater mobility in rough terrain but were always short in number. In a smaller operation in 1937 involving twenty units — counting battalions, artillery groups, and bands — Italian logistical services were stretched to the limit to provide sufficient numbers of mules. Ricagno to Centro Servizi, Dessie, 23 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>218</sup> Dominionioni, *Sfascio dell’Impero*, 230.

<sup>219</sup> “Relazione militare mensile – maggio–giugno 1937,” n.d. [July 1937], AUSSME, D-6, n. 62.

<sup>220</sup> “Relazione sul fatto d’arme di Debra Uork,” 29 September 1939, AUSSME, L-14, fasc. 4.

government. Collateral damage was not only the result of Italian reprisals and indiscipline; it also stemmed from the army's unwillingness to fully adjust its techniques and weaponry for counter guerrilla warfare. Although the *askari* provided a reasonably specialized arm for light operations that in theory did not necessitate the destruction of settlements and private property, the Italians continued to rely upon heavy weaponry in concert with their colonial battalions.<sup>221</sup> Italian commanders valued destructive technologies — including artillery, aviation, and poison gas — as a means of demonstrating prestige and superiority while reducing their own casualties.

Conditions prevented the Italians from making much use of armoured vehicles in Ethiopia. The disaster that befell an armoured column at Dembeguina Pass in December 1935, when Ethiopian infantry trapped and destroyed six CV 35 tanks in a defile, demonstrated the limitations of armour in rough terrain.<sup>222</sup> The CV 35 lacked the range to be used in major operations and the Italians did not have enough heavy trucks to transport them. The armoured cars that the Italians fielded lacked sufficient protection for their crews even against rifle shots, and rebels soon learned to render them immobile by aiming for their engines.<sup>223</sup> Due to these limitations, the Italians restricted the use of their limited armour to patrol duty along major communications lines.<sup>224</sup>

On the other hand, most Italian commanders made ample use of artillery wherever and whenever they could. Colonial artillery tended to be packed on mules [*someggiata*] for ease of transport even on mountain paths. Italian commands attached 65-mm or 75-mm howitzers and 81-mm mortars to their mobile columns as needed. Most column

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<sup>221</sup> The use of light weapons did not prevent the death of non-combatants during operations. The tendency of Ethiopian guerrillas to occupy and hole up in villages and to travel with unarmed male and female camp followers made it difficult to distinguish between neutral onlookers and enemies, when Italian forces cared to do so. Formento describes a surprise attack his unit conducted against a rebel hideout. At daybreak, his men opened fire on a cluster of huts that they had surrounded, picking off male and female “rebels” as they sought safety in a nearby forest. Formento’s unit suffered three wounded, but killed thirty “rebels” and recovered ten rifles. Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 124–26.

<sup>222</sup> John J. T. Sweet, *Iron Arm: The Mechanization of Mussolini's Army, 1920–40* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980), 94. Sweet describes the CV 35 as a “glorified machine-gun carrier.” It had only two hull-mounted machineguns for defence. The lack of a rotating turret left the two-man crew vulnerable if they were not supported by infantry.

<sup>223</sup> “Relazione fatti d’arme a Uacnè (7–20 maggio 1938),” 24 May 1938, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

<sup>224</sup> “Squadrone carri veloci ‘Arimondi’,” 7 February 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

commanders relied on artillery to soften up rebel positions and reduce the casualties suffered by their men. Once they established contact with the enemy, they would wait to deploy their artillery and establish a base of fire, often giving time for the rebels to escape.<sup>225</sup> Giuseppe Pirzio Biroli lamented the tendency of Italian officers to resort too quickly to the use of artillery. Too often, sporadic enemy fire was followed by “a disproportionate reaction with the inopportune use of artillery that frightened the populations.” These heavy-handed tactics gave villagers caught up in operations little option but to flee their homes in fear. This was a counterproductive by-product of considering colonial police operations to be “true and proper operations of war” in which commanders sought “combat” and “conquest” as if involved in a conventional conflict.<sup>226</sup>

Although the Italian air force repatriated many of its units after the conquest of Addis Ababa, by 1940 the viceroy still had 320 aircraft at his disposal in East Africa.<sup>227</sup> Italian commanders made use of aviation in a number of ways. Aircraft dropped propaganda leaflets to indigenous populations as well as supplies to distant columns and isolated garrisons, in the process helping to raise the morale of the beleaguered troops. They also provided Italian columns with fire support through bombing or strafing.<sup>228</sup> Because it was difficult to locate guerrillas, the air force focused its bombing on villages where informants had signalled the presence of rebels.<sup>229</sup> After-action reports from operations in Lasta in 1936 reveal that “rebel villages were methodically destroyed” by

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<sup>225</sup> Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:542–43, 576. Pierelli notes that General Mariotti was unique in avoiding tactical manoeuvres and favouring outright charges by his *askari*.

<sup>226</sup> “Sottomissione, disarmo e pacificazione del Beghemeder. Condotta della truppa verso la popolazione,” 10 December 1937, ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 31.

<sup>227</sup> “Relazione al Duce sulle questioni militari più importanti concernenti l’Impero,” 6 April 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207. Most of these aircraft — Caproni Ca.133s, Savoia-Marchetti SM.81s, and Fiat CR.32s — were second-rate but perfectly serviceable in a colonial setting where the enemy lacked aircraft or anti-aircraft weaponry of its own.

<sup>228</sup> “Relazione sulle operazioni militari svoltesi nel territorio dei Galla + Sidama dalla seconda metà di febbraio al mese di maggio 1937,” n.d. [1937], ACS, FG, b. 26, fasc. 29, sf. 28. “Le operazioni nel Lasta del settembre – ottobre 1937,” n.d. [1937], ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a. Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 257–58.

<sup>229</sup> See, for example, Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 23 September and 21 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

Italian aircraft.<sup>230</sup> Graziani's orders for operations in Shewa in 1937 called upon the air force "to conduct systematic work for the destruction of inhabited centres, rebels, [and] populations that until now have not submitted."<sup>231</sup>

Aerial action went hand-in-hand with Italian repression and terror. When informants reported that rebel propaganda was stirring up the population in parts of Gojam, Pirzio Biroli immediately ordered "aerial activity in grand style" to ward off revolt.

Need to bomb and burn all above-named centres not sparing the churches or livestock. The lesson must be firm, severe, [and] devastating, to give a tangible demonstration of our superiority and strength to the populations. The same action should be repeated on the 17th and 18th, because only in this way, in this moment, can the future of Gojam turn decisively in our favour.

Given that the population had not yet actually risen in revolt, this response was disproportionate.<sup>232</sup> Aircrew reported that most villagers managed to flee and take cover in nearby woods, so they targeted huts and livestock with fragmentation and incendiary bombs.<sup>233</sup> With apparent relish, Pirzio Biroli noted that the "[dry] season is propitious for the spread of fires and the lesson will be very effective." The Governor of Amhara deemed the operation a success when villagers began to seek out Italian commanders and beg them for the bombing to stop.<sup>234</sup>

Clearly, there was little effort or desire to avoid collateral damage in these operations. Indeed, incidents of friendly fire were not uncommon. Formento's own irregular band came under aerial bombardment on several occasions as the air force "bombed and burned some defenceless villages, [and] enthusiastically machine-gunned

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<sup>230</sup> "Relazione sul concorso dell'aviazione alle operazioni di polizia coloniale compiute, dalle truppe del Governo Amara, nel periodo agosto-dicembre 1936," 23 March 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172.

<sup>231</sup> Graziani to Maletti, 7 April 1937, ACS, FG, b. 29, fasc. 29, sf. 33c. In the draft manuscript for his work on "Il secondo anno dell'Impero," Graziani crossed out the word "destruction" and replaced it with "subjugation."

<sup>232</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 15 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>233</sup> "Bombardamento territori del Goggiam Meridionale" and "Bombardamento Goggiam Meridionale," 16 and 18 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>234</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 27 October and 25 November 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

throng of innocent fleeing peasants and herds of terrorized cattle.”<sup>235</sup> Italian commanders continued to rely upon bombing up to the Second World War, convinced that aerial bombardments “had strong moral repercussions on populations.”<sup>236</sup> During the first four months of 1940, including the truce with and operations against Abebe Aregai, the Italian air force flew 229 sorties in Ethiopia, dropping 124,898 kilograms of bombs and firing 9,750 rounds of machinegun ammunition.<sup>237</sup>

The air force also provided the means of delivery for chemical weapons. The Italians made widespread use of poison gas against rebels and indigenous populations well after the fall of Addis Ababa. Although the use of gas was restricted by the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which Italy had signed, Mussolini authorized its use during the invasion of Ethiopia and immediately thereafter against “rebels.”<sup>238</sup> The chemical weapon used most frequently during the occupation was the C 500-T bomb. It weighed 280 kilograms, of which 212 kilograms was mustard gas [*iprite*]. The air force timed the bomb to explode 250 metres above the ground, thereby spreading its contents in an elliptical area 500 to 800 metres long and 100 to 200 metres wide, depending on the wind. The corrosive liquid produced lethal vapours and could penetrate the skin to produce internal lesions which could result in death days later. Furthermore, it was long-lasting, rendering the ground impassable for several days.<sup>239</sup>

These characteristics prevented Italian commanders from employing gas in close proximity to their own units. They tried, not always effectively, to use mustard gas to hem rebels in and prevent their escape across affected areas.<sup>240</sup> Because gas covered such

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<sup>235</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 21, 29. For a similar experience, see Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:353.

<sup>236</sup> Felsani to Graziani, 19 September 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>237</sup> ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/47, fasc. 223, “Relazioni militari del G. G. 1939–1940.”

<sup>238</sup> Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 168–70.

<sup>239</sup> Giorgio Rochat, “L’impiego dei gas nella guerra d’Etiopia 1935–1936,” in *I gas di Mussolini: Il fascismo e la guerra d’Etiopia*, ed. Angelo Del Boca (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1996), 63–64. Giorgio Rochat, “The Italian Air Force in the Ethiopian War (1935–1936),” in Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, *Italian Colonialism*, 41–42.

<sup>240</sup> Nasi reported, perhaps with some astonishment, that the guerrilla leader Fitawrari Bahade managed to escape with six-hundred men across an area covered with mustard gas [*zona ipritata*]. Nasi to Graziani, 16 November 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 169.

a large area and was difficult to control, it lent itself naturally to collateral damage, but commanders like Pirzio Biroli did not care. His operations in Lasta against Wondosson Kassa employed “asphyxiating gas of all types in areas where it is presumed that Wondosson has recruited men, without distinction between subjects and non-subjects.”<sup>241</sup> Most Italian documentation is not so forthcoming, as army commanders maintained a general attitude of secrecy about the use of gas. The reports from the punitive operation that followed the murder of the Italian surveyor Castagna in October 1938 are revealing. The viceroy ordered an immediate “aerial bombardment” followed by a ground attack by seven colonial battalions. However, the after-action reports reveal that the mopping-up operation was delayed for two weeks while the Italians waited for the “toxic effects” of the “bombardment” to dissipate.<sup>242</sup> Through 1938, any aerial bombardment potentially could have involved the use of gas. The war diaries of Italian air force squadrons record with some consistency the deployment of bombs loaded with mustard gas or, less frequently, phosgene gas. According to this data, Graziani employed chemical weapons by average on a weekly basis. Conversely, the Duke of Aosta significantly restricted their use and ended it completely after the repatriation of Cavallero.<sup>243</sup>

Italy’s massive use of poison gas in Ethiopia must be understood within the context of Fascism’s obsession with “modernity” and “totalitarian tactics.”<sup>244</sup> Mussolini’s personal role advocating and permitting the employment of chemical weapons demonstrates its importance to the regime. The generals that employed these weapons were driven by a connected but distinctly military logic that they shared with other European military cultures. The previous decade, Spanish aircraft in Morocco had

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<sup>241</sup> “Lasta,” 13 September 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 171.

<sup>242</sup> “Notiziario nove ottobre,” 10 October 1938, and “Relazione sui fatti d’arme più importanti,” 15-29 October 1938, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

<sup>243</sup> A list of poison gas bombs dropped during the conquest and occupation of Ethiopia is available in Roberto Gentili, “La storiografia aeronautica e il problema dei gas,” in Del Boca, *I gas di Mussolini*, 133–44. Borra claims that Amedeo opposed the use of poison gas on humanitarian grounds and that Cavallero’s continued use of the weapon widened the rift between the two. Borra, *Amedeo di Savoia*, 89.

<sup>244</sup> Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 126.



deployed prodigious amounts of mustard gas.<sup>245</sup> As Giulia Brogini Künzi has argued, the use of gas and large-scale bombing during the invasion of 1935–36 conformed “to the futuristic vision laid out in Europe’s military academies, military journals, and general staffs” that was intended to avoid stalemate and produce shorter wars. It also conformed to a colonial doctrine that relied heavily on violence and moral factors.<sup>246</sup> Italian generals continued to employ gas after the conquest for the same reasons that they relied so heavily on conventional bombing and artillery: these weapons helped reduce their own casualties while demonstrating Italian military might and prestige in the bluntest of terms.

## Irregular Forces

Alongside employing heavy weapons, the Italians recruited large numbers of irregular bands [*bande*] to help reduce their own casualty rates and to make up for deficiencies in manpower to police the new empire. Italian officers harboured reservations over their recruitment, subscribing to the general axiom that irregular forces could be relied upon in times of success, but were best done without under more difficult circumstances.<sup>247</sup> Experience in Cyrenaica, where locally recruited bands frequently provided insurgents with arms and intelligence, prompted Italian generals to rely on Eritrean battalions.<sup>248</sup> Nevertheless, as conditions in Ethiopia grew more difficult, Italian commanders accepted irregulars as a necessary evil, to be used for lesser tasks.<sup>249</sup> Throughout the occupation, Italian authorities constantly struggled to balance the need for boots on the ground with the counterproductive effects of ineffective, unreliable, or undisciplined militia.

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<sup>245</sup> On the Spanish colonial army’s use of gas during the Rif War of the 1920s, see Sebastian Balfour, “The Secret History of Chemical Warfare Against Moroccans,” chap. 5 in *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>246</sup> Brogini Künzi, “Total Colonial War,” 326.

<sup>247</sup> Nasi, “Operazioni coloniali,” 71. AUSSME, L-3, b. 79, fasc. 5.

<sup>248</sup> Arielli, “Colonial Soldiers in Italian Counter-Insurgency,” 61–62.

<sup>249</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 163. The recruitment of irregular forces increased as regular units from the invasion returned to Italy. Nasi to Marghinotti, 2 November 1936, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 169.

The Italians employed different types of bands in their service. Residential bands provided permanent service as garrisons. In theory, local auxiliaries were well-suited to this defensive role. They were less expensive to maintain than regular troops and their local knowledge helped to gather intelligence and target insurgent infrastructure. Their presence offered protection to villages and helped isolate guerrillas from the population.<sup>250</sup> However, these benefits became nullified if irregular troops were not strong enough to fend off local insurgents. Hastily recruited and trained, residential bands did not earn a strong reputation among Italian officials.<sup>251</sup> In September 1937, Ciro Poggiali recorded his conversation with an “intelligent functionary” who pointed out that the Italian administration now had established more than one thousand residencies and vice-residencies in East Africa, each with a band of one hundred men.

But which men? Not warriors, who led by good officers could give excellent protection to our rule and prestige. But for it [we have] more shepherds, peasants, unemployed beggars, who enlist in the bands for the glory of carrying a rifle, which in Abyssinia means rising many ranks in the estimation of the masses.<sup>252</sup>

The following month, one such band in Amhara broke up and dispersed in the midst of battle after its commanding officer, an Italian lieutenant serving as vice-resident, was wounded.<sup>253</sup> Despite setbacks like this, manpower shortages compelled the governors of Amhara to recruit and arm more civilians for local defence. Many of the weapons that Italian authorities doled out eventually found their way into rebel hands, either through defeats in battle or the desertion of disloyal units.<sup>254</sup>

In addition to residential bands, the Italians incorporated some bands of former *rases* — largely made up of Amhara warriors — into their order of battle. These units came with a level of esprit de corps and cohesion that enabled their employment as *askari* in operations. However, these same traits made them unreliable from the Italian point of

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<sup>250</sup> Statiev, *Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 210.

<sup>251</sup> Hazon memorandum, October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1c.

<sup>252</sup> Poggiali diary, 20 September 1937.

<sup>253</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 27 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>254</sup> See Mezzetti’s political reports for July and November 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. See also “Notiziario ventuno agosto,” 22 August 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

view, especially with the regions of Amhara and Shewa in revolt. The Italians allowed a group of bands under *Ras* Hailu to operate together until 1937, when they determined that the *ras* no longer could be trusted. After this, they parcelled the bands out to garrison distant locales and reinforce mobile columns throughout Shewa and Amhara.<sup>255</sup> Ettore Formento, the commander of one of these bands, admitted that they had a tendency to switch sides.

Many irregular bands in our pay were made up of former *neftegna* [Amhara soldiers sent to garrison non-Amhara territories of the Abyssinian empire] that likewise provided the backbone of the rebel formations, with the result that there was always the possibility of dangerous exchanges and arrangements. In fact it happened on more than one occasion that a few bands made up exclusively of *neftegna* rebelled, butchering the officers.<sup>256</sup>

Italian authorities tried to guarantee the loyalty of permanent bands by paying them well. By 1940, they cost the Italian government six million lire per month to maintain. Although Nasi wanted to disband them, he ultimately kept them in Italian pay, hoping that it would keep them from joining the partisans en masse.<sup>257</sup>

Finally, the Italians recruited temporary bands, usually to carry out tasks of basic policing and patrolling or to provide reconnaissance and act as screens for mobile columns. These tasks brought them into contact with populations — often of different ethnicities, in accordance with the Italian strategy of “divide and conquer” — and involved them in the process of reprisals.<sup>258</sup> The makeup of temporary bands ran the gamut from hardened warriors to green villagers. Their equipment also varied. With captured Austrian stock running low, Italian authorities sometimes could only provide bands with obsolete Model 1870/87 Vetterlis. In other cases, they simply carried spears.<sup>259</sup> Colonel Uberto Raugei, who commanded a column made up of Oromo bands

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<sup>255</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 17–22, 41.

<sup>256</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 86–87. Official bulletins also mention acts of treachery. “Notiziario ventuno agosto,” 22 August 1938, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 86.

<sup>257</sup> Dominiononi, *Lo sfascio dell’Impero*, 229.

<sup>258</sup> Harar Armed Forces Command war diary, 8 June 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 170. Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 15–16. Pipitone, “Le operazioni di polizia coloniale,” 490.

<sup>259</sup> Pirzio Biroli to Graziani, 26 April 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 172. Nasi to Graziani, 2 July 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 62. The variety of weapons in use by irregular bands in Ethiopia caused problems for

in Lasta in 1937, concluded that his men were brave fighters but poor shots, prone to desertion or looting, and had a tendency not to obey their leaders.<sup>260</sup> As an officer in a regular battalion, Walter Pierelli held these types of bands with disdain: they “operated according to Abyssinian methods and even if they were supposed to be structured into platoons and squads, you could not tell because they always marched like a flock of sheep.”<sup>261</sup> By 1939, Quirino Armellini concluded that irregular bands of armed villagers were almost worthless in combat and, although he acknowledged the administration’s shortage of personnel, he recommended that such bands be abolished.<sup>262</sup>

In areas with strong insurgent movements, then, irregular bands failed to provide a reliable means of security for the Italian administration. Equally damaging to the Italian occupation was the lack of discipline among irregular units. In counterinsurgency, the ability to monitor auxiliary forces and curtail counterproductive looting or random violence is vital.<sup>263</sup> However, Italian authorities failed to impose strict control over their irregulars in Ethiopia. Sometimes, bands were led by local chiefs and left to their own devices.<sup>264</sup> Even if an Italian officer was present, this did not guarantee a satisfactory level of command and control. Formento was a twenty-five-year-old second lieutenant when he took command of an irregular band of five-hundred Amhara and Tegrayan warriors with its own internal hierarchy. This left Formento — the only officer in the unit, with an Eritrean as his interpreter and an Amhara noble for a deputy — isolated.

We officers did not know our men, their customs, their mentality; the Eritrean learned in the colonial battalions did not help, of the Amharic tongue we knew

the Italian logistical services, since calibres and parts were not standardized. “Relazione al Duce sulle questioni militari più importanti concernenti l’Impero,” 6 April 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/43, fasc. 207.

<sup>260</sup> “Relazione sulle operazioni di polizia svolte nel Lasta,” 10 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

<sup>261</sup> Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:338.

<sup>262</sup> “Relazione sul fatto d’arme di Debra Uork,” 29 September 1939, AUSSME, L-14, fasc. 4.

<sup>263</sup> Statiev, *Soviet Counterinsurgency*, 210.

<sup>264</sup> “Notiziario politico e relazione mensile mesi Dicembre e Gennaio,” 10 March 1938, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 248. Pipitone, “Le operazioni di polizia coloniale,” 478.

only a few words gleaned from nocturnal contacts with local women [*donne del posto*] and... not all useable.

Formento feared that if he did not make a good first impression, his men simply would desert.<sup>265</sup>

Doubts over the loyalty of their men prompted Italian commanders of irregular units to tolerate looting and pillaging to a greater degree than in regular colonial battalions. They considered such behaviour to be an unchangeable characteristic of the African race. According to Anselmi, who served as the medical officer for an irregular band in 1937, looting was “typical of irregular formations, to whom were conceded privileges that were not codified but tacitly were accepted by commands.” In lieu of fixed economic compensation and rations, the government tolerated their “ancestral tradition of plunder” [*razzia*].<sup>266</sup> Nor did Anselmi believe that Italian commands could prevent the burning of villages, an unfortunate and “harsh law of war in the bush” [*boscaglia*].<sup>267</sup> More senior commanders, like Colonel Raugè, held similar views when summing up the traits of the typical Oromo [*Galla*] irregular.

He is by nature greedy and selfish and to satisfy this thirst, he is inimitable: he walks day and night in search of villages to pillage, [and] people to decapitate and castrate. [...] Once he has satisfied his instinctive thirst for plunder, he no longer wants to fight and he defends only all that which he stole. [...] The Galla answers only when he has the safety and freedom to plunder, if this is not conceded no one would answer to the *chitet* [the traditional call to arms throughout the Horn of Africa], or answering, would defect en masse the same day.<sup>268</sup>

Italian commands understood that irregular forces were prone to inflict collateral damage, but they made little effort to restrain their men. Although they brushed aside violent excesses as a natural part of warfare in East Africa, this behaviour further gave the lie to Italian claims of bringing a more just and civilized administration to Ethiopia.

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<sup>265</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 20–22.

<sup>266</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 71–73. Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 42. The pay of irregular bands was equivalent to that of regular colonial troops, except that they had no access to welfare services and only received pay for days of effective participation in operations. Pipitone, “Le operazioni di polizia coloniale,” 478. Pierelli, *Le mie tre guerre*, 2:369.

<sup>267</sup> Anselmi, *Negarit amharignè*, 74.

<sup>268</sup> “Relazione sulle operazioni di polizia svolte nel Lasta,” 10 October 1937, ACS, FG, b. 27, fasc. 29, sf. 33a.

Italian counterinsurgency policy in Ethiopia made virtually no effort towards winning over the hearts-and-minds of the local populations. Rather, Italian authorities and field commanders easily conformed to Fascist precepts of imposing dominance by force and terror. Insurgents and those deemed guilty of assisting them as a rule were shot out of hand before any amnesty could be applied. In identifying the causes of rebellion and the mentality of the insurgents, Italian generals frequently reflected the same cultural and racial biases evident in Fascist propaganda. Poor intelligence impeded the effectiveness of the army's propaganda among the occupied populations, propaganda based primarily on the threat and display of force. Repression fell indiscriminately on non-combatants, the result of reprisal policies, heavy-handed tactics, and undisciplined or frustrated troops. Despite making good use of colonial light infantry against guerrillas, the continued reliance on overwhelming firepower, including the use of poison gas, proved ineffective and made it difficult to avoid collateral damage against civilians. Irregular forces recruited by Italian authorities were equally inefficient and undisciplined. Frustrated by guerrilla warfare, Italian forces committed apparently arbitrary acts of violence which often went unpunished or condoned by the military leadership.

Italian counterinsurgency was a failure and the Fascist leadership recognized it as such. The uncompromising practice of shooting rebels and brigands captured in combat tended to make even demoralized and defeated partisans less willing to surrender.<sup>269</sup> Italian columns inflicted heavy losses on insurgents, but guerrilla activity and popular rebellions continued to surface. Authorities in Rome repudiated Graziani, not only for his indigenous policy and treatment of elites but for his reliance on force and application of terror.<sup>270</sup> The Duke of Aosta made fundamental changes to many aspects of Italian military policy — he ended the arbitrary targeting of civilians; he restricted the scope of operations and reprisals; he offered clemency to rebels and tried to negotiate with their leaders; he acknowledged the grievances of the indigenous populations and sought to win them over through appeals to reason; he ended the indiscriminate use of chemical

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<sup>269</sup> Nasi to Graziani, 25 April 1937, AUSSME, D-6, vol. 169.

<sup>270</sup> "Direttive politico-militari e loro sviluppo," n.d., ACS, FG, b. 47, fasc. 42, sf. 1d.

weapons. However, the policies of the new viceroy did not meet with resounding success. Italian military authorities never found a viable alternative to the harsh measures of 1936 and 1937, which had come to them so instinctively, based as they were on previous practice and upon commonly held racist assumptions of the mentality and value of life in Africa. By 1940, there was little indication that the Duke of Aosta had transformed Italian colonial or military culture. In many respects, Graziani's methods prevailed.

Despite their rank and pre-eminence, figures like the Duke of Aosta, Guglielmo Nasi, and Luigi Frusci had difficulty changing the general attitudes of Italian officers in East Africa. They constantly had to harangue junior and senior officers on the need for moderation, but many of these continued to take the all-or-nothing approach to pacification that they had embarked upon in 1936 and 1937. The commanders that adopted more nuanced approaches towards indigenous populations struggled against a military culture that tended towards extremes, at least in the case of colonial revolt or guerrilla insurgency. For most colonial military officials, natives either were loyal subjects or irrevocable insurgents; there was no middle ground. Taking command of the "Eastern Theatre" after the outbreak of war with Britain and France in 1940, Nasi imparted directives demanding greater "tolerance" towards suspect populations, seeking to reform internal dissidents through "persuasion" rather than "compulsion."<sup>271</sup> This was another case of too little, too late.

The Second World War underlined the failure of Italian counterinsurgency in East Africa. In April 1940, Pietro Badoglio warned Mussolini that the offensive operations planned for the theatre likely would not be possible due to the unfavourable internal situation. As far as the Chief of the Italian General Staff was concerned, Ethiopia remained in a state of "emergency" [*di urgenza*], with "internal pacification" demanding the attention of all the forces of the empire.<sup>272</sup> While Harar remained calm after six months of war against Britain, Italian control in Amhara had weakened.<sup>273</sup> After the war,

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<sup>271</sup> "Relazione sui servizi d'istituto eseguiti durante il mese di giugno 1940," 3 July 1940, ASMAE, MAI, pos. 181/53, fasc. 247.

<sup>272</sup> Badoglio to Mussolini, 6 April 1940, DDI 9, III, 716.

<sup>273</sup> "Relazione politica riassuntiva giugno-novembre 1940," 6 December 1940, AUSSME, L-14, b. 111, fasc. 1.

the former commander of troops in Amhara, General Martini, attributed the Italian defeat in large part to the “unhappy” internal situation in Amhara. This, in turn, he deemed the result of a simple-minded population but also of “crude” administrative policies and counterproductive reprisals carried out by junior officers. Initial Italian successes maintained relative calm until November 1940, when the British broke through Italian defences at Gallabat. After that point, previously loyal chiefs began to join the rebels who, supplied by the British, were able to mine roads in the Italian rear. Rebellion spread in 1941 and Martini criticized the viceroy’s decision to continue supplying local populations with arms that largely went straight into rebel hands. Rebellion in Gojam became so severe that the Italians abandoned it altogether in February 1941.<sup>274</sup>

Besieged in the mountain stronghold of Amba Alagi, the Duke of Aosta refused the offers of the Ethiopian *Ras* Seyum to negotiate, claiming haughtily that “a prince of the House of Savoy does not treat with a traitor.”<sup>275</sup> Ironically — now that Italian forces found themselves confronted by Commonwealth forces superior in armour, artillery, motor transport, and aircraft — Amedeo called for the adoption of something resembling guerrilla warfare. He urged his remaining commanders to form bands of soldiers and loyal civilians “for attacking by surprise when stronger, avoiding combat when weaker with a single purpose: to be present and active until the end of the war” so that Italy might retain its imperial claims.<sup>276</sup> The Duke of Aosta surrendered to the British in May 1941. Nasi followed suit in November, signalling the end of Italy’s East African empire.

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<sup>274</sup> “La guerra nell’Amara dal 10 giugno 1940 al 4 febbraio 1941,” 15 June 1950, AUSSME, L-13, b. 159, fasc. 6.

<sup>275</sup> Berretta, *Amedeo d’Aosta*, 152.

<sup>276</sup> “Situazione dell’Impero,” 14 February 1941, DSCS, 3/II:191–94. Although their strategic impact on the war was negligible, some of the bands remained active into 1943. On the Italian guerrilla movement in East Africa, see Alberto Rosselli, *Storie segrete: Operazioni sconosciute o dimenticate della seconda guerra mondiale* (Pavia: Iuculano, 2007). For a popular biography on one of the more colourful Italian officers that waged guerrilla warfare against the British in East Africa, see Sebastian O’Kelly, *Amedeo: The True Story of an Italian’s War in Abyssinia* (London: Harper Collins, 2002).



## PART II. EUROPEAN EMPIRE: YUGOSLAVIA



**Figure 2. Western Yugoslavia, 1941 (Occupation Zones)**

Source: Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), xvii.

## 4 Between Allies and Empire

While the Duke of Aosta held on at Amba Alagi, Mussolini carved out a new Fascist empire in Europe. After a year of war that had seen few Italian territorial gains — limited to a small strip of land along Italy's western border with France — Axis victories over Greece and Yugoslavia in April 1941 expanded exponentially the amount of foreign soil under Italian occupation. The *Regio Esercito* now found itself responsible for maintaining security throughout most of Greece, an enlarged Albania, Montenegro, Herzegovina, western Bosnia, Dalmatia, western Croatia, and half of Slovenia. Although Italy directly annexed only small parts of these territories during the war, all of them formed part of Fascism's vaguely defined *spazio vitale* or Imperial Community.<sup>1</sup> Italian generals once again were thrust to the forefront of Mussolini's imperial policy.

Many of the experienced colonial officers — including Gallina, Tosti, Galliani, Lorenzini, Raugei, and Nasi — remained in Africa to be killed or captured by Commonwealth forces. Nevertheless, some generals who had previously held important positions in East Africa received commands in the Balkans. The supreme Italian commander in Greece was Carlo Geloso, the former Governor of Galla Sidamo. In Montenegro, Alessandro Pirzio Biroli, the once disgraced Governor of Amhara, exercised military and civil powers. Initially, military authority in Dalmatia was assigned to Renzo Dalmazzo, who had commanded a brigade in Pirzio Biroli's Eritrean Corps during the conquest of Ethiopia. In 1942, he was joined by Quirino Armellini, former commander of troops in Amhara. Ugo Cavallero, Graziani's immediate replacement as military commander in East Africa, now presided over the *Comando Supremo* in Rome.<sup>2</sup> These men, appointed solely on the basis of seniority, brought their recent experience of

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<sup>1</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 9–11. On the territorial settlement for the occupation of Greece, see Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–44* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 18–22.

<sup>2</sup> Gobetti further notes that the division commanders Pentimalli, Lusana, and Piazzoni — who would take over command of VI Corps in 1943 — also served in Africa, while Second Army's Mario Roatta followed closely the repression in Ethiopia as head of the Italian military intelligence service in 1937. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 184.

imperial administration and colonial warfare to their new assignments.<sup>3</sup> Continuity between the Ethiopian and Balkan campaigns was personal as well as institutional.

The Italian Second Army took part in the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, launching an offensive from northeastern Italy. In the following months, the formation was transformed into an army of occupation, losing most of its motorized units and much of its artillery. However, the army and corps commanders remained with their staffs to oversee the occupation of western Yugoslavia. Through 1941, Mario Robotti's XI Corps established itself in Slovenia; the V Corps under Riccardo Balocco occupied northern Croatia; Dalmazzo's VI Corps held Dalmatia and parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The three corps commanders answered to Vittorio Ambrosio, who directed Second Army out of Sušak, on the outskirts of Fiume [Rijeka].<sup>4</sup> Of the former territories of Yugoslavia under Italian occupation, only Montenegro and the lands appended to Albania remained outside the purview of Second Army.<sup>5</sup> In January 1942, Ambrosio switched places with Mario Roatta as Chief of the Army General Staff [*Stato Maggiore del Regio Esercito*, or SMRE]. The following month, Roatta was joined by Quirino Armellini, whose XVIII Corps was slotted between the V and VI Corps in Dalmatia. In May 1942, Second Army was officially renamed the *Comando Superiore Forze Armate di Slovenia e Dalmazia* [Supersloda].<sup>6</sup> With upwards of 200,000 men at their disposal, the commanders of Second Army were responsible for defending the new territories annexed by Italy in Slovenia and Dalmatia, as well as maintaining security along the Adriatic coastline, including parts of the nominally Independent State of Croatia.

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<sup>3</sup> Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 367n11.

<sup>4</sup> On the deployment of Second Army and the transfer of divisions by the end of April 1941, see "Organizzazione del territorio occupato: variant alla circolare 3700," 3 May 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 724, DS Second Army, April-May 1941, allegati. A complete order of battle for Second Army as of September 1941 is available in "Situazione comandi e truppe al 14 settembre 1941," 14 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 724, DS Second Army, August-September 1941, allegati.

<sup>5</sup> Montenegro was occupied by the Ninth Army's XIV Corps, which in December 1941 became an independent command. Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 249.

<sup>6</sup> In official correspondence, Italian commanders used the terms Second Army and Supersloda interchangeably through 1943.

In some respects, the generals of Second Army enjoyed greater independence of command than had their colleagues in East Africa. They did not take orders from a colonial ministry or other civilian body, but instead reported up the traditional military hierarchy. In 1941 and 1943, Second Army answered to the SMRE. In 1942, it came under the direct supervision of Cavallero's *Comando Supremo*.<sup>7</sup> The latter arrangement theoretically enabled Mussolini to exercise tight control over occupation policy, since Cavallero answered directly to the *Duce*. However, in practice, Mussolini remained disinterested in the mundane tasks of imperial administration, especially while conventional warfare raged on in other theatres. The lack of clear direction from Mussolini's office gave the army something of a free hand in occupied Yugoslavia, but its authority was not unlimited. Italian generals had to work alongside civilian Fascist administrators as well as allied Croatian and German officials. These ill-defined and challenging relationships governed the political dimension of Second Army's activity in the Balkans. Politics, lamented an Italian staff officer after the war, always remained the central "problem" for the army. Military concerns were of secondary importance.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter examines how Italian military authorities responded to two overarching political conditions. The first of these conditions was the incorporation of the Province of Ljubljana and the Governorate of Dalmatia into the Kingdom of Italy. Their annexation came as the result of Mussolini's imperial ambitions and impatient opportunism. The decision was unpopular with the majority of the local populations and hindered the development of an effective counterinsurgency strategy. It also brought the army into conflict with the civil authorities tasked with Italianizing and Fascistizing the new provinces. Initially, Second Army's responsibilities were supposedly limited to securing the borders against external threats. This provided the basis for jurisdictional disputes once it became clear that local police could not guarantee the internal security of the new provinces.

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<sup>7</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 106. Mario Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette: L'esercito italiano in guerra 1941–1944* (Milan: Mondadori, 1946), 169.

<sup>8</sup> Giacomo Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia* (Rome: Corso, 1945), 1:213.

The second condition was the presence of foreign allied powers in the theatre. Italian officials could not ignore the interests of their Axis partners, given Germany's role in defeating the Yugoslavian armed forces in 1941 and the need thereafter to coordinate the counterinsurgency efforts of Axis armies in southeastern Europe. Italian generals became involved in a struggle against Germany for hegemony in the Balkans, but they sometimes disagreed with Fascist diplomats as how best to protect and expand Italy's sphere of interest. Second Army's concern over German interference was surpassed only by its contempt for the government and armed forces of the Independent State of Croatia. Established as an Axis puppet state, the Ustaša regime further destabilized the situation in Yugoslavia and fed insurgency, while providing another jurisdictional labyrinth that Italian authorities had to navigate after occupying half of the country. In addition, coalition relations were at the heart of the Italian army's two most controversial policies in Yugoslavia: its support of the Serb Četnik movement and its protection of Jewish refugees in the midst of Nazi-Ustaša genocide.

The pressures of empire-building on one hand and coalition relations on the other turned Italian generals once again into politicians and diplomats. Despite the ongoing conflict against the Commonwealth, the Soviet Union, the United States, and Yugoslavian Partisans — as well as Fascist Italy's increasing reliance on and subordination to Nazi Germany — the commanders of Second Army did not adopt a narrow military approach to their task. They operated as functionaries of empire in their own right, generally working to expand Italy's political influence and control. Their clashes with Fascist civil authorities and their German and Croatian allies typified the jurisdictional chaos of Europe under Axis administration. Politically, the generals of Second Army remained loyal, and occasionally effective, functionaries of the Fascist regime.

## Fascism's Adriatic Empire

The war against Yugoslavia and the subsequent occupation of the country by Axis forces in 1941 came about unexpectedly. As late as 15 March, Mussolini had told his generals not to take additional security measures along the Albanian-Yugoslavian frontier, since

he anticipated that Yugoslavia ultimately would join the Axis.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, preparing to bail out their Italian allies in Greece and seeking to shore up their southern flank in preparation for the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Germans convinced the Yugoslavian government to join the Tripartite on 25 March.<sup>10</sup> When a group of Serb officers orchestrated a pro-Allied coup in Belgrade on the 27th, the Germans and Italians had to draw up invasion plans overnight. The resulting offensive mirrored the *Wehrmacht's* successful campaigns in Poland, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, and France.<sup>11</sup> Due to the unanticipated timing of the invasion, the speed of its success, and the decisive role played by Germany towards that success, Italy was unprepared for the reorganization of territory that followed. Nonetheless, Mussolini's immediate political need to claim a victory for the Fascist regime through territorial annexation, partition, and occupation resulted in imperial expansion across the Adriatic.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the improvised nature of the territorial settlement in Yugoslavia, Mussolini's expansionist aims in the country did not come as a surprise to the Italian military leadership. The partition of Yugoslavia was one of Mussolini's central foreign policy objectives well before the invasion of Ethiopia had reached the planning phase. Like many Italian nationalists, Mussolini considered the settlement of 1919 a "mutilated victory," largely because Italy had failed to gain the territories along the Adriatic that had been promised by the British and French when it entered the Great War in 1915. After seizing power, Mussolini adopted a revisionist policy intent on dismantling the new Yugoslavian state and expanding Italian influence in Southeastern Europe. During the 1920s and early 1930s, he worked to isolate and destabilize Yugoslavia by creating alliances with its neighbours and supporting extremist movements within the country.

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<sup>9</sup> Meeting between Mussolini, Cavallero, Gambaro, and Geloso, 15 March 1941, OO, XXX, 69.

<sup>10</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 75. German preparations to intervene in Greece had been underway since November 1940, with discussions for joint Italo-German operations reaching an advanced stage by January 1941. Van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy*, 79. See "Progettata operazione tedesca contro la Grecia," 4 January 1941, and "Collaborazione italo-tedesca," 13 January 1941, DSCS, 3/II:29–32, 64.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Citino, "The War Hitler Won: The Battle for Europe, 1939–1941," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 14, no. 1 (2011), 12, <http://jmss.org/jmss/index.php/jmss/article/view/441/453>. Mussolini ordered the army to develop invasion plans on 31 March. Cavallero diary, 1 April 1941. "Direttive per le operazioni contro la Jugoslavia," 1 April 1941, DSCS, 3/II:340–41.

<sup>12</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 63.

While these initiatives failed to bear fruit, the Italian armed forces focused most of their military planning on a prospective land war against Yugoslavia.<sup>13</sup>

With the shift of emphasis towards African expansion in the mid-1930s, the Fascist regime adopted more peaceful means towards achieving Balkan hegemony, culminating in a treaty of friendship with Yugoslavia in 1937.<sup>14</sup> However, the removal of pro-Italian and quasi-fascist Milan Stojadinović as Prime Minister of Yugoslavia in February 1939, followed shortly thereafter by Hitler's partition of Czechoslovakia, the Italian occupation of Albania, and the signing of the Pact of Steel caused Italo-Yugoslavian relations to deteriorate once again. While working to draw Yugoslavia into the orbit of the Axis on one hand, Ciano maintained contacts with separatist movements in Croatia. At Mussolini's behest, he promised military assistance in the event of an insurrection. The price for such assistance would be the establishment of an Italian protectorate over Croatia. Based on the Albanian model, Italy would maintain troops and a lieutenant governor in the new Croatian state. By the end of May, Mussolini was fixated, in Ciano's words, on "breaking up Yugoslavia and annexing [*annettere*] the Kingdom of Croatia."<sup>15</sup>

Although the Croats balked at the one-sided Italian offer, Mussolini continued to muse about potential Balkan conquests. In mid-August, aware of Hitler's plans to invade Poland, Mussolini saw an opportunity to claim "his share of the booty in Croatia and

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<sup>13</sup> Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy*, 221–22. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 30. Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 72, 112, 122–23, 128–29. Mallett, *Mussolini and the Second World War*, 18–20.

<sup>14</sup> Salerno, *Vital Crossroads*, 21. Strang, *On the Fiery March*, 8. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 39. The pact with Yugoslavia also was part of Mussolini's short-lived attempt to establish a revisionist alliance with Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. However, this became irrelevant after the Sudetenland crisis of 1938. Marina Cattaruzza and Dieter Langewiesche, introduction to *Territorial Revisionism and the Allies of Germany in the Second World War: Goals, Expectations, Practices*, ed. Marina Cattaruzza, Stefan Dyroff, and Dieter Langewiesche (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Massimo Bucarelli, "Disgregazione iugoslava e questione serba nella politica italiana," in Caccamo and Monzali, *L'occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia*, 16–17. Ciano diary, 5–6 February, 20–21 March, 5–6 April, and 18 and 24 May 1939. Ciano enjoyed a friendly relationship with Stojadinović. For a discussion on Stojadinović's policy towards Italy and his ambiguous relationship with fascist ideology, see Dejan Djokić, "'Leader' or 'Devil'? Milan Stojadinović, Prime Minister of Yugoslavia (1935–39), and his Ideology" in *In the Shadow of Hitler: Personalities of the Right in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Rebecca Haynes and Martyn Rady (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 153–68. Arguably, Mussolini intended the occupation of Albania to provide a base to mount offensives into Yugoslavia and Greece. Mallett, *Mussolini and the Second World War*, 80.

Dalmatia.” He ordered the armed forces to prepare attacks against both Yugoslavia and Greece. An army under Graziani was kept at the ready to invade Yugoslavia while the Foreign Ministry worked to mobilize radical Croats inside the country. Mussolini only rescinded his offensive plans at the end of the month when he acknowledged the army’s unreadiness for war, the weakness of his potential Hungarian and Bulgarian allies, the unreliability of German aid, and the likelihood of conflict with Britain and France.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, by the beginning of 1940, Mussolini and Ciano once again were scheming about intervention in Yugoslavia to establish a large Croatian state in a personal and customs union with Italy.<sup>17</sup> Following Germany’s invasion of Norway, Mussolini believed he could take advantage of the chaos by attacking Yugoslavia.<sup>18</sup> By the summer, with Italy now engaged in war against Great Britain, invasion plans had reached an advanced stage. However, Hitler — content with a politically “coordinated” Yugoslavia — insisted that Mussolini leave the Balkans alone for the time being. The failure of the *Luftwaffe* in the Battle of Britain gave Mussolini the confidence to switch gears and strike out on his own against Greece, but the disastrous Italian offensive at the end of 1940 forced him to shelve his plans against Yugoslavia indefinitely.<sup>19</sup>

The timing of the conquest of Yugoslavia was out of Mussolini’s hands, but Italian military planning and foreign policy during the 1920s and 1930s demonstrates that the Fascist regime followed a programme for expansion at Yugoslavia’s expense. Mussolini favoured direct conquest, with the formation of protectorates closely bound to his regime, over more subtle or patient means of expanding Italian influence in the region. However, like his Liberal predecessors, Mussolini was limited by the realities of Italy’s industrial and military might, which relegated the country to playing the role of

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<sup>16</sup> Ciano diary, 31 May, 13 and 22 August 1939. Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 485–87. Mallett, *Mussolini and the Second World War*, 205–206. Frank Marzari, “Projects for an Italian-led Balkan Bloc of Neutrals, September–December 1939,” *The Historical Journal* 13, no. 4 (1970): 770.

<sup>17</sup> Meeting between Ciano and Pavelić, 23 January 1940, DDI 9, III, 194. Ciano diary, 21–22 January 1940.

<sup>18</sup> Ciano diary, 9 April 1940.

<sup>19</sup> Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 169–70, 177, 193. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 47. Anfuso to Ciano, 8 December 1940, DDI 9, VI, 260.



“the least of the Great Powers.”<sup>20</sup> During the 1920s and 1930s, Italian military strength was not sufficient to guarantee success in an isolated war against Yugoslavia, let alone in a conflict that involved stronger allies. Thus, Mussolini’s Balkan policy had to be opportunistic. On several occasions he came close to launching operations against Yugoslavia, but favourable circumstances did not coalesce until the coup of March 1941 and the arrival in the theatre of thousands of German troops.

For the same reasons, the army and monarchy did not always greet Mussolini’s schemes with enthusiasm. Through 1931, Badoglio opposed the *Duce*’s plans for a two-front war against Yugoslavia and France on the basis that it was suicidal without strong allies.<sup>21</sup> Army Chief of Staff Alberto Pariani viewed the possibility of war against Yugoslavia in 1939 with greater optimism and he developed detailed plans for an invasion. However, other Italian generals criticized his lack of realism. After Pariani’s dismissal in October 1939, Italy’s military leadership adopted a more pessimistic attitude towards offensive plans against any nation and urged Mussolini not to intervene in Hitler’s war until the armed forces were properly re-equipped.<sup>22</sup> According to Ciano, the King too was skeptical of Italy’s chances of success for operations in Yugoslavia without the agreement of Britain and France.<sup>23</sup> Since the armed forces had yet to recover from their expensive campaigns in Ethiopia and Spain, these concerns were justified. Doubts over the army’s readiness for war, rather than questions of principle, best explain the military’s less than whole-hearted commitment to war in the Balkans prior to 1941.

Of greater significance was the army’s opposition to the annexation of territory in the Adriatic after the capitulation of Yugoslavia in April 1941. Roatta, representing the Army General Staff, favoured a “political solution” and considered “dangerous any extremist demands regarding Dalmatia.” Similarly, the King opined that annexing Dalmatia would bring more problems than it was worth. He was more interested in

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<sup>20</sup> See Bosworth, *Least of the Great Powers*.

<sup>21</sup> Mallett, *Mussolini and the Second World War*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> See Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 484–93.

<sup>23</sup> Ciano diary, 29 January 1940.

Montenegro, the birthplace of his wife.<sup>24</sup> In his memoirs, Giacomo Zanussi, a close collaborator of General Roatta, claimed to have been opposed in principle to Italy's mission of expansion in Yugoslavia.<sup>25</sup> Roatta's own postwar account was more revealing. He at once criticized Mussolini for taking the unpopular step of annexing Dalmatia and Slovenia, with their primarily Slavic populations, and for acquiring too little territory, which was impossible to defend.<sup>26</sup> Whereas the Italian navy supported a "maximalist" programme in Dalmatia, in favour of its strategy to dominate the Adriatic Sea, the direct annexation of territory in the Balkans offered few advantages to the army.<sup>27</sup> Institutional interests played an important role in Roatta's apparent opposition to the regime's expansionist project in Yugoslavia, which he clearly deemed premature. If the army needed to allocate resources for the occupation of territory in the region, it would have preferred a straightforward military occupation where the armed forces enjoyed total authority on an interim basis.

Even so, the army was not wholly opposed to the concept of annexation. The commander of Second Army, Vittorio Ambrosio, pushed for the annexation of Ragusa [Dubrovnik].<sup>28</sup> At the local level, division commanders like Furio Monticelli optimistically passed on reports that populations in the Dalmatian hinterland welcomed annexation to Italy.<sup>29</sup> Before any decisions had been announced, Italian military authorities paved the way for the annexation of Dalmatia by ordering the removal of

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<sup>24</sup> The King sought the restoration of his wife's Petrović dynasty in Montenegro. Ciano diary, 24–30 April and 21 May 1941. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, 1:15.

<sup>26</sup> Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette*, 166–67.

<sup>27</sup> Marina Cattaruzza, *L'Italia e il confine orientale, 1866–2006* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), 212. The navy's thoughts on the "Dalmatian problem" are summed up in "Appunto per l'Eccellenza il Ministro," 30 April 1941, in *Dalmazia: Una cronaca per la storia*, by Oddone Talpo (Rome: USSME, 1985), 1:373, and DDI 9, VII, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Ambrosio wrote the War Ministry, *Comando Supremo*, and SMRE that Ragusa "must become part of Italy, including it however in view of its thousand-year-old municipal autonomy." Second Army Command war diary, 4 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, April–September 1941.

<sup>29</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 11, 12, and 16 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941.

Croatian flags, disbanding Croat militias, and buying off [*azione di accaparramento*] local notables in the region.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, Mussolini agreed with Roatta that he would rather have an independent Croatia in his political orbit than “a bit more land populated by hostile Croats.” However, he could not renounce the prestige to be gained through annexation.<sup>31</sup> When he entered the war in 1940, Mussolini had confidently announced that “the New Europe . . . could not have more than four or five large states” and that the small ones would “have to disappear,” suggesting that his immediate inclination was towards the direct annexation of as much territory as possible.<sup>32</sup> On top of this, Mussolini and Ciano faced pressure from a vocal irredentist lobby that demanded the seizure of the entire Croatian coastline.<sup>33</sup> From his discussions with Italian diplomats, the industrialist Alberto Pirelli ascertained that the regime’s initial intention was to do just that, but that complaints from Mussolini’s Ustaša allies required an “intermediate solution.”<sup>34</sup>

The result was a poor compromise. On 3 May, the Italian government announced the annexation of the Province of Lubiana [Ljubljana] — never an objective of even the most radical irredentists — mainly in response to the German occupation of northern Slovenia.<sup>35</sup> Then, on 18 May, the Rome Accords formalized relations with the Independent State of Croatia while a royal decree expanded the borders of the province of Carnaro [Rijeka] and established the Governorate of Dalmatia, comprising the provinces

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<sup>30</sup> Arduini to Ciano, 8 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Ciano diary, 26 April 1941. Mario Dassovich, *Fronte jugoslavo 1941–42: Aspetti e momenti della presenza militare italiana sull’opposta sponda adriatica durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Udine: Del Bianco, 1999), 8–9. Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 138.

<sup>33</sup> Ciano diary, 24 April and 1 May 1941. For an example, see Dudan to Mussolini, 4 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 53. Gobetti emphasizes the difficulty of Ciano’s task “to satisfy the ambitions of various centers of power.” Gobetti, “The Royal Army’s Betrayal,” 191, 195.

<sup>34</sup> Pirelli, *Taccuini*, 298.

<sup>35</sup> Cattaruzza, *L’Italia e il confine orientale*, 210. Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 12–13. Marco Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” in Caccamo and Monzali, *L’occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia*, 223–25.

of Zara [Zadar], Spalato [Split], and Cattaro [Kotor].<sup>36</sup> The amount of territory given to the Dalmatian provinces was limited and the Independent State of Croatia retained large stretches of coastline. Civilian functionaries admitted that the new regime imposed on Dalmatia was marred by “a hasty technical preparation, a lack of expertise, [and] an amateurish thoughtlessness.”<sup>37</sup> Given the circumstances, it is unlikely that Mussolini or Ciano would have renounced any form of annexation in the region, but their vision for empire in the Adriatic clearly was malleable.<sup>38</sup> Through the partition of Yugoslavia, the regime sought to balance competing ideological, strategic, economic, political, and diplomatic interests. Roatta was hardly unique in advising an alternate course of action.

### *The Imperial Community*

During April and May 1941, Fascist propaganda made it clear that annexation was not a necessary corollary to empire. After 1936, Fascist ideologues had developed new concepts of empire that went beyond traditional notions of colonial expansionism, domination, and enslavement. In part, this was intimately connected to the regime’s effort to relaunch the Fascist revolution during its imperial and racist phase. Theorists eschewed narrow-minded traditional nationalism in favour of a palingenetic ideology focused on empire-building. Italians, as bearers of a “New Civilization,” became the focal point of a new “Imperial Community” in Europe. But the ideological debate — and its European rather than African focus — also developed in response to the changing balance of power in Europe and to Italy’s increasingly close and eventually subordinate relationship with Nazi Germany. The regime needed to adjust its propaganda and ideology to account for geopolitical transformations that were already under way.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Frank P. Verna, “Notes on Italian Rule in Dalmatia under Bastianini, 1941–1943,” *International History Review* 12, no. 3 (1990): 529.

<sup>37</sup> Ortona diary, 27 April 1941.

<sup>38</sup> Through April 1941, the Italian Foreign Ministry wavered between establishing an autonomous state of Dalmatia within Italy’s sphere of interest, directly annexing the entire coastline between Senj and Kotor, and limiting annexation to the “historical” confines of Dalmatia. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, vol. 1:309, 365. Ciano diary, 24 April 1941.

<sup>39</sup> Gentile, *La Grande Italia*, 175–76.

Discussion of the concepts of Imperial Community, *spazio vitale*, and a New European Order peaked in 1941–42, only after the Axis conquests in the Balkans. Even then, it remained inchoate and impractical, lacking much direct guidance from Mussolini, who did not want to commit to any specific programme before the end of the war. In theory, the Fascist Imperial Community was based on the voluntary gravitation of smaller satellite nations around greater imperial nations like Italy, which espoused principles of a superior civilization. In this respect, the concept of a “civilizing mission” became more central and sincere for Fascism’s European expansion in the 1940s than it had been in Ethiopia five years earlier. Italian Fascists recognized and emphasized that their notions of Imperial Community and *spazio vitale* set them apart from Nazism’s annihilationist concept of *Lebensraum*.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, Fascist literature on the Balkans never fully embraced these new “modern” ideas of empire. Justifying Italy’s role in the region by invoking the empires of ancient Rome and Renaissance Venice, authors retained an imperial vision that regarded traditional territorial expansion as legitimate.<sup>41</sup>

Because the details of how the Imperial Community was supposed to function continued to be fleshed out through 1943, Fascist ideology provided the field commanders of Second Army with few precise guidelines to follow. It is not clear how many Italian generals actually read the books and articles published on the topic during the war. However, they would have been familiar with the “Albanian model” established after the occupation of that country in 1939, characterized by a personal union with the House of Savoy, the export of Fascist institutions, and its protectorate status that subordinated Albanian national interests to imperial ones. They also knew that the inclusion of Dalmatia and Slovenia in Italy’s *piccolo spazio* [small space] through annexation differentiated those territories from the rest of Croatia, which became a member of the Imperial Community in Fascism’s *grande spazio* [large space].<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 46. Gentile, *La Grande Italia*, 178–82. Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 44–46, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Stefano Bianchini, “L’idea fascista dell’impero nell’area danubiano-balcanica,” in *L’Italia e la politica di potenza in Europa, 1938–40*, ed. Ennio Di Nolfo, Romain H. Rainero, and Brunello Vigezzi (Milan: Marzorati, 1985), 181.

<sup>42</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 47–63. Most of the Fascist publications examined by Rodogno in his study were short articles in magazines such as *Civiltà Fascista* and *Gerarchia*. Authors included

The upshot was that Fascism's vision for empire in the Balkans was not a carbon copy of its programme in East Africa. Whereas Mussolini had demanded super direct rule over his African subjects in 1936, Fascist concepts of racial hierarchy allowed for indirect rule over Slavs.<sup>43</sup> Yet, it was undoubtedly clear to the officers of Second Army that their entire zone of occupation was to be considered part of Fascism's future empire and living space, in which Italy alone would be fully sovereign.

The Fascist regime ensured that this much was understood by Italians, even those who did not follow the leading ideological periodicals. In April 1941, the Minister of Popular Culture, Alessandro Pavolini, explained his understanding of the Imperial Community to Italian journalists.

Our mindset, as it relates to that area [Dalmatia], cannot be the same mindset as in the time of the D'Annunzian enterprise of Fiume [...] Our mindset in the Adriatic is an imperial mindset (infinitely greater than what we had before). Now the Italian Imperial Community (is a Community that) holds peoples of different races: as we have received the Albanians so we may tomorrow receive, with varying measures and intensity of relations, but in a same orbit, Montenegrins and maybe the Croats themselves, and certainly the Slovenes.<sup>44</sup>

Leading up to the Treaty of Rome, Pavolini further explained that the limited extent of territory bequeathed to the Governorate of Dalmatia — and the fact that its borders were not contiguous — was unimportant because Croatia had become a member of the Imperial Community. Under an Italian monarch, Croatia would be “closely bound to us” with “a common foreign policy.” He added that Croatia, “without being in the same relation to us as an expanded Albania or Montenegro, is a nation tightly connected to ours. So the Italian citizen who finds himself in Croatia is a citizen that finds himself in a country belonging to our imperial community.”<sup>45</sup> Pavolini's statements reveal the

Bottai, Gianturco, Mainardi, Orestano, Pellizi, Piccoli, Quartara, Selvi, Sertoli Salis, Soprano, Spampanato, Tamagnini, Titta, and others.

<sup>43</sup> On Fascist notions of racial hierarchy, see Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 63–71.

<sup>44</sup> “Rapporto del Ministro ai giornalisti,” 29 April 1941, in *Ministri e giornalisti: La guerra e il Minculpop (1939–43)*, ed. Nicola Tranfaglia (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), 127.

<sup>45</sup> “Rapporto ai direttori dei principali giornali del 17 maggio 1941,” 17 May 1941, in Tranfaglia, *Ministri e giornalisti*, 144.

interplay between propaganda, circumstances, and ideology on the formation of Fascist imperialist thought. The propaganda minister clearly intended to rationalize Italy's inability to claim more territory directly after the defeat of Yugoslavia, while drawing upon existing theories and maintaining continuity with Fascism's emphasis on re-establishing a Roman Empire.

Both the reorganization of territory in the Balkans and the ideology sustaining it were the result of hastily conceived compromises between Mussolini's long-term plans and the realities that confronted them. The failure of Fascism's "parallel war" by the end of 1940 and Mussolini's subsequent reliance on Hitler meant that Italy lacked complete freedom of action in its own declared *spazio vitale*.<sup>46</sup> Mussolini could not dictate terms in Yugoslavia. Settling for less than it had hoped for, the regime justified the new borders across the Adriatic in terms of an Imperial Community in which newly annexed provinces as well as semi-autonomous states looked to Rome for guidance and leadership. However thin this ideological scaffolding might have been, it provided Italian functionaries — including those of the *Regio Esercito* — with one basic guiding principle to work towards: the expansion and protection of Italian influence, power, and prestige in the name of empire.

### *Governing the Annexed Territories*

The role of Italian military authorities as empire builders in the annexed territories was, by definition, limited to that of security against external threats. Considerations of prestige demanded that the formally annexed zones of Dalmatia and Slovenia be governed by civilian administrators in accordance with the laws of the Kingdom of Italy. But these officials enjoyed greater authority and autonomy than did prefects in other Italian provinces. The High Commissioner of the Province of Ljubljana, Emilio Grazioli, and the Governor of Dalmatia, Giuseppe Bastianini, answered directly to Mussolini — rather than the Ministry of the Interior — and they ruled by decree.<sup>47</sup> To give the outward

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<sup>46</sup> On the transition from a "parallel war" to a "subordinate war" [*guerra subalterna*] in 1941, see Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 302–304.

<sup>47</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 121–24, 269. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:635.

appearance of normalcy, the Fascist regime moved quickly to curtail the powers of army commanders stationed in the new provinces. Civil authorities quickly took over police powers, including border control and the surveillance of the population.<sup>48</sup>

Alongside economic development, the civil authorities in Dalmatia and Slovenia prioritized the Italianization and Fascistization of the new provinces. The implementation of these policies, and the army's contribution to them, differed between the two regions. Bastianini's approach in Dalmatia was the most radical and ambitious.<sup>49</sup> Within the Imperial Community, Dalmatia was intended to serve as the economic "outlet" for Croatia. The regime planned to exploit Dalmatia's hydroelectric potential, transforming it into an industrialized hub fed by natural resources from Bosnia.<sup>50</sup> Bastianini also hoped to settle Italian colonists in Dalmatia, both to alleviate Italy's demographic situation and to overwhelm the local Slavic populations.<sup>51</sup> These grandiose economic and colonial schemes for Dalmatia would not come to fruition during the Second World War, but Bastianini's efforts to forcibly denationalize and Italianize his provinces made an immediate impact.

Mussolini provided the guidelines for Italianization in a speech on 10 June 1941. After justifying the regime's limited annexation of territory in Yugoslavia on the basis that "states which burden themselves with too many ethnic minorities have a difficult life," he used the same criteria to legitimize the denationalization of Slavs caught within the borders of the new Italian possessions. Ultimately, Mussolini concluded, when ethnic

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, "Controllo del traffico attraverso la linea di confine," 7 June 1941; "Censura sulle comunicazioni telefoniche, telegrafiche e postali," 11 June 1941; and, "Censura sulla comunicazioni," 19 June 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati. The transition from military to civil authority did not go entirely smoothly. The army had to fill gaps along the Dalmatian-Croatian border, which lacked checkpoints. "Linea di vigilanza militare provvisoria," 24 and 25 June 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati. Until July 1941, when the Governorate of Dalmatia formally established its own *carabinieri* section, *carabinieri* units in Dalmatia were caught between two jurisdictions, taking orders from the army for "military police" matters while answering to local political authorities for tasks concerning "public order." See "Servizio d'istituto dei reparti cc.rr.," 12 June 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati, and "Foglio d'ordine n. 21," 3 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>49</sup> Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 73.

<sup>50</sup> Pietromarchi to Ciano, 30 October 1941, DDI 9, VII, 699.

<sup>51</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 273-75.



lines do not coincide with geographic boundaries, “it is the ethnic group that must move.”<sup>52</sup> Davide Rodogno has argued that Italian civil functionaries in Dalmatia thereafter zealously worked “towards the Duce,” expelling former Yugoslavian officials from the civil service, revoking the rights of Slavs to work as professionals, and forcing courts to adopt the Italian language. Bastianini sought to exclude Slavs from eligibility for Italian citizenship, while Fascistizing and Italianizing eligible youth by forcing them to learn Italian and join Fascist organizations.<sup>53</sup>

Reminiscent of the situation in Ethiopia, the regime lacked the funds and administrative personnel to successfully implement all of these measures.<sup>54</sup> Symbolically, however, Italianization proceeded rapidly. Slavic place names were replaced with Italian ones, drawing where possible upon historical Venetian nomenclature. Therefore, Kotor became Cattaro and Split became Spalato. Biograd reverted to Zaravecchia and Herceg Novi to Castelnuovo. The village of Plisko Polje on the island of Vis became Pliscopoli on the island of Lissa.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, Italian authorities sought to erase signs of the Slavic or Habsburg past by banning cultural associations, nationalizing former Yugoslavian enterprises, and demolishing public monuments.<sup>56</sup> The population of Split in particular was upset by the relocation of the statue of Gregory of Nin, a masterpiece by the renowned Croat sculptor Ivan Meštrović.<sup>57</sup>

The policies of forced denationalization and Italianization undoubtedly were the cause of much popular resentment throughout Dalmatia and especially in Split, Croatia’s second city. As early as July 1941, military authorities reported on the popular backlash against the governor’s measures to impose an “Italian character” on the city. Intelligence

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<sup>52</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 265. OO, XXX, 90–101. Fascist newspapers in Dalmatia reproduced the text of the speech in full. “Gli accordi per la pace adriatica,” *San Marco*, 12 June 1941, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 263–72.

<sup>54</sup> Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 17. Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 267.

<sup>55</sup> “Denominazioni italiane dei comuni e delle frazioni dei territori dalmati annessi al Regno,” 29 September 1941, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. “Dalmazia.”

<sup>56</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 268.

<sup>57</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 40,” 5 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

officers of the VI Corps cautioned against forcing Italianization upon the largely Croat population.<sup>58</sup> Judges in Split openly protested against Bastianini's orders to pass all judgements "in the name of H.M. the King and Emperor Vittorio Emanuele III."<sup>59</sup> This was followed in September by a protest involving two hundred students that refused to join the GIL [*Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*, the Fascist youth movement] and wanted to receive their records [*certificati di studio*] in Croatian. The *Carabinieri* broke up the protest and the recalcitrant students were expelled, but the adult population disapproved of the arrests made by Italian authorities.<sup>60</sup> The following year, the civilian population of the city almost completely abstained from participating in ceremonies to commemorate the anniversary of the Italian entry into the city.<sup>61</sup>

These difficulties were the inevitable result of forcing a nationalist irredentist policy onto a territory where less than nine percent of the population was Italian. The vast majority of Italian Dalmatians were concentrated in the city of Zara, which had been under Italian administration since 1918.<sup>62</sup> Two months after the declaration of annexation, the command of the Sassari Division, operating out of Šibenik, concluded that "the *italianità* of Dalmatia is truly felt by few."<sup>63</sup> Military authorities were not alone in coming to this conclusion. Prior to the Treaty of Rome, the Italian consul in Split, Luigi Arduini, warned that local officials and the general population considered their city Croatian. Once it became clear that the Italian government was preparing to annex parts

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<sup>58</sup> "Notiziario n. 64," 5 July 1941, and "Notiziario n. 69," 11 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>59</sup> "Notiziario n. 76," 18 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>60</sup> "Promemoria riservato personale n. 73," 25 September 1941, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD [NARA] T-821/402/0129 (cited as microfilm collection/roll/frame). "Studenti di Spalato," 12 October 1941, NARA T-821/402/0125-26. "Relazione informativa," 25 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 381, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>61</sup> "Notiziario n. 73," 1 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>62</sup> Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> "Notiziario giornaliero," 19 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June-July 1941, allegati.

of Dalmatia, attitudes in the city became “ambiguous if not really openly hostile.”<sup>64</sup> As in Ethiopia, the hasty annexation and imposition of an Italian administrative apparatus severely handcuffed the ability of military and political authorities to keep order.

The policy of Italianization in Dalmatia was outside of the army’s jurisdiction. However, despite concerns that the policy threatened public order, military authorities were not universally critical of Bastianini’s objectives. Certainly, they had supported similar measures in the past. In the Venezia Giulia after 1922, military interests had merged with political, economic, nationalist, and imperialist ones to favour an aggressive form of “border fascism,” favouring state centralization at the expense of local interests and the elimination of German and Slavic nationalism in the frontier region.<sup>65</sup> Ambrosio proposed bolstering the level of *italianità* in Dalmatia by resettling Italian civil servants of Dalmatian origin in the new provinces.<sup>66</sup> Following episodes of urban guerrilla activity in Split and Šibenik in November 1941, the commander of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division, General Angelo Pivano, concluded that “halfway measures could be rather harmful, in that they could nourish illusions.” Considering the local Slavic populations already a lost cause, Pivano recommended cultivating enthusiastic support from the Italian minority through an even more forceful policy of Italianization.<sup>67</sup>

The army’s obsession with national and institutional prestige also prompted symbolic acts to support the Italianization and Fascistization of Dalmatia. For example, military authorities joined government and party officials leaving the Basilica of Trogir [Traù] in protest when a priest read an epistle in Croatian instead of Latin. It was later established that the priest had not intended to be inflammatory; the prayer had been read for years in Croatian, with permission from the Holy See.<sup>68</sup> The military also participated

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<sup>64</sup> Arduini to Ciano, 8 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 73.

<sup>65</sup> Elio Apih, “Fascism in North-Eastern Italy,” trans. R. J. B. Bosworth and G. Cresciani, *Altro Polo: A Volume of Italian Studies* (1979): 116.

<sup>66</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 274.

<sup>67</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 40,” 5 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

<sup>68</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 51,” 17 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

in public ceremonies, in which they adopted Fascist symbols and themes with apparent ideological sincerity. High-ranking representatives of the Army, Navy, and Party attended the funeral of a soldier killed in one of the guerrilla attacks in November. The commander of the soldier's regiment — described as “a true Piedmontese gentleman, tall, lean, cold, fussy and brave,” the typical career officer — read the “Fascist roll-call” [*appello fascista*].<sup>69</sup> This was a “particularly fascist ritual” that usually followed the Catholic mass and concluded with all attendees simultaneously shouting “present,” symbolizing Fascism's emphasis on unity and its culture of death. The Italian military and veterans associations had adopted the *appello fascista* with relative enthusiasm during the *ventennio*.<sup>70</sup> In the atmosphere of occupied Dalmatia, these symbolic acts took on even greater political importance and contributed to the Fascist character of the Italian occupation.

Compared to Dalmatia, the Fascist regime initially adopted a more moderate stance towards Slovenia. Mussolini's 10 June speech offered Slovenes “special treatment” and “privileges” in return for expectations of absolute loyalty.<sup>71</sup> Slovenian continued to be taught in schools and remained an official language in the civil administration. Slovene functionaries, including judges and police, remained at their posts. High Commissioner Grazioli governed in collaboration with a *Consulta* [council] that included fourteen Slovene representatives.<sup>72</sup> The Province of Ljubljana thus enjoyed a special autonomous status within the Kingdom of Italy, without forcible Italianization or Fascistization. Slovenes were exempt from conscription and were not forced to join

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<sup>69</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 46,” 11 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati. Casanuova, *I/51*°, 18.

<sup>70</sup> On the *appello fascista*, see Kate Ferris, *Everyday Life in Fascist Venice, 1929–40* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 169–71. Whereas only 29 percent of civilian funerals in prewar Venice included the *appello fascista*, 60 percent of “military” funerals — including those of serving members of the armed forces and veterans of the Great War — incorporated the rite.

<sup>71</sup> “Il discorso alla Camera dei fasci e delle corporazioni nell'annuale della guerra,” 10 June 1941, OO, XXX, 90–101.

<sup>72</sup> Cattaruzza, *L'Italia e il confine orientale*, 216–19. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 245. “L'Alto Commissario Grazioli presiede a Lubiana la prima riunione della Consulta,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 4 June 1941, 6.

Party organizations, whose membership was mostly limited to Italian citizens who arrived after occupation.<sup>73</sup>

The relatively liberal policy implemented in Slovenia in 1941 was made possible by the regime's lack of ideological interest in the region. The decision to occupy southern Slovenia was only prompted by the speedy advance of the Germans during the invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941. Fearing the restoration of a "neo-Habsburg" frontier on Italy's eastern border, Rome established the Province of Ljubljana as a strategic buffer zone.<sup>74</sup> In addition, the policy corresponded to military intelligence reports that optimistically highlighted the willingness of Slovenes to collaborate with Italian authorities. According to SIM [*Servizio Informazione Militare*, the Italian army's intelligence service], the majority of Catholic Slovenes viewed Italy with "sympathy and a certain inclination," while fearing annexation by an anti-clerical Germany, whose occupation policy in northern Slovenia had already proven quite harsh.<sup>75</sup> In his diary, Ciano revealed that Italy's "liberal treatment" of Slovenia was specifically intended to contrast Italian and German policies.<sup>76</sup> Although the ultra-conservative Bishop Rožman of Ljubljana immediately pledged loyalty to the new regime, SIM likely overrated the popularity of the radical Catholic and quasi-fascist groups that offered collaboration in April and May 1941. Collaboration among Slovenes did not become significant until 1942, in response to Communism rather than identification with their Italian overlords.<sup>77</sup>

The apparent leniency of the Italians in Slovenia had limits. Ultimately, Grazioli — a Julian Fascist who had supported the denationalization of Slovene minorities in the territories added to Italy after the First World War — aimed at the gradual Italianization of Slovenes. He ensured that the administration, while including local civil servants and police, was directed solely by Italians. In practice, Grazioli did not use the Slovene

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<sup>73</sup> Raphaël Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 245. Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 13. Cattaruzza, *L'Italia e il confine orientale*, 220.

<sup>74</sup> Cuzzi, "La Slovenia italiana," 225–26.

<sup>75</sup> "Slovenia, riflessi nell'opinione pubblica dell'occupazione italiana," 29 April 1941, DSCS, 3/II:394.

<sup>76</sup> Ciano diary, 26 and 29 April 1941.

<sup>77</sup> Cuzzi, "La Slovenia italiana," 231–37.

*Consulta*, and its members resigned. Disappointed by the outbreak of revolt in June 1941, Rome began to second-guess its policy for an autonomous Slovenia and Grazioli accelerated his policies of denationalization.<sup>78</sup> Over time, many of the Slovene civil servants originally retained by the regime were dismissed or pensioned off.<sup>79</sup>

Italian military authorities proved the least committed to applying a liberal occupation policy in Slovenia. As revolt grew, the army complained that Grazioli's government appeared weak.<sup>80</sup> This was the basis of a long running verbal feud between Grazioli and the commander of the XI Corps in Slovenia, General Mario Robotti. Upset that the special status of the province effectively subordinated his command to Grazioli's office, which employed Italian troops in police operations against rebels, Robotti demanded autonomous control over repression in Slovenia. When Grazioli proved incapable of stemming the revolt, Mussolini sided with the army, declaring Slovenia a war zone on 3 October 1941. In January 1942, the military received full powers over public order in Slovenia.<sup>81</sup>

With the army ascendant in Slovenia by 1942, the process of denationalization and Italianization peaked. Robotti distrusted the Slovenes and, while civil policy remained the purview of the High Commission, he sought to curtail the political incentives that had been offered in 1941. He warned that membership in the GIL was merely a "formal expression" of loyalty not to be taken seriously.<sup>82</sup> He complained that too many Slovenes remained in public offices and that the maintenance of Yugoslavian legal codes and the Slovenian language in provincial courts rendered judges untrustworthy.<sup>83</sup> Taking his cue from an article in *Il Popolo d'Italia* on "The Responsibility of the Slovenes," Robotti concluded that past treatment had been

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<sup>78</sup> Cuzzi, "La Slovenia italiana," 227–28, 240–44. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 95.

<sup>79</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 268.

<sup>80</sup> See "Situazione militare in Slovenia," 15 October 1941, in DSCS, 5/II:70–73.

<sup>81</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 19–21, 43. Cuzzi, "La Slovenia italiana," 244–45.

<sup>82</sup> "Relazione mensile," 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>83</sup> "Sostituzione personale sloveno," 9 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati.

excessively soft, that Slovene leaders had proven unequal to the task of self-government, and that “we need, therefore, starting now, to think of the totalitarian and deep Italianization of this province destined to become the eastern bulwark of the peninsula.” For Robotti, Italianization meant first of all removing elements of the population likely to adopt an anti-Italian attitude, including the unemployed and university students.<sup>84</sup> The resulting policy of internment, adopted equally by Grazioli and Robotti, proved the most extreme manifestation of the regime’s denationalization policy in Slovenia.<sup>85</sup> Robotti’s support for Italianization derived primarily from security concerns, his harsh approach to counterinsurgency, and his racist contempt for Slavs. Nonetheless, by adopting Fascist rhetoric and citing the semi-official Fascist newspaper for his mandate, Robotti demonstrated that he also understood his mission in terms of cementing Slovenia’s place as a metropolitan province within Fascism’s empire.

### *“Speaking Ill of Garibaldi”*

In the annexed territories, the military was not completely free to act as it willed. The political reality of the annexation of Dalmatia and Slovenia meant that civil policy was largely out of the army’s hands. In the context of internal rebellion, which by spring 1942 had become significant throughout Second Army’s zone of occupation, this separation of powers inevitably became a source of conflict between the military and Fascist civil authorities. While Robotti quickly gained the upper hand in Slovenia, relations took a very different course in Dalmatia. The intense dispute between the commander of the XVIII Corps, General Quirino Armellini, and the Governor of Dalmatia, Giuseppe

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<sup>84</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 64,” 29 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>85</sup> Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, “Una storia rimossa dell’Italia fascista: L’internamento dei civili jugoslavi (1941–1943),” *Studi storici* 42, no. 1 (2001): 206–210. Davide Conti, *L’occupazione italiana dei Balcani: Tra crimini di guerra e mito della brava gente* (Rome: Odradek, 2008), 29–30. Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” 246. Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 335–37. Pisarri has observed a similar process of “de-Slavicization” conducted simultaneously by the V Corps in the neighbouring Province of Carnaro. Milovan Pisarri, “Occupazione italiana e violenza ai civili nel Carnaro, 1941–1942,” *Rivista di storia dell’800 e dell’900* 16, no. 3 (2013): 406–407.

Bastianini, ended on 25 July 1942 with Armellini's dismissal, "by order of the *Duce*."<sup>86</sup> The conflict has been presented as evidence of a fundamental gap in objectives and methods between the army and the regime, and even of anti-Fascist dissent on the part of the military.<sup>87</sup> But, such an interpretation can be misleading. Far from a confrontation between opposing ideologies, the Armellini-Bastianini feud was, first and foremost, a jurisdictional struggle between rival agencies that spiraled out of control because of the uncompromising nature of the personalities involved.

Giuseppe Bastianini was a forty-three year old "Fascist of the first hour." Having served with the *arditi* in the First World War, he became an important leader in the Umbrian squadrist movement and obtained a national presence prior to the March on Rome. He was a polarizing figure, but one of the more charismatic Fascist leaders. In the late 1920s, Bastianini entered the Italian diplomatic corps, where he enjoyed a speedy rise. He served as ambassador to Poland and Great Britain, with a stint in between as Ciano's undersecretary at the Foreign Ministry.<sup>88</sup> Remembering Bastianini as "cautious, honest and loyal" — referring primarily to Bastianini's support for non-belligerence in 1939 and his lukewarm attitude towards Germany — it was Ciano who put forward his name for the governorship in Dalmatia.<sup>89</sup>

Like many other Fascists, Bastianini had little esteem for the leadership of the armed forces, which he considered thoroughly "discredited" after the first seven months of war. He criticized the apparent timidity of the army and navy, and advocated "the need

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<sup>86</sup> Cavallero diary, 24 July 1942. Magli to Roatta, 25 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0385.

<sup>87</sup> Monzali argues that Armellini represented a group of Italian officers that increasingly criticized Fascist policy after 1941. His opposition to Bastianini demonstrated that Fascism's political power was no longer "undisputed" in Italy. Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 102. Burgwyn argues that, by questioning Italy's imperial mission and criticizing Blackshirt repression, Armellini "veered toward anti-Fascism." Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 125–27. While Roatta did not refer specifically to the Armellini-Bastianini dispute in his memoirs, he criticized "fascist authorities" for governing the annexed territories in a harsh and arbitrary manner. Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette*, 167–68. For the most complete narrative of the Armellini-Bastianini conflict, see Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:209–79.

<sup>88</sup> *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, s.v. "Bastianini, Giuseppe." *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (1970), s.v. "Bastianini, Giuseppe," accessed 25 August 2016, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-bastianini\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-bastianini_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/). Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 16.

<sup>89</sup> Ciano diary, 19–20 May 1941. *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, s.v. "Bastianini, Giuseppe." *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (1970).



to re-establish assault units” as in the First World War.<sup>90</sup> His contempt for the army grew after participating on the Greek-Albanian front in early 1941.<sup>91</sup> Arriving in Zara to take over as governor on 7 June 1941, Bastianini quickly came to regard the local military authorities as the greatest threat to his power and autonomy. The example of Montenegro — where Mussolini abolished the civil High Commission and granted the army full powers at the end of July — weighed heavily on Bastianini, who may have taken this as a cue to adopt “strong-arm methods” [*maniera forte*] of his own.<sup>92</sup>

At first, Bastianini and his staff in Dalmatia found the commander of the VI Corps, Renzo Dalmazzo, relatively “agreeable.”<sup>93</sup> However, on 18 February 1942, Dalmazzo transferred his command to Dubrovnik to oversee the occupation of southern Croatia and the tiny Province of Kotor. Replacing Dalmazzo in Split — with jurisdiction over the provinces of Zara and Split as well as parts of Lika and western Bosnia — was the new command staff of the XVIII Corps, under the leadership of Quirino Armellini.<sup>94</sup> Ten years Bastianini’s senior, Armellini brought a wealth of operational and colonial experience to his new command. Having graduated with distinction from the Military Academy of Modena, Armellini served in the Libyan War and First World War. He commanded troops in Somalia, served on Badoglio’s staff during the invasion of Ethiopia, and afterwards led Italian forces in Amhara. When Italy entered the Second World War, Armellini rejoined Badoglio as his aide at the *Comando Supremo* in Rome, where he remained until Badoglio’s dismissal in December 1940. Before taking

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<sup>90</sup> Ortona diary, 22 January and 10 February 1941.

<sup>91</sup> Ortona diary, 8 May 1941. Pirelli, *Taccuini*, 295.

<sup>92</sup> Ortona diary, 26 and 31 July 1941. On the abolition of the Montenegrin High Commission, see Francesco Caccamo, “L’occupazione del Montenegro: Dai progetti indipendentistici alla collaborazione con *četnici*,” in Caccamo and Monzali, *L’occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia*, 172–73.

<sup>93</sup> Ortona diary, 23 July 1941.

<sup>94</sup> The XVIII Corps command was formerly the command staff of the *Alpino* Corps. After arriving in Croatia, most staff officers were then transferred back to the new *Alpino* Corps being formed in Italy for deployment on the eastern front. Cavallero diary, 25 February 1942.

command of the XVIII Corps, Armellini presided over the newly formed La Spezia Division, which was training for an airborne assault on Malta.<sup>95</sup>

Armellini was an energetic officer — the war diary entries of the Sassari Division, deployed far from Armellini’s headquarters in Split, reported frequent visits and inspections conducted personally by the corps commander.<sup>96</sup> Second Army staff officer Giacomo Zanussi considered Armellini a “man of great ability and a model of probity.” Zanussi believed that Armellini’s inclination to “call a spade a spade” became problematic in dealings with the “big-headed” [*montato*] Bastianini, for Armellini was “tough, bony, [and] obstinate, beyond any limits.”<sup>97</sup> The son of an independent farmer [*coltivatore diretto*], Armellini was not raised in an atmosphere of high politics.<sup>98</sup> His diary entries suggest that he felt out of place amidst the cliquism and subtle intrigue that prevailed in Rome.<sup>99</sup> By his own admission, Armellini’s “temperament” favoured a rigid approach to discussions coupled with an aversion to compromise.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, he attributed his unexpected repatriation from Ethiopia to “incompatibility of character with Teruzzi,” the Fascist Minister of Italian Africa.<sup>101</sup>

Armellini, then, had run afoul of Fascist hierarchs before. There is considerable evidence of a genuine aversion to Fascism on Armellini’s part. However, much of this evidence came to the fore after Mussolini’s fall in 1943, and must therefore be treated with caution. His postwar manuscript, *La crisi dell’Esercito*, sought to restore the reputation of the Italian officer corps by casting the blame for military collapse on the

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<sup>95</sup> *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (1988), s.v. “Armellini, Quirino.”

<sup>96</sup> See the Sassari Division Command war diary, March–July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, bb. 769 and 999. According to Zanussi, Armellini was more energetic than his successor. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrophe d’Italia*, 1:254–55.

<sup>97</sup> Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrophe d’Italia*, 1:246–47.

<sup>98</sup> *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (1988), s.v. “Armellini, Quirino,” accessed 25 August 2016, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/quirino-armellini\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/quirino-armellini_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/).

<sup>99</sup> The theme of internal rivalries runs through Armellini’s *Diario di guerra* (Milan: Garzanti, 1946). See especially, the entries for 21 July, 11 September, 20 October, and 29 November 1940.

<sup>100</sup> “Rapporti con l’autorità politica,” 29 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>101</sup> See Armellini’s preface to his *Diario di Guerra*.

environment created by Fascism. The regime's inflated version of military spirit, he argued, disguised a crass ignorance of military affairs and a desire ultimately to replace the regular army with a Fascist militia.<sup>102</sup> The same thesis is evident in Armellini's diary from his time with the *Comando Supremo*, also published after the war.<sup>103</sup>

Armellini's diary entries suggest that his growing disillusionment with Fascism stemmed in large part from the regime's treatment of his superior, patron, and mentor, Pietro Badoglio.<sup>104</sup> Accusations of sycophancy on Armellini's part do not take into account his own technical competence and ability, but he undoubtedly shared a strong relationship with and admiration for Badoglio, as demonstrated by his eulogistic publication from 1937, *Con Badoglio in Etiopia* [With Badoglio in Ethiopia].<sup>105</sup> Armellini blamed Mussolini's micromanagement of military affairs and ideological interference in matters of strategy for handicapping Badoglio's work. Pointing out that Mussolini had fixed the anniversary of the March on Rome as the date for the invasion of Greece, Armellini lamented that the war was being conducted "according to squadrist doctrine."<sup>106</sup> His relatively humble origins made his career dependent upon the patronage of an influential general like Badoglio. By the end of 1940, with Badoglio's forced resignation, Armellini concluded that the *Duce* was "undoubtedly and only a demagogue, a politician, a journalist."<sup>107</sup> He told the King's aide, General Puntoni, that Mussolini was

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<sup>102</sup> Quirino Armellini, *La crisi dell'Esercito* (Rome: Priscilla, 1945), 42–43, 58–60.

<sup>103</sup> Historians have largely accepted Armellini's published diary as reliable. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:211–12. MacGregor Knox describes the diary as "a valuable source on Italian strategy and politics in 1940." *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, s.v., "Armellini, Quirino."

<sup>104</sup> Badoglio's already strained relationship with Fascism reached a head in November 1940, when the Italian offensive in Greece bogged down. Badoglio's staff leaked information that he had disapproved of the invasion from the outset. Farinacci called for his head and publicly attacked Badoglio in the press, leading him to tender his resignation at the end of the month. Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 243–49.

<sup>105</sup> Quirino Armellini, *Con Badoglio in Etiopia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1937). The King's aide-de-camp, General Paolo Puntoni, described Armellini as Badoglio's "devoted creature." Puntoni diary, 28 November 1940 and 30 January 1941. After the Second World War, the disgraced General Carboni penned a vindictive and unreliable memoir, which presented Armellini as Badoglio's pathetic toady. Giacomo Carboni, *Memorie segrete, 1935–1948* (Florence: Parenti, 1955), 87–88. This portrayal has been accepted as accurate in James J. Sadkovich, "Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War," *Journal of Military History* 58, no. 4 (1994): 635.

<sup>106</sup> Armellini diary, 12 September and 25 October 1940.

<sup>107</sup> Armellini diary, 13 December 1940.

“an ‘abnormal’ man” [*un uomo ‘anormale’*].<sup>108</sup> Anticipating his later dispute with Bastianini, Armellini clearly believed that the war effort should be run exclusively by the military, without political interference.<sup>109</sup>

Armellini’s dissent, then, was not primarily ideological in nature. Not unlike opposition to Hitler within the German *Wehrmacht*, personal career status and the regime’s system of command and direction of the war were the decisive factors fuelling dissent.<sup>110</sup> He shared the regime’s desire to militarize society “to make a single army out of the entire Nation,” but believed that this was best achieved under the professional auspices of the *Regio Esercito*.<sup>111</sup> Certainly, Armellini was no supporter of Liberal Italy, whose neglect of the armed forces he later blamed for allowing Fascism’s rise. Armellini accused the Liberal urban population of attacking “militarism” and insulting army officers who had no recourse because “challenges, in homage to certain modern theories against the duel, were not accepted.”<sup>112</sup> Added to his lack of political tact, Armellini’s

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<sup>108</sup> Puntoni diary, 30 January 1941.

<sup>109</sup> Originally, Armellini interpreted Clausewitz’s philosophy of war as the continuation of politics by other means to suggest that, once war was declared, its conduct was “by nature essentially military-technical and, as such, does not allow for [...] interference or overlapping.” Armellini, *Con Badoglio in Etiopia*, 19–21. After the Second World War, Armellini slightly revised this conclusion, admitting that modern “total” war necessitates greater influence from political leadership on the conduct of war. He argued that “a deep, reciprocal, sincere spirit of mutual understanding” was needed between military and political authorities. Military and political leaders must adapt to each other’s situation. Armellini, *La crisi dell’Esercito*, 86–87. Armellini’s argument here was remarkably similar to that of his final letter to Bastianini. Armellini to Bastianini, 19 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0447–49.

<sup>110</sup> Groups of officers in the German army began conspiring against Hitler after 1938, when the traditionally privileged position of the army came under attack by the regime and as Hitler appeared determined to embark on a seemingly impossible war against Britain and France. Only after the defeat at Stalingrad, with the realization that Hitler’s policy was leading Germany towards catastrophe, did resistance within the *Wehrmacht* coalesce, resulting in the attempted coup of July 1944. Even at this point, most of the plotters were officers that lacked field commands. See John Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918–1945*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1964).

<sup>111</sup> Armellini, *Con Badoglio in Etiopia*, 10. Armellini criticized the dilettantish nature of the Fascist youth movement. Armellini, *La crisi dell’Esercito*, 63–64.

<sup>112</sup> Armellini, *La crisi dell’Esercito*, 17. The popularity of dueling grew rapidly in Italy after unification. The Liberal ruling classes and army officers legitimized dueling to promote their elite status and sense of masculine chivalric honour. Subject to much social and legal debate at the turn of the century, the number of duels in Italy declined thereafter, only to resurge after the First World War. While Fascists appreciated dueling as a positive expression of virility and violence, the regime deemed the practice too individualistic and sought to control it during the 1930s and Second World War. See Steven C. Hughes, *Politics of the Sword: Dueling, Honor and Masculinity in Modern Italy* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007).

reactionary conservative sense of honour made de-escalation in personal conflicts less likely. His diary shows that, while he generally enjoyed the respect of his fellow officers, he held grudges and contempt for those generals — like Cavallero — that had a dishonourable penchant for politics and who bypassed traditional military procedure or channels of seniority.<sup>113</sup> For Armellini, the politicization and subsequent corruption of the armed forces was Fascism's greatest error.

The extent to which Armellini's dislike for the Fascist regime translated into meaningful opposition or resistance before 1943 was limited. At the end of 1940, Armellini tried to convince Mussolini through metaphor to reduce his meddling in military affairs, but without success.<sup>114</sup> More tangibly, as commander of XVIII Corps, Armellini openly resisted the interference of the Fascist Party in military propaganda. He insisted that material for the troops should focus on the practice of war, discipline, subordination, and hierarchy, while glorifying the army, armed forces, patriotism, and the monarchy.<sup>115</sup> From Dalmatia, Armellini maintained contact with dissident figures in Italy, including Emilio De Bono.<sup>116</sup> Leaving aside his dispute with Bastianini, Armellini's greatest contributions against Fascism came only after 25 July 1943, when the King arrested Mussolini and appointed Badoglio prime minister. Badoglio gave Armellini the task of de-Fascistizing the MVSN, which he wanted to transform into an integral part of the Italian army. Armellini immediately changed the uniforms of the Militia and

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<sup>113</sup> On Armellini's hatred of Cavallero and his "modern system of command" that bypassed traditional hierarchies and structures, see Armellini diary, 29 May, 9 June, 29 November, and 12 December 1940. Armellini's contempt for Cavallero was shared by most of the Italian military establishment. Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 247–48.

<sup>114</sup> Meeting with Mussolini in Badoglio's stead, Armellini opined that it was better to rely on one trustworthy doctor than to receive potentially conflicting opinions from several. The *Duce* took the statement, intended to refer to political-military relations, literally. Armellini diary, 18 November 1941.

<sup>115</sup> "Relazione mensile 15 febbraio–15 marzo 1942," 29 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>116</sup> In a diary entry for 10 June 1942, De Bono commented on a "long letter full of truth" sent to him by Armellini. Bianchi, *Perché e come cadde il fascismo*, 795. A *quadrumvir* of the March on Rome, De Bono became increasingly critical of the regime after 1935, when Mussolini replaced him with Badoglio as commander in East Africa. Although awarded honorific postings during the Second World War, De Bono was pessimistic and privately criticized the regime's preparation and handling of the war effort. He later voted in favour of Grandi's motion to return military authority to the king, thereby contributing to the fall of Mussolini. See Franco Fucci, *Emilio De Bono: Il maresciallo fucilato* (Milan: Mursia, 1989).

introduced a prayer for the King [*preghiera del Re*] to replace that of the *Duce*.<sup>117</sup> On the other hand, his laudatory inaugural address to the MVSN has been singled out as a “grotesque” example of continuity between the Badoglio regime and Fascism.<sup>118</sup> The confusing events following the Italian armistice in September 1943 left Armellini in hiding in Rome.<sup>119</sup> Despite his monarchist leanings, he established a good working relationship with the capital’s leftist Committee of National Liberation. According to OSS reports, “personally [Armellini] was respected and was willing to work as an independent [*sic*] figure.”<sup>120</sup>

In terms of his personality and his relationship with Fascism, Armellini was enigmatic. In many respects, he was the typical career officer: conservative, monarchist, authoritarian, nationalist, militaristic, with a high sense of honour, duty, and institutional loyalty. These characteristics permitted an uneasy compatibility with Fascism, but he also proved able to work with the leftist resistance movement against the Nazis. That he owed his rise not to family connections but to merit and to Badoglio’s patronage may have reinforced his opinions on the independent nature of the military establishment, especially after Badoglio’s fall from favour with the regime, while inflating his concepts of honour and discipline. These traits, combined with a lack of delicacy, made a relationship between Armellini and any equally dogged political authority unlikely to bear fruit. At the same time, his absolute loyalty to the military hierarchy meant that, had he received a direct order from his superior, Roatta, to give in to Bastianini, he would have done so. That such an order was lacking suggests that Armellini’s military

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<sup>117</sup> Armellini took over command of the MVSN on 26 July. Bianchi, *Perché e come cadde il fascismo*, 610, 629. “Relazione di Don Rubino al ministro Casati sull’Ispettorato dei Cappellani della MVSN,” 10 August 1944, in *Il riarmo dello spirito: I cappellani militari nella seconda guerra mondiale*, by Mimmo Franzinelli (Treviso: Pagus, 1991), 384. Conversely, Carboni criticized Armellini for issuing orders to the Militia that remained “very Fascist in style and substance, in which the military glories of the Militia were exalted.” Carboni, *Memorie segrete*, 216. Indeed, following the armistice with the Allies, Armellini briefly was persecuted as pro-Fascist for his role in the MVSN. Puntoni diary, 2 July 1944.

<sup>118</sup> Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*, trans. Peter Levy and David Broder (London: Verso, 2013), 13.

<sup>119</sup> Carboni accused Armellini of leaking news of the armistice to the Germans and of cloistering himself in the Lateran Palace after a failed attempt to flee his post in Rome. Carboni, *Memorie segrete*, 374, 498.

<sup>120</sup> “The Military Significance of Political Conditions in Rome,” 21 February 1944, and “German Occupied Italy No. 2,” 16 March 1944, NARA Record Group 226, Box 313, WN 13554–67.

colleagues in the Balkans largely shared his views on the issues at stake in his conflict with Bastianini.

The issues at play within the actual dispute between Armellini and Bastianini were as enigmatic as the personalities involved in it. The two figures argued over garrison deployment, the Italianization of Dalmatia, and squadrist violence; they fought for control over Dalmatia's various forces of repression and they questioned each other's technical competence. However, while Armellini had some genuine anti-Fascist credentials and his arguments sometimes strayed into the ideological field, his feud with Bastianini cannot be described in black-and-white terms as a conflict between Fascist and anti-Fascist. At the heart of each dispute were divergent tactical judgements and tensions generated by jurisdictional overlap. The dynamics of the Armellini-Bastianini conflict were similar to that in East Africa between Graziani and Lessona, two devoted Fascists. Indeed, like Graziani and Lessona, Armellini and Bastianini rarely saw one another. That Armellini's headquarters in Split was more than 100 km away from the Governor's offices in Zara likely made it more difficult for cooler heads to prevail.<sup>121</sup>

The first argument broke out almost immediately after Armellini's arrival in February 1942. This had to do with orders from Roatta for all Second Army commanders to reduce the number of garrisons in their sectors and to concentrate their forces in powerful mobile units. Armellini thereby ordered the consolidation of smaller garrisons and border posts in Dalmatia.<sup>122</sup> As a result, he could no longer guarantee the safety of Bastianini's political organs in the countryside, and he suggested that they be withdrawn.<sup>123</sup> Bastianini refused to accept such a solution, so he appealed directly to Roatta, complaining that, if the army had protected the borders properly in the first place, they wouldn't be in this situation. Abandoning the border altogether would be a blow to

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<sup>121</sup> Initially, Bastianini complained that the distance between the two offices impeded collaboration between military and political authorities. "Promemoria per il comandante del XVIII Corpo d'Armata," n.d. (but from the end of March 1942), NARA T-821/410/0032-35. Zanussi observed dryly that the distance at least prevented the two from resorting to violence. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, 1:246.

<sup>122</sup> "Raggruppamento presidi del Corpo d'Armata," 10 March 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March-April 1942, allegati.

<sup>123</sup> "Raggruppamento presidi del XVIII Corpo d'Armata," 22 March 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March-April 1942, allegati.

Italian prestige and would allow Communist Partisans to enter from Croatia, further threatening security in Dalmatia.<sup>124</sup> Armellini later retorted that Bastianini would have built a Great Wall of China around Dalmatia if he could, but that the army should develop its system of garrisons according to its own needs, without giving too much consideration to the inexpert opinions of civilian officials.<sup>125</sup>

These first shots across the bows revealed two fundamentally different concepts of each other's mission and jurisdiction in Dalmatia. Both sides drew upon different decrees issued by the *Duce* to provide the legal basis behind their respective positions. Bastianini took his mission from the decree law which formalized the annexation of Dalmatia back in May 1941. Over a month after Armellini's arrival in Split, Bastianini sent him a patronizing memorandum that outlined, very specifically, the territory that comprised the Governorate of Dalmatia and the legislation that established its three provinces "in absolute identity with that of the other provinces of the Kingdom." He therefore insisted that Dalmatia be treated as if it were part of metropolitan Italy, where the army did not exercise civil authority.<sup>126</sup> Civil authorities repeatedly fell back upon the May 1941 decree, arguing that Armellini's line amounted to a "disavowal" of the *Duce*'s project.<sup>127</sup>

On the other hand, Armellini's understanding of jurisdictional boundaries was based on the same decrees that had given the military full control over repression in Slovenia. After 20 January 1942, Dalmatia, Slovenia, and occupied Croatia were defined as a "zone of operations."<sup>128</sup> Prior to Roatta's appointment as Second Army commander,

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<sup>124</sup> "Riservatissima personale per l'Eccellenza Armellini da l'Eccellenza Bastianini," 27 March 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March-April 1942, allegati. Bastianini to Roatta, 31 March 1942, NARA T-821/410/0031.

<sup>125</sup> Armellini to Roatta, 8 May 1942, and Roatta to Bastianini, 12 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>126</sup> "Promemoria per il comandante del XVIII Corpo d'Armata," n.d. [late March 1942], NARA T-821/410/0032-35.

<sup>127</sup> Armellini to Roatta, 23 March 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March-April 1942, allegati. Bastianini to Armellini, 15 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0441-42.

<sup>128</sup> "Bando n. 107," 20 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 769, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), February-March 1942, allegati.



he and Cavallero had agreed that this legal change was necessary to give military authorities full control over public order. It was also intended to improve troop morale: soldiers stationed in the theatre now received full battle honours and their families were guaranteed larger pensions.<sup>129</sup> As war zones, the annexed territories were potentially subject to martial law, but Mussolini allowed the provincial governments to retain most civil powers, including ordinary policing. Civil authorities could call upon the army to intervene in the interest of public order, and military authorities could intervene on their own initiative in extreme circumstances.<sup>130</sup> After Bastianini complained directly to Mussolini, on 24 January Rome modified the decree as it pertained to Dalmatia. Military authorities could not intervene in matters of public order on their own initiative.<sup>131</sup> Roatta interpreted this to mean that tasks of public order in “normal” situations were to be left to civil authorities; however, where civil police forces were deficient, control could be ceded to the military upon request of political authorities. As soon as military units became involved in the defence of public order, the army assumed full control over the conduct of operations and could give orders to civil functionaries and police. Military units were never to come under the command of political authorities. Moreover, Roatta considered operations against “armed formations of rebels” to fall strictly within the military’s sphere.<sup>132</sup> All this was in place prior to Armellini’s arrival in Split. He would frequently cite the decree of 20 January and Roatta’s interpretive order of 12 February, conveniently neglecting the modified text of 24 January.<sup>133</sup>

Both personalities exacerbated the situation by addressing one another in patronizing tones. Bastianini treated Armellini like an inexperienced newcomer with no handle on Dalmatian affairs, which Bastianini claimed to have mastered after ten months

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<sup>129</sup> Cavallero diary, 13 January 1942.

<sup>130</sup> “Decreto del Duce per ordine pubblico in Dalmazia,” 20 January 1942, in Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:317.

<sup>131</sup> Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:215. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 121–22.

<sup>132</sup> “Applicazione del Decreto del Duce del 19 gennaio 1942,” 12 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>133</sup> Sources refer interchangeably to the decree as dating from 19 or 20 January. Mussolini issued the decree on 19 January, but it came into effect on 20 January.

of rule.<sup>134</sup> For his part, Armellini made clear his conviction that Bastianini and his functionaries were military dilettantes whose opinions on the deployment and use of armed forces counted for nothing. Armellini, whose troops were spread out in areas under Croatian civil control, Croatian territory under Italian military control, as well as in Dalmatia, believed that it was useless to distinguish between zones, as political authorities insisted on doing. Rebels were everywhere, and the greater war effort required the concentric and economical use of force according to “a single system and single vision of military command.”<sup>135</sup> Armellini accused Bastianini of “feigning ignorance that Dalmatia is already in full revolt.”<sup>136</sup> He preferred to envision the role of his corps within the context of the overall war effort — it was part of a struggle against a Balkan-wide insurgent movement and the army needed to economize on resources that were badly needed for frontline operations in North Africa and Russia.<sup>137</sup> In this context, Armellini could care less whether or not the provinces of Dalmatia functioned normally.

After working together for just over a month, communication broke down entirely. Armellini ordered his units to stop informing political authorities of operational plans.<sup>138</sup> An exasperated Roatta ordered Armellini to address any jurisdictional matters to him, and he asked Bastianini to do the same. Roatta hoped to find a compromise whereby Zara and Split were treated neither as normal Italian provinces nor purely as “zones of operations.” He reminded Bastianini that the military garrisons he so badly wanted retained in Dalmatia did not exist in peaceful Italian provinces, but he agreed that

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<sup>134</sup> “Riservatissima personale per l’Eccellenza Armellini da l’Eccellenza Bastianini,” 27 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati. Bastianini to Roatta, 31 March 1942, NARA T-821/410/0031.

<sup>135</sup> Armellini to Roatta, 24 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>136</sup> “Situazione,” 25 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>137</sup> Armellini’s intelligence reports emphasized the existence of a single rebel threat to the entire region under his jurisdiction, where insurgents from Croatia coordinated their efforts with those in Dalmatia. This view of a “single front” throughout Yugoslavia was in accordance with Roatta’s Circular 3C. Massimo Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta: Le direttive della 2a armata sulla repressione antipartigiana in Slovenia e Croazia,” *Italia contemporanea* 209/210 (1997–1998): 159.

<sup>138</sup> “Comunicazioni di carattere operativo al Governatore della Dalmazia ed altre autorità politiche,” 28 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

political considerations warranted maintaining some smaller garrisons, even if they were militarily useless.<sup>139</sup> Armellini duly postponed the withdrawal of small garrisons in Dalmatia.<sup>140</sup>

The question of garrison deployment was a strictly jurisdictional struggle between military and civil authorities to control the various tools of repression in Dalmatia. These included the units of XVIII Corps that were stationed in Dalmatia; namely, the Truppe Zara and the Perugia Division, as well as independent battalions attached directly to Armellini's command. Bastianini had at his disposal various forces of public order, including detachments from the *Carabinieri*, *Guardia di Finanza*, *Guardia alla Frontiera* [border police], and MVSN.<sup>141</sup> Armellini saw Bastianini's interference with the deployment of his garrisons as a jurisdictional infringement and as an attempt to subordinate military forces in Dalmatia to political authorities.<sup>142</sup> Likewise, Bastianini had taken exception to Armellini's suggestions that the *Guardia di Finanza* — armed financial and customs police that, while technically a branch of the armed forces, answered to civil authorities — concentrate on coastal defence, since its work in the interior of Dalmatia was “less important.”<sup>143</sup>

The issue of garrisons returned to plague relations in July 1942, when Armellini again ordered reductions following the departure of the Perugia Division.<sup>144</sup> To no avail, Armellini had lobbied Roatta to allow him to keep the division, which would permit him to maintain a “heavy checkerboard of garrisons” in annexed territory.<sup>145</sup> Again, and not

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<sup>139</sup> Roatta to Bastianini, 4 April 1942, and “Rapporti con l'autorità politica,” 6 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>140</sup> “Ritiro piccoli presidi nella 1<sup>a</sup> zona,” 5 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>141</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 121.

<sup>142</sup> “Rapporti con l'autorità politica,” 29 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>143</sup> “Guardia di Finanza della Dalmazia,” 22 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati. “Carabinieri Reali e Guardie di Finanza della Dalmazia,” 11 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>144</sup> “Situazione del corpo d'armata,” 16 July 1942, NARA T-821/51/0682–84.

<sup>145</sup> “Nuovo schieramento del corpo d'armata,” 8 July 1942, NARA T-821/51/0680–81.

entirely without reason, Bastianini blamed “the absence of our armed forces” in Dalmatian towns for the growth of the Partisan movement.<sup>146</sup> Armellini argued that Bastianini needed to adapt himself to XVIII Corps’s manpower situation, which did not permit such dispersal of force.<sup>147</sup>

If Armellini was on solid ground defending his forces from civilian intrusion, his opposition to the establishment of civil government in Dalmatia treaded more dangerously. As shown, the army’s attitude towards the annexation of the new provinces in 1941 varied between caution and enthusiasm. Armellini’s initial experiences in the theatre prompted him to question the wisdom of forming a civil regime so hastily in Dalmatia. At the end of March, he confided to Roatta that it was an “error — almost universally acknowledged and maybe unavoidable [*insopprimibile*] — having prematurely [*anzitempo*] established in Dalmatia three Italian provinces.”<sup>148</sup> Again in May, he blamed Bastianini for causing revolt and then fuelling it with counterproductive measures.

The premature constitution of an Italian civil government and the policy taken by this government — intent on obtaining the rapid Italianization of the country — has brought, after surprise, discontent. The population, almost totally anti-Italian and anti-Fascist, which during the phase of military occupation maintained a correct — if not cordial — attitude, has thus become more and more isolated. Isolation, interpreted as hostility — and maybe it was — caused reaction from the Italian part. Thus, one passed from isolation to detachment and — in spirit — revolt.<sup>149</sup>

By questioning Bastianini’s very existence in Dalmatia, Armellini certainly ran afoul of the Fascist regime that had placed him there. However, these criticisms did not amount to a questioning of Italian imperialism that “veered toward anti-Fascism,” as has

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<sup>146</sup> Bastianini to Cassata, 12 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0423–30. Burgwyn notes that Bastianini’s criticism of XVIII Corps, whose units were stationed in barracks far from problem areas, had some merit. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 122.

<sup>147</sup> “Situazione e presidi della Dalmazia,” 18 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>148</sup> “Rapporti con l’autorita politica,” 29 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>149</sup> “Relazione periodica,” 3 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, May 1942, allegati. Armellini repeated these conclusions at the end of the month. “Sistemazione futura del C. d’A.,” 29 May 1942, NARA T-821/51/0685–91.

been argued elsewhere.<sup>150</sup> Armellini's rationale reveals that his main problem with the establishment of civil government in Dalmatia was one of timing. First, it was foolish to announce the unpopular move of political annexation when Italy was still at war with Britain. Second, in the midst of a world war and a rebellion, the existence of a civil regime prevented "necessities of a military nature" from gaining "full and undisputed supremacy."<sup>151</sup> Accepting annexation as an accomplished fact, Armellini concluded that political means could accomplish little; the problem facing Dalmatia was a military one that required a military solution.<sup>152</sup> Like his colleagues in 1941, Armellini believed that a military government would be easier to manage. Third, like a classic imperialist, he did not believe that the local populations — "by tradition, instinct, a Balkan people" — had obtained the proper level of civilization to allow for their immediate incorporation into the metropolitan sphere. It was a basic precept that "in every occupation of territory against the will of the inhabitants [...] civil organization must follow military occupation." For Armellini, these arguments were based primarily on observations made in the Balkans, but "could be justified by my experiences during my long colonial life, whose environment is strangely similar to this."<sup>153</sup>

Armellini called for Bastianini to adopt a more "conciliatory attitude" towards the local populations, at least by reining in his project of Italianization.<sup>154</sup> Like Badoglio and Graziani in Ethiopia, Armellini saw little value in immediately alienating a large part of a still unpacified population through exclusionist policies, something that even Rome appeared to repudiate after 1938. But, as in Ethiopia, this dose of utilitarianism did not result in a wholly different approach to repression. As will be shown in Chapter Six, Italian army commanders during 1941 generally lauded Bastianini's tough handling of resistance. In July 1942, Armellini himself oversaw one of the most destructive

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<sup>150</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 126.

<sup>151</sup> "Rapporti con l'autorità politica," 29 March 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March-April 1942, allegati.

<sup>152</sup> Armellini to Roatta, 21 June 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, June 1942, allegati.

<sup>153</sup> "Organizzazioni militari in Dalmazia," 2 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>154</sup> "Sistemazione futura del C. d'A.," 29 May 1942, NARA T-821/51/0685-91.

operations conducted by Italian forces in the Balkans, when his corps laid waste to the area around the Velebit mountain range to the north of Dalmatia's border with Croatia. He credited supposed improvements in Croatia, where Italian military authorities enjoyed full powers, to "the firm lessons inflicted by our troops, using not rash but inexorable reprisals."<sup>155</sup> When news of the Armellini-Bastianini dispute reached the command of the Sassari Division — deployed on the Dalmatian border — in June, staff officers there credited it to the "naturally" different ways of thinking between a military authority favouring "strong-arm methods" [*maniera forte*] and a civil authority preferring "gentle political action."<sup>156</sup> Armellini did not advocate a soft approach to counterinsurgency; merely a consistent one.

It was Armellini's criticism of the inconsistent and counterproductive violence meted out by Bastianini's Blackshirt militia units that brought the corps commander closest to adopting an openly anti-Fascist stance. By the time that Armellini arrived in Dalmatia, Bastianini had collected a small army of Blackshirts sent by the MVSN in Rome to conduct police operations in the provinces. These included a mixture of "M" battalions and *squadristi* battalions. The "M" battalions were made up of seasoned veterans from the Greek campaign. Military authorities considered them combat worthy and claimed that they fell within the army's jurisdiction.<sup>157</sup> For several months, Bastianini insisted that the "M" battalions were within his competency, but pressure from Armellini and Roatta eventually forced him to accept that they belonged to XVIII Corps. Bastianini therefore requested more *squadristi* battalions from Rome.<sup>158</sup> By the end of the summer, Bastianini had four of these battalions — between 2,000 and 3,000 men — under the

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<sup>155</sup> "Relazione periodica," 3 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>156</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 6 June 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May-June 1942.

<sup>157</sup> Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:214. On the "M" battalions, see Piero Crociani and Pier Paolo Battistelli, *Italian Blackshirt, 1935-45* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010), 18-19. There is disagreement over whether the "M" stood for Mussolini or *mobile*.

<sup>158</sup> Pentimalli to Roatta, 25 March 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March-April 1942, allegati. Bastianini to Roatta, 19 April 1942, NARA T-821/51/0218-23.

direct control of his Governorate.<sup>159</sup> The *squadristi* battalions were made up of older reservists, mostly veterans of the Blackshirt movement of the 1920s.<sup>160</sup> Whereas Armellini had nothing but praise for the Blackshirt units that were attached to Italian infantry divisions, he considered the *squadristi* units second-rate and undisciplined.<sup>161</sup>

The behaviour of the 68th “Toscano” CC.NN. Battalion in Split, where Armellini kept his headquarters, was particularly troubling. On 10 June, during celebrations for the second anniversary of Italy’s entry into the war, men from the battalion — “already known for its bad conduct” — added to the fanfare by vandalizing a hotel. The next day, they randomly beat up civilians in the main square of Split. Finally, on 12 June, twenty *squadristi* stormed a Jewish synagogue, attacking bystanders performing religious rites, and burning furniture, tapestries, and documents “of great historical value.” The Catholic Bishop of Split, Dr. Kvirin Bonifačić, lodged a complaint, assuming the militia were under Armellini’s command. In turn, Armellini warned Bastianini that such behaviour alarmed the local populations and fed rebellion in Dalmatia. Bastianini ordered such acts to cease, but at the same time claimed to Armellini that, if this behaviour was damaging sixty percent of the time, then the other forty percent was useful. The corps commander lamented the existence of a “squadrist” mentality among political authorities, who had in some cases openly supported the violence.<sup>162</sup> Armellini recognized that his criticism of the *squadristi* verged on anti-Fascism.

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<sup>159</sup> These included the 7th “Milano,” 68th “Toscano,” 112th “Tevere,” and 170th “Vespri” *squadristi* battalions. “Situazione comandi e truppe al 1° agosto 1942,” 1 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati.

<sup>160</sup> Crociani and Battistelli, *Italian Blackshirt*, 27.

<sup>161</sup> For example, Armellini publicly lauded the conduct of the Sassari Division’s 44th CC.NN. Battalion, besieged in its garrison at Srb for twenty-two days by Partisan forces. “Ordine del giorno n. 5,” 27 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942, allegati. The level of discipline of Bastianini’s Blackshirt units in Split had been criticized by the commander of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division months earlier. “Relazione informativa,” 7 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>162</sup> Armellini to Roatta, 14 June 1942; “Incidenti provocati in Spalato da militi del I° btg. Squadristi ‘Toscana,’” 17 June 1942; and, Bonifačić to Armellini, 13 June 1942, NARA T-821/64/0330–37. “Incidenti a Spalato,” 30 June 1942, NARA T-821/63/0972–73. Even Bastianini’s personal secretary agreed that the *squadristi* were “capricious, bombastic, undisciplined, [and] badly organized.” Ortona diary, 16 June 1942. Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 62.

This is a delicate subject since it is easy for someone to say: he spoke ill of Garibaldi. No one denies — just as no one denies the existence of the sun — that *squadristo* saved Italy. But the environment of 1919–20–21–22 in Italy is not the environment of 1941–42 in Dalmatia. The way of the truncheon and castor oil is no good here.

Italians [...] were almost all desirous of order, discipline, fruitful labour. They have nothing in common with the Dalmatians who — by tradition, instinct, a Balkan people — in almost their totality refuse to suffer any government — especially a government of a nation considered by them to be an enemy and towards which they have always cultivated the most furious hatred.<sup>163</sup>

But, even the issue of *squadristi* violence overlapped with the more insidious threat, in Armellini and Roatta's view, that the militia posed to the army's jurisdiction over the repression of revolt in Dalmatia. Bastianini used his militia and police to conduct operations of an increasingly military character against Dalmatian rebels. Armellini complained that the coexistence of "two armies, two heads, two systems is harmful, it disperses means that are not very abundant, it squanders forces and energies that must instead be vigorously spared."<sup>164</sup> This situation not only contravened basic military principles on the dispersal of force, Armellini argued, it went against "the sole and total control that constitutes one of the tenets of Fascism."<sup>165</sup> According to the general, Bastianini wielded his "Gubernatorial army" [*esercito Governatoriale*] without a coherent strategy. Moreover, his forces relied on XVIII Corps for provisions and ammunition, and their actions frequently required intervention from Armellini's units.<sup>166</sup> Military personnel had died coming to the aid of rash political authorities who proved unable to organize even a basic combing operation. Armellini lamented the excessive camaraderie that had led his units to be "dragged in" to Bastianini's poorly conceived and conducted operations. He reminded his subordinates that, according to Mussolini's 20 January decree and to Roatta's Circular 3C, operations against rebels were "true and

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<sup>163</sup> "Organizzazioni militari in Dalmazia," 2 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>164</sup> Armellini to Roatta, 21 June 1942, NARA T-821/64/0907-08.

<sup>165</sup> "Organizzazioni militari in Dalmazia," 2 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>166</sup> "Operazioni condotte dal Governatore e forze a sua disposizione," 22 June 1942, NARA T-821/64/0460-66. "Trasformazione truppe Zara," 18 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.



proper operations of war” that should be conducted by military authorities in accordance with military criteria.<sup>167</sup> Armellini demanded that the “gubernatorial army” be disbanded, that Bastianini’s military cabinet [*Gabinetto Militare*] limit itself to liaison functions, that his Blackshirt units be reduced to police forces subordinate to the *Carabinieri*, and that XVIII Corps take over police functions outside of major urban areas.<sup>168</sup> Roatta agreed that the existence of two armies with two commanders operating in the same region towards the same objectives was “absurd,” but he could not issue orders to Bastianini any more than Armellini could.<sup>169</sup>

With this, relations between Armellini and Bastianini reached a critical breaking point in mid-July 1942. Guerrilla activity was on the rise in the Province of Zara — its prefect had been killed in an ambush at the end of May — and Bastianini blamed this on the inactivity of XVIII Corps.<sup>170</sup> Privately, and citing colonial precedent, he urged Mussolini to establish “a single military command for Dalmatia able to collaborate directly with the political authorities,” by which he meant a command that answered to the Governor’s office.<sup>171</sup> From Armellini, he demanded immediate action to normalize the situation, and insisted that civil government must remain in Dalmatia for reasons of prestige.

As long as I am in my position and you are in yours, the reciprocal attributes are: the civil authority, with all its organs, are under my orders and the military authority with its assigned troops are yours. I carry out administrative policy and you fight the war. [...] You consider the government of Dalmatia a thing that has no reason for existence and that it should be abolished [...] Nevertheless, as long as there is a governorship in Dalmatia, do me the favour of letting it carry out its work in peace. I am not one of your subordinates or one you merely tolerate. I

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<sup>167</sup> “Arditismo e ponderazione,” 20 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati. Armellini drew upon the failed response of civil authorities following the kidnapping of an Italian school teacher in June to exemplify his points. On the June incident, see NARA T-821/64/0457–77.

<sup>168</sup> Armellini to Roatta, 5 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>169</sup> “Questione Eccellenza Bastianini – XVIII,” 25 June 1942, NARA T-821/64/0967.

<sup>170</sup> On the death of Prefect Vezio Orazi, see Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:238–43. Bastianini was emotionally shaken by Orazi’s death, which likely added even more of a personal dimension to his feud with Armellini. Ortona diary, 26 May 1942.

<sup>171</sup> Ortona diary, 8 and 22 July 1942.

have been serving my country and my leader in peace and war for a quarter of a century. I am more inclined towards action than polemics.<sup>172</sup>

Armellini penned Bastianini a long response that summed up the issues that plagued relations between civil and military authorities in Dalmatia. Armellini complained that civil authorities treated him as if he was “an executive body of the Governor.” He repeated his belief that the establishment of civil government had been an error. He argued that his deployment of fewer but stronger garrisons was dictated by his lack of troops, which prevented imposing by force “a policy that the population had not accepted voluntarily.” He complained that Bastianini, despite his claims of limiting himself to the realm of policy, had in fact been making quite a bit of war, intentionally keeping XVIII Corps in the dark about his plans for anti-partisan operations. Finally, Armellini addressed the veiled charges of anti-Fascism laid against him.

You say that you have served the country for a quarter of a century; I have served it for 35 years and, more than a quarter of a century ago, I first shed blood for my country. And I have always served — believe you me — exactly as the *Duce* wants: with absolute dedication, with conscious discipline, demonstrating love for combat, making habit of danger [...] demonstrating frank honesty in personal relations. I have served, that is, according to how the Director of the Party recently proclaimed, as the perfect Fascist even before Fascism existed.<sup>173</sup>

This claim in itself could be considered subversive, but Armellini was not being sarcastic.<sup>174</sup> His career path and personality reflected a mentality that shared much with Fascist ideology.<sup>175</sup>

After being informed of this last tirade, Roatta ordered Armellini to abstain from any direct communication with Bastianini.<sup>176</sup> Already by the end of June, Roatta had decided that either Bastianini or Armellini would have to go. He clearly sided with Armellini, who he considered exchanging posts with the commander of the V or VI

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<sup>172</sup> Bastianini to Armellini, 15 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0441–42.

<sup>173</sup> Armellini to Bastianini, 19 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0447–49.

<sup>174</sup> Gobetti considers Armellini’s statement to be a genuine expression of pride. Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 66.

<sup>175</sup> See Minniti, “Gli ufficiali di carriera,” 89–90.

<sup>176</sup> Roatta to Armellini, 21 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0390.

Corps.<sup>177</sup> Giacomo Zanussi, a Second Army staff officer, later criticized Roatta for failing to protect a general of Armellini's stature against political intrigue. Both Roatta and Armellini were caught off guard by Bastianini's unannounced trip to Rome that resulted in the corps commander's dismissal on 25 July.<sup>178</sup> It is likely that Mussolini intervened in Bastianini's favour because anything else would have appeared an admission that the Fascist project in Dalmatia had failed.<sup>179</sup> Timing may also have played a role. Bastianini's visit caught Mussolini immediately after a trip to North Africa; the *Duce* blamed his generals for failing to achieve a great victory while he was there.<sup>180</sup> Concerns over Armellini's anti-Fascist tendencies do not appear to have played a role in his dismissal. Armellini was not disgraced in the eyes of the military or regime. Cavallero considered Armellini as a replacement to command the XXI Corps in North Africa. Mussolini approved Armellini's appointment to this important theatre but Armellini declined, citing medical reasons.<sup>181</sup>

From Armellini's point of view, his feud with Bastianini was primarily jurisdictional in nature. Armellini's final hand-written note to Roatta after receiving orders to vacate his post took a parting shot at the "ridiculous" military organization of the Governor and the dispersal of force that it caused. Armellini did not mention the episodes of Fascist violence conducted by the *squadristi*. His main concern was Bastianini's "intransigent" refusal to give "all the available forces, all the responsibility to the military authorities to avoid big trouble." On this topic, Armellini declared, he "could write a novel."<sup>182</sup> While he criticized Bastianini and Rome for making his task

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<sup>177</sup> "Questione Eccellenza Bastianini – XVIII," 25 June 1942, NARA T-821/64/0967.

<sup>178</sup> Armellini to Roatta, 25 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0384. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, 1:248.

<sup>179</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 140. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 127.

<sup>180</sup> Ortona diary, 21 July 1942. Pirelli, *Taccuini*, 339.

<sup>181</sup> Cavallero diary, 21 September and 24 October 1942.

<sup>182</sup> Armellini to Roatta, 29 July 1942, NARA, T-821/64/0375-76.

more difficult, he did not question Italy's imperial mission.<sup>183</sup> Although he largely avoided demagogic Fascist themes in his addresses to his troops, Armellini had himself affirmed that "Italy is, and will be an Empire."<sup>184</sup> While he opposed Italianization in the short term, he did not challenge the eventual inclusion of Dalmatia and Croatia within Italy's Imperial Community. Certainly, Armellini was no Fascist of the first hour; yet, despite evidence of his genuine opposition to the regime, his dispute with Bastianini did not amount to anti-Fascism. That an otherwise unremarkable jurisdictional squabble ended with the removal of a corps commander was mainly due to the incompatible personalities, rather than ideologies, of the two antagonists.

The Armellini-Bastianini feud in Dalmatia was fundamentally similar to that between Robotti and Grazioli in Slovenia: in both cases, military authorities directly or indirectly criticized the political annexation of the territory their forces occupied in order to gain total control over the repression of resistance. There are several reasons that Armellini failed where Robotti had succeeded. Robotti's willingness to adopt Fascist rhetoric and to support Italianization may have ingratiated him to the *Duce*, but other factors were more significant. First, Bastianini ensured that his approach to repression did not appear soft compared to the army's policy. Second, Slovenia was a politically marginal region where the regime held few long-term interests; Dalmatia had greater symbolic value for Mussolini. Third, Grazioli, the former Fascist Party head in Trieste, was a far less influential or prestigious figure than Bastianini, who enjoyed national fame and a close relationship with the *Duce*.<sup>185</sup> Finally, Robotti's dispute with Grazioli coincided with a conflict between the High Commissioner and the ministerial bureaucracy in Rome, which by mid-1941 sought to limit the autonomous position of the

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<sup>183</sup> Conversely, Burgwyn argues that "by questioning Italy's imperial mission, Armellini had broken ranks with his military peers, which deprived him of protection against the Fascist chain of command." Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 127.

<sup>184</sup> "Ordine del giorno n. 12," 9 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>185</sup> Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 13-16.

Province of Ljubljana.<sup>186</sup> In short, the regime had less invested in Grazioli and Slovenia, and Mussolini could curtail his powers without risking a significant loss in prestige.

This is not to say that Robotti's task of concentrating power in the army's hands in Slovenia went smoothly. The 20 January decree allowed for considerable overlap in responsibilities and Robotti found many civil functionaries, including police in Ljubljana, unwilling to subordinate themselves to the military.<sup>187</sup> Robotti, too, complained of undisciplined terror employed by Blackshirt units in an effort to remove their uncooperative commander from Ljubljana.<sup>188</sup> Robotti continued to blame civil authorities for the rise of revolt, and he complained of plots to usurp his powers.

It is simply disgusting to see how the blood of our soldiers, killed in fulfilment of their sacrosanct duty, has become the object of speculation of petty politicians. [...] Our task here in Slovenia, hindered, obstructed, hampered in a thousand sneaky ways by the civil authorities, that know how to disguise their true work with a varnish of collaboration that can deceive the naïve and provides a purely formal 'alibi', grows more bitter and difficult every day. Our every step finds a political trap: our every measure is seen through a prism that distorts its aims and alters its nature: and all this veiled, obstinate, wicked, underhanded hostility is disguised by an outward cordiality, by an apparent collaboration that is nothing more than a supine, cold acceptance of our requests. We soldiers find this type of hostility repugnant.<sup>189</sup>

The use of such language indicates that Armellini's stance was shared by other generals of the *Regio Esercito*. It reinforces the conclusion that the Armellini-Bastianini dispute was part of a broader jurisdictional struggle that became particularly acute in Dalmatia because of personalities.

Armellini's removal ended the clash of personalities in Dalmatia, but it did not change the nature of the conflict between civil and military authorities. The staff officers

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<sup>186</sup> Cuzzi, "La Slovenia italiana," 243.

<sup>187</sup> "Azioni di polizia in Lubiana," 8 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati. Lack of communication with Grazioli's office prompted Robotti to establish an office to coordinate political police activity conducted by garrison commanders, provincial police, and the *Carabinieri*. "Difesa dell'ordine pubblico," 10 November 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>188</sup> "Situazione in Lubiana," 26 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

<sup>189</sup> "Situazione politica in Lubiana: Azione del Vescovo," 6 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

of the corps command in Split had liked and respected Armellini; now they adopted an even cooler attitude towards their civilian counterparts.<sup>190</sup> Armellini's replacement, Umberto Spigo, was a "passionate exponent of [Italian] penetration in the Balkans," was more willing to adopt Fascist rhetoric in public, and benefited from a partly mollified, partly chastened Bastianini, but military and civil authorities continued to jockey for position in Dalmatia.<sup>191</sup> Roatta retained his interpretation of the 20 January decree and lobbied *Comando Supremo* regarding Bastianini's "inappropriate" arrogation of military responsibilities. Cavallero now agreed that Bastianini only had control over public order in the cities. In a discussion with Bastianini, Cavallero insisted that operations against rebels were for the military to decide, remarking "that one cannot command in two."<sup>192</sup> They came to a compromise whereby the upgraded Zara Division would answer to XVIII Corps for border and coastal defence, but would adhere to requests from the Governor concerning the garrisoning and policing of the provinces of Zara and Split.<sup>193</sup> Bastianini's "gubernatorial army" of police and *squadristi* were placed under the command of the Zara Division, but in practice Spigo found that he had little control over the *squadristi*, which the Governorate continued to deploy for "police" duties.<sup>194</sup> Overall, though, Bastianini's position had weakened. As XVIII Corps withdrew from Croatia to

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<sup>190</sup> "Promemoria riservato personale n. 85," 3 August 1942, NARA T-821/64/0361.

<sup>191</sup> Spigo was formerly Italy's military attaché to Bulgaria. Ortona diary, 1 August 1942. On Spigo's use of Fascist rhetoric, see his address to the troops of XVIII Corps on the anniversary of the March on Rome. "Alle truppe del XVIII Corpo d'Armata," 29 October 1942, NARA T-821/63/0143. Bastianini adopted an excessive cordiality towards the new corps commander, who he addressed in his correspondence as "dear Spigo." Bastianini to Spigo, 23 November 1942, NARA T-821/64/0350-51. After the war, Spigo penned a manuscript remarkably similar to Armellini's *La crisi dell'Esercito*, criticizing the regime for undermining the armed forces and leading Italy into war unprepared. Umberto Spigo, *Premesse tecniche della disfatta: Dall'euforia al disastro* (Rome: Faro, 1946).

<sup>192</sup> "Trasformazione del Comando 'Truppe Zara' in Comando di Divisione," 8 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April-September 1942, allegati. Cavallero diary, 1 August 1942.

<sup>193</sup> "Trasformazione del Comando 'Truppe Zara' in comando di Divisione," 6 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April-September 1942, allegati.

<sup>194</sup> "Trasformazione del Comando Truppe Zara in Comando di Divisione," 16 August 1942, and "Costituzione Divisione in Dalmazia," 19 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April-September 1942, allegati. "Sintesi degli argomenti trattati nella riunione del pomeriggio 12 ottobre a Spalato," 14 October 1942, and "Rapporto tenuto nei giorni 27 e 28 ottobre 1942-XX in Sebenico ai comandati il VI e XVIII Corpo d'Armata," 28 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October-November 1942, allegati.

concentrate on the defence of Dalmatia, something for which Bastianini had advocated for some time, civil authorities found themselves “overwhelmed by generals.”<sup>195</sup> The redeployment bolstered the army’s jurisdictional claims over public order in Dalmatia. In February 1943, Bastianini himself left Zara, bumped upstairs as part of a major cabinet shuffle to take over as undersecretary of state for Foreign Affairs.<sup>196</sup>

The army’s political behaviour in the annexed territories of Slovenia and Dalmatia revealed apparent contrasts with the policies of the Fascist regime. Officially, these territories made up the “small space” of Italy’s *spazio vitale*, the point where metropolitan Italy engaged with the rest of its Imperial Community in the Adriatic. Important generals like Roatta cautioned against annexation, and local military authorities like Armellini and Robotti later criticized annexation and its connected policies of Italianization and Fascistization as premature. Yet, official ideology was hardly crystal clear and was, in part, established to justify the systems and boundaries so hastily imposed after the conquest of Yugoslavia. Within the vague framework established by Mussolini, Italian generals believed they had room to manoeuvre; and, for the most part, Mussolini let them. He intervened at a late date to remove Armellini, only to reduce Bastianini’s powers afterwards. The army’s struggle against Fascist authorities in Slovenia and Dalmatia stemmed from its institutional doctrine that, once hostilities were under way, the entire war effort should be controlled by the military to achieve unity of command and effort. For most generals, these basic precepts were not at odds with Fascist totalitarianism or imperialism. Military occupation, they believed, was the simplest way to permanently make those lands Italian.

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<sup>195</sup> Ortona diary, 25 November 1942.

<sup>196</sup> Ortona diary, 6–15 February 1942.

## The Dysfunctional Coalition<sup>197</sup>

The generals of Second Army had to deal not only with Fascist functionaries, but also with the civil and military representatives of its Axis partners. At its height, the army's zone of occupation shared a demarcation line in the north and east with Germany. This line cut through Slovenia and extended southeast to Montenegro, including the Dalmatian coast with a hinterland up to 200 km deep, much of which belonged to the Independent State of Croatia, an Axis member since June 1941. Behind the demarcation line, the Italians differentiated between three zones: Zone I comprised the annexed territories governed by Fascist civil authorities; Zone II, the so-called "demilitarized zone," extended into sovereign Croatian territory halfway to the demarcation line, forming a coastal belt of immediate strategic interest to the Italian armed forces; Zone III included the Croatian interior up to the Italo-German demarcation line. Zones II and III were co-inhabited by Second Army and by Croatian civil and military personnel; their legal relationship to one another and level of authority varied during the course of the war.

As a result of this complex arrangement, Italian generals were fully involved in coalition relations with their German and Croatian allies.<sup>198</sup> These relations were notoriously poor. Indeed, with its failure to develop unified political objectives, joint planning, or a coherent grand strategy, the Axis has been labelled a "dysfunctional coalition."<sup>199</sup> In terms of strategy and frontline operations, the lion's share of the blame must fall on Germany's shoulders: Hitler's ideological ambitions left little room for others; the Germans balked at supplying their allies with much-needed technology; and,

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<sup>197</sup> Parts of this section expand upon the article, Nicolas G. Virtue, "Occupation Duty in the Dysfunctional Coalition: The Italian Second Army and its Allies in the Balkans, 1941–43," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 14, no. 1 (2011), <http://jmss.org/jmss/index.php/jmss/article/view/443/442>.

<sup>198</sup> While Hungarian and Bulgarian forces also occupied parts of Yugoslavia, their zones of occupation did not share a boundary with that of the Italian Second Army. The army had no contact with the Hungarians or Bulgarians.

<sup>199</sup> Burkhart Mueller-Hillebrand, *Germany and its Allies in World War II: A Record of Axis Collaboration Problems* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1980), 11–13. DiNardo, "Dysfunctional Coalition," 711–30.



German liaison officers frequently came across as arrogant.<sup>200</sup> However, in regions like the Balkans — far from the main fighting and of secondary importance to Hitler’s objectives — lesser powers enjoyed considerable autonomy, enabling them to pursue their own political and ideological agendas. As a result, the Axis coalition tended to be at its most dysfunctional in occupied territory.<sup>201</sup>

In handling its allies the Italian army again appeared to challenge the official line coming from Rome, especially in terms of the army’s hostility towards the new Croatian state. Yet, the extent to which Italian generals adhered to the long-term imperial project of the Fascist regime in the Balkans is remarkable. Political factors, as much as military ones, guided the Italian army’s approach to coalition relations in Yugoslavia. Towards the Germans, Italian generals adopted a defensive line, aiming to limit German encroachment upon Italy’s sphere of interest. Towards the Croats, on the other hand, the army worked to expand Italian influence at its ally’s expense, as long as it had the military capability to do so. Within this framework, Second Army adopted controversial policies in favour of the Serb and Jewish populations being persecuted by the Nazi and Ustaša regimes.

### *Italo-German Relations*

Scholarship on the occupation of the Balkans has emphasized the conflicting interests of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in the region. Their rivalry was rooted in ideology, diplomacy, and economics. Ideologically, Mussolini and Hitler held competing visions for a postwar New European Order. Despite the failure of his “parallel war” in 1940–41 and his subsequent reliance on German military might, Mussolini clung to the belief that Fascist Italy would emerge from the war an equal partner of Nazi Germany, with the two major Axis powers dividing Europe between them. According to this vision, the Balkans — and certainly the Adriatic coast — fell solely within the Italian sphere of interest.

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<sup>200</sup> Richard L. DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers: From Coalition to Collapse* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 192–97.

<sup>201</sup> Istvan Deak, “The Worst of Friends: Germany’s Allies in East Central Europe; Struggles for Regional Dominance and Ethnic Cleansing, 1938–1945,” in Cattaruzza, Dyroff, and Langewiesche, *Territorial Revisionism*, 17. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 237. Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 36.

Hitler repeatedly, and perhaps sincerely, agreed that Croatia belonged to Italy's *spazio vitale*, but Nazi leaders did not view the German and Italian empires in equal terms; the latter would be subservient to the former.<sup>202</sup> Mussolini's diplomacy in the late 1930s had aimed to solidify his Mediterranean empire through alliance with Nazi Germany. But, the cost of this alliance was *Anschluss* — the union of Austria with Germany — which placed the Danube basin firmly in German hands. Inheriting Habsburg strategic interests, the Nazis sought to limit Italian influence in the region.<sup>203</sup> Control of the Danube enhanced German economic power throughout Southeastern Europe. Italy had been Yugoslavia's main trading partner prior to the invasion of Ethiopia and the imposition of sanctions by the League of Nations. Germany filled the void and Italian economic efforts in the area never recovered. The parts of Yugoslavia that Italy annexed or controlled after 1941 lacked industrial or natural resources and suffered from food deficits. On top of this, the Nazis and Ustaše signed a secret protocol that granted Germany full access to Croatian resources and ensured that Italian trade with Croatia would never match Germany's.<sup>204</sup>

Mussolini, Fascist ministers, and Italian industrialists caught wind of the protocol immediately. The *Duce* feared that the Germans were developing “what seems to be a four-year plan in Croatia through which we will not even get a crumb.”<sup>205</sup> The Director of Commercial Affairs for the Italian Foreign Ministry, Amedeo Giannini, complained that

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<sup>202</sup> Srdjan Trifković, “Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia, 1942–1943,” *Historical Journal* 36, no. 4 (1993): 884–86. Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 128–29. At the time of the Italian occupation of Albania and the signing of the Pact of Steel, Mussolini and Ciano repeatedly warned German diplomats that the Axis would fall apart if Germany did not respect Italian hegemony in Croatia, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean. See Ciano diary, 17 March, 20 April, and 21–23 May 1939.

<sup>203</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 18–19. Trifković, “Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia,” 903.

<sup>204</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 612, 662. Trifković, “Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia,” 884–85. Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 28. Czesław Madajczyk, “German-Italian Clashes of Interests in the Occupied Areas (1940–1943),” *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae* 21 (1994): 144. The text of the protocol is available in Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:380. Fascist efforts to increase Italy's economic penetration in foreign markets before the Second World War largely failed due to an insufficient industrial base and a lack of businesses capable of competing with other Western firms. See, for example, Niccolò Serri, “Fascist Imperialism and the Italian Arms Trade to Nationalist China, 1929–1937,” *Nuova Rivista Storica* 99, no. 2 (2015): 435–58.

<sup>205</sup> Cavallero diary, 10 June 1941.

the protocol “does not reconcile itself with the inclusion of Croatia in Italy’s *spazio vitale*.”<sup>206</sup> The situation was even worse in Slovenia, where the Germans kept the richest areas for themselves. As a result, Alberto Pirelli observed, “Ljubljana has lost any *raison d’être*; the aqueduct and power plants go to Germany. Not to mention the mines, cotton mills...! The Tarvisio railroad...”<sup>207</sup> Thus, despite their military alliance in the ongoing war against Great Britain, the Italian and German regimes immediately found themselves locked in an economic rivalry in occupied Yugoslavia that favoured the latter.

Rome sought to compensate for its economic impotence by extending its political influence in the Balkans. Ciano repeatedly sought reassurances from Ribbentrop that Croatia belonged entirely within the Italian sphere of interest, citing previous German assertions to that effect. When Ribbentrop questioned Rome’s decision to annex parts of Dalmatia that were inhabited mostly by Croats, Ciano responded that Italian annexation was not based on ethnic lines but on principles of “living space” [*spazio vitale*]. During negotiations concerning the partition of Yugoslavia, Italian diplomats proved particularly touchy over perceived threats to the integrity of Italy’s sphere of influence. When in April 1941 the pro-German General Kvaternik proclaimed Croatian independence in Zagreb, praising the German Reich but failing to mention Italy, the Italian Foreign Ministry worked quickly to ensure that the text was not published in Italy or Germany. The Italian ambassador in Berlin, Dino Alfieri, accused Germany of undermining Italy’s position by appearing to favour a Greater Croatia. Alfieri argued that Italy had earned the right to complete suzerainty in the region, having already sacrificed an empire — Italian East Africa — for the cause of the Axis. Confronted by such protests, Hitler and Ribbentrop repeatedly confirmed Germany’s “political disinterest” in the region.<sup>208</sup> However, thanks to Germany’s military supremacy, Yugoslavia was partitioned according to German, rather than Italian, aims. Fundamental aspects of the territorial, political, and legal makeup of the Axis occupation therefore depended upon the whim of

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<sup>206</sup> Alfieri to Ciano, 12 June 1941, DDI 9, VII, 247 and 248.

<sup>207</sup> Pirelli, *Taccuini*, 298.

<sup>208</sup> De Ferraris to Ciano, April 1941, DDI 9, VI, 912. Meeting between Ribbentrop and Ciano, 22 April 1941, DDI 9, VI, 967. Alfieri to Ciano, 1 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 39. Meeting between Ciano and Ribbentrop, 2 June 1941, DDI 9, VII, 200.

the *Führer*. For example, although Hitler initially declared that Italy would determine the fate of Bosnia and Herzegovina, he then established a demarcation line that left most of those regions within the German zone. The Italians had little choice but to accept the proposed demarcation line, with minor changes, at the end of April 1941.<sup>209</sup>

From the beginning of the invasion of Yugoslavia, Italian generals involved themselves in Rome's efforts to maximize and consolidate its political control in the occupied territories. As we have seen, the Province of Ljubljana was intended primarily as a buffer that would halt further German penetration into Southern Europe. According to Zanussi, it was thanks to Roatta's personal intervention as army chief of staff that Ljubljana was occupied by a makeshift group of *bersaglieri* on motorcycles before the Germans arrived.<sup>210</sup> The minor changes made to the demarcation line through Slovenia and Croatia at the end of April were due largely to the intervention of Italian military authorities. Although the boundary drawn up in the middle of the month was supposed to be "definitive," Second Army and the SMRE worked to expand the territory under Italian control. Citing practical military reasons, but also the need to affirm Italian prestige, Italian military authorities argued that the demarcation line in Slovenia and Croatia needed to be redrawn. While they failed to establish a more defensible border for the Province of Ljubljana along the Sava River, they managed to bring the important railroad hub of Karlovac under Italian control.<sup>211</sup>

Once the location of the demarcation line was agreed to at the end of April, the Italians moved quickly to physically occupy all the territory on their side of the line, much of which remained in the hands of the invading German Second Army. While urging his troops to "behave themselves in the most cordially and comradely form towards the representatives of the allied army," Ambrosio made it clear that he wanted German forces out of the Italian occupation zone as soon as possible. If German units refused to abandon their positions and lodging, Ambrosio ordered his subordinates to

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<sup>209</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 49. Marko Attila Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance in Hitler's Bosnia: The Partisans and the Chetniks, 1941–1943* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 15.

<sup>210</sup> Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, 1:94. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 1:43–44.

<sup>211</sup> See "Linea di demarcazione fra le truppe germaniche e italiane," 22 April 1941, and "Linea di demarcazione italo-tedesca nei territori ex-jugoslavi," 27 April 1941, DSCS, 3/II:375–76, 392–93.

proceed with occupation regardless.<sup>212</sup> In fact, Ambrosio had already chastised an Italian unit for abandoning a town near the demarcation line to German troops, demanding that “such an episode must not repeat itself.”<sup>213</sup>

Agreements between the Italian and German commands created bureaucratic obstacles and established a system of reciprocity that limited the frequency of visits across the demarcation line.<sup>214</sup> Ambrosio wanted to reduce travel by both sides in order to define his occupation zone as an exclusively Italian sphere of influence. As demonstrated by events in Slovenia in December 1941, this came at the expense of effective military cooperation between Axis forces. Following an incident earlier in the month when a German police unit was ambushed and completely destroyed by Partisans just north of the demarcation line while Italian forces across the border looked on, XI Corps’s Mario Robotti asked Ambrosio for clarification on his responsibilities towards the Germans should such a situation repeat itself.<sup>215</sup> The clarified policy was to avoid crossing the demarcation line and setting precedent for future German interference. When on Christmas Eve the Germans asked for urgent intervention to help a surrounded unit, the Italian response was dilatory. In part, this was due to problems deciphering and translating German messages, but the Italians were also following policy. Taddeo Orlando’s Granatieri di Sardegna Division received the German appeals and forwarded them to Robotti, who instructed Orlando to seek a request in writing before crossing the demarcation line. In the end, Orlando again contented himself with a blocking action on his side of the border.<sup>216</sup> A similar Italian aversion to joint operations may also have

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<sup>212</sup> “Occupazione 2<sup>a</sup> zona,” 12 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, April–May 1941, allegati.

<sup>213</sup> Second Army Command war diary, 8 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, April–September 1941.

<sup>214</sup> “Scambio visite militari in zona di occupazione,” 4 May 1941, and “Norme per le visite militari tedeschi e italiani in zone rispettive di occupazione,” 9 May 1941, NARA T-821/52/0058–61.

<sup>215</sup> Robotti to Ambrosio, 14 December 1941, NARA T-821/60/0671. The events of the debacle are narrated in Second Army Command war diary, 13–14 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, December 1941–January 1942.

<sup>216</sup> Orlando to Robotti, 25 December 1941, NARA T-821/60/0652. Robotti to Ambrosio, 24 December 1941, NARA T-821/60/0658.

prevented the Germans from capturing the Partisan leader Tito that same month. When his beleaguered command fled German-occupied Serbia and crossed into Italian-held Montenegro, the Germans failed to pursue, ostensibly reluctant to antagonize the Italians with a foray into their territory.<sup>217</sup>

While the Italians eventually consented to joint operations in Croatia in 1942, the annexed territories always remained impenetrable to German units. Robotti, Roatta, Ambrosio, and Cavallero all agreed that, since the Province of Ljubljana was considered Italian “national territory,” public order must be guaranteed solely by Italian means. They repeatedly turned down German proposals to coordinate counterinsurgency strategy in Slovenia, arguing that such agreements would only benefit the Germans.<sup>218</sup> Robotti also instructed his divisions not to share details on hostages or reprisals with German police, since he could “not understand what interest the German police could have with the requested information.”<sup>219</sup> Italo-German cooperation in Slovenia remained limited to sealing off the border, heavily strewn with landmines, during each other’s independent operations.<sup>220</sup> Stemming from political and imperial rivalries, the unwillingness of Italian generals to cooperate with their German counterparts on matters of security undoubtedly hampered their war against a guerrilla movement that was not necessarily restricted by political boundaries. Counterinsurgency in Slovenia was conducted as two separate battles at a time when Second Army was urging unity of action between its own district commands against the rebel enemy.<sup>221</sup> The treatment of the demarcation line in 1941 and

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<sup>217</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 146.

<sup>218</sup> “Cooperazione con reparti tedeschi di frontiere in operazioni contro i ribelli,” 11 April 1942, NARA T-821/60/0967. “Cooperazione italo-tedesca in operazioni contro ribelli alla frontiera della Slovenia,” 21 May 1942, NARA T-821/60/0960.

<sup>219</sup> “Fucilazioni per rappresaglia,” 24 June 1942, NARA T-821/277/0041.

<sup>220</sup> “Verbale della riunione tenuta dell’Ecc. Robotti in Lubiana il giorno 12 luglio 1942,” 12 July 1942, NARA T821/62/0708–710. “Rastrellamento,” 9 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September–October 1942, allegati.

<sup>221</sup> Paul N. Hehn, *The German Struggle against Yugoslav Guerrillas in World War II: German Counterinsurgency in Yugoslavia, 1941–1943* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 6–7. Roatta memorandum, 7 May 1942, NARA T-821/66/0686–87.

1942 demonstrated how Italian generals consciously allowed political objectives to trump military pragmatism.

Another upshot of this policy was that, despite their rivalry, open conflict or dissent between German and Italian military personnel was rare. As Davide Rodogno points out, “contacts between the troops of the two armies were less frequent than one might imagine.”<sup>222</sup> The Germans did have a presence around Mostar, where trade agreements with Croatia gave them access to bauxite mines. Local Italian commands complained that the Germans failed to inform them of the movements of their personnel, for whose security the Italians were responsible.<sup>223</sup> The German army also maintained liaison units attached to the command of Second Army. Italian intelligence officers kept a close eye on German liaison officers and their staff, petulantly complaining of their disrespectful attitude towards Italian officers and self-consciously reporting German criticisms, especially pertaining to Italy’s “excessive liberal [*generosa*] humanity [that] has allowed rebellion to rise and spread.”<sup>224</sup> This touchiness reflected an inferiority complex that stemmed from the failure of Mussolini’s “parallel war.”<sup>225</sup> The same sense of insecurity fed Italian fears of German agents in both annexed and occupied territories. Already in June 1941, the VI Corps alarmingly reported the presence of Gestapo personnel in Split.<sup>226</sup> In November, a V Corps garrison commander detained and expelled three officials of the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* — a Nazi agency responsible for considerable theft of cultural goods throughout occupied Europe — who claimed to be travelling through Italian-occupied Croatian territory “to conduct studies on the history,

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<sup>222</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 179. Relations between Italian and German military personnel became truly problematic only after the disastrous defeat at Stalingrad in winter 1942–43, when uncertainty towards Germany was transformed into deep resentment. Minniti, “Gli ufficiali ci carriera,” 93, 99.

<sup>223</sup> “Aggressione autocolonna tedesca nei pressi Poselje (Ljubinjje),” 12 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>224</sup> “Sottufficiali tedeschi addetti al collegamento presso la 2<sup>a</sup> Armata ed in licenza ad Abbazia,” 11 February 1942, NARA T-821/413/0662–63.

<sup>225</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 37.

<sup>226</sup> “Notiziario n. 56,” 27 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati.

habits and customs of Croatia.”<sup>227</sup> The army’s responses to apparent German intrusions in an Italian sphere paralleled the concerns of the Italian Foreign Ministry which, for example, sought to prevent Germany from establishing consulates in Croatian cities on the Italian side of the demarcation line.<sup>228</sup> In reality, the expansion of German influence in Croatia was not part of an elaborate scheme, but occurred incrementally in response to military circumstances. After mid-1942, increased insurgency and the new external threat posed by potential Allied landings in southeastern Europe prompted the Germans to play a greater role in Croatian military affairs, at the expense of Italy’s regional hegemony.<sup>229</sup> After that point, the Italian and German leadership clashed more frequently over Balkan affairs and strategy, especially — as we shall see — over the treatment of Serbs and Jews.

### *Italo-Croatian Relations*

During the formative first months of the occupation — and arguably into 1943 — Italian military authorities were far more concerned by their relations with the Ustaša regime than with their German allies. The demarcation line, coupled with Hitler’s unwillingness to allocate military resources to occupied Yugoslavia, kept any serious German threat at bay. On the other hand, Italian military personnel frequently came into contact with representatives and functionaries of the Independent State of Croatia. Almost invariably, this contact was negative. If German power undermined Italian influence in the Balkans and posed a distant threat to undo it, Italian commanders and staff officers quickly came to regard the Ustaše as the most immediate obstacle to their policy of expansion and consolidation in Yugoslavia. Although the 18 May Rome Accords technically established the Independent State of Croatia as a protectorate in a dynastic union with Italy, and while Croatia officially joined the Tripartite in June 1941, by the end of the year Italian

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<sup>227</sup> “Ufficiali delle S.A. germaniche a Segna,” 21 November 1941, NARA T-821/402/0157–62. On the activity of the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg*, see Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe’s Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

<sup>228</sup> “Consolato generale del Reich a Ragusa,” July 1942, DSCS, 7/II:249.

<sup>229</sup> Trifković, “Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia,” 882.



generals had reoccupied Croatian territory up to the demarcation line and had all but abandoned the notion that Pavelić's regime could function as a useful ally for Italy, militarily or politically.

Historians have argued that Italian officers developed their own "line" on Croatian affairs that diverged from Rome's official pro-Ustaša stance and, therefore, marked a fundamental break between the *Regio Esercito* and the Fascist regime.<sup>230</sup> However, this is an oversimplification. The regime's line towards Croatian policy was anything but clear. Mussolini, the *Comando Supremo*, the Fascist Party, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as gubernatorial, provincial, and military functionaries on the spot all held contrasting views towards the Independent State of Croatia. The army's repudiation of the Ustaše did not amount to ideological disloyalty: it occurred within the context of internal competition between multiple rival agencies, and it came largely in response to local circumstances and as the result of political calculations aimed at extending Italy's imperial reach in the region.

Eric Gobetti has questioned whether Rome ever adopted an "official line" on Italo-Croatian relations. The most unflinching support for the proto-fascist Ustaša movement came from within the Italian Foreign Ministry, which invested much financial and political capital in the Ustaše.<sup>231</sup> Following King Alexander's declaration of dictatorship in Yugoslavia in January 1929, Ante Pavelić and other radical Croat separatists formed the Ustaša revolutionary movement and went into exile, where they intended to coordinate terrorist activity against the Yugoslavian state. Pavelić himself arrived in Italy in May 1929, where his organizational activities — and eventually 550 paramilitaries — were subsidized by the Italian Foreign Ministry. Mussolini's decision to support Pavelić was consonant with his revisionist desire to undermine Yugoslavia and apply pressure on the European great powers. This policy contributed, at least indirectly, to the assassination of King Alexander in Marseilles in 1934. The 1937 Italo-Yugoslavian pact of friendship formally outlawed the Ustaše in Italy as well, but this had practically

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<sup>230</sup> Trifković, "Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia," 881. Monzali, "Il difficile alleanza," 74, 98. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 280.

<sup>231</sup> Gobetti, "The Royal Army's Betrayal," 191–98.

no impact on Pavelić's freedom, and the Ustaše factored into Mussolini's renewed expansionist plans after 1939.<sup>232</sup>

Nonetheless, Mussolini's support for the Ustaša movement was never unequivocal and always tactical. Mussolini and Ciano's plans to foment revolution in Croatia in 1939 centred on Vladko Maček's more popular and moderate Croat Peasant Party.<sup>233</sup> Only after being rebuffed by Maček, and having determined that the Peasant Party was either too closely tied to Anglo-French patronage or too pro-German, did the Foreign Ministry again give Pavelić and his Ustaše pride of place in its Balkan schemes.<sup>234</sup> Even so, Italian diplomats continued to voice their doubts over the level of mass support for the Ustaše in Croatia, and after the Treaty of Rome they tried to establish a rapprochement between Pavelić and Maček, who had already rejected a German offer to assume leadership of the Independent State of Croatia. These efforts quickly collapsed and the Italian Foreign Ministry thereafter wedded itself to Pavelić rather than the democrat, Maček.<sup>235</sup>

While committing himself to an Ustaša regime in April 1941, Ciano did not consider it an equal partner of Italy. Rather, the Foreign Minister envisioned a "political pact, which in practice puts all of Croatia under our control."<sup>236</sup> Leveraging the influence he believed to have gained over a grateful Pavelić, Ciano intended the Independent State of Croatia to function as a Fascist puppet. However, any pro-Italian sentiment that existed among the returning Ustaša exiles — not all of whom had found their experience of "internment" in Italy particularly endearing — was immediately compromised by the

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<sup>232</sup> Teodoro Sala, "Le basi italiane del separatismo croato," in *Fascismo italiano e Slavi del sud*, 165–200.

<sup>233</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 42. On contacts between Ciano and representatives of Maček, see Ciano diary, 9 and 20–21 March, 5 April, and 24–26, and 31 May 1939.

<sup>234</sup> Indelli to Ciano, 6 December 1939, DDI 9, II, 496; Anfuso to Ciano, January 1940, DDI 9, III, 182; Meeting between Ciano and Pavelić, 23 January 1940, DDI 9, III, 194; and, Gobbi to Ciano, 8 May 1940, DDI 9, IV, 335. Ciano diary, 21–23 January 1940.

<sup>235</sup> Casertano to Ciano, 28 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 173. The Germans initially supported Maček over Pavelić. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:299–300. The Ustaša regime placed Maček under house arrest in October 1941. Casertano to Ciano, 15 October 1941, DDI 9, VII, 650.

<sup>236</sup> Ciano diary, 24 April 1941.

Italian annexation of Dalmatia, which Croat nationalists claimed as their own.<sup>237</sup> As we have seen, the decision on annexation itself was subject to much debate within Italian political, diplomatic, and military circles. Some favoured appeasing the Croats to prevent them from turning to Germany for protection, while others warned that “it would be a terrible blow for us if we do not totally exclude the Croats from Dalmatia.”<sup>238</sup> Few were willing to renounce the concept of annexation altogether, and the establishment of the Governorate of Dalmatia proved the initial and chief obstacle to Italo-Croatian relations in spring 1941. Although Mussolini and Pavelić signed a border agreement on 7 May, the two sides continued to quibble over territorial arrangements through the summer.<sup>239</sup> Partly in response to annexation, the Croatian government never agreed to the customs union that would have bolstered Italy’s economic influence in the country and enabled Dalmatia to function as Italian *spazio vitale*.<sup>240</sup> By the end of June, even Ciano feared the presence of a growing Croatian “imperialism,” or irredentism, against Italy’s interests.<sup>241</sup>

Pavelić’s most consistent backer within the Foreign Ministry — and, as a result, the most vocal critic of the army’s policies in Croatia — was the Italian ambassador in Zagreb, Raffaele Casertano.<sup>242</sup> Casertano and Pavelić shared a strong working

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<sup>237</sup> The prominent exile, Eugen Dido Kvaternik, later complained of “suffering and hardship in the camps on Lipari, Sardinia, and Sicily.” Slavko Goldstein, *1941: The Year that Keeps Returning* (New York: New York Review Books, 2013), 12.

<sup>238</sup> The debate that took place in Rome is illustrated in the Ortona diary, 27–28 April 1941. The quote is attributed to the former Colonial Minister, Alessandro Lessona.

<sup>239</sup> On Italo-Croatian boundary negotiations, see Pavelić to Ciano, 28 April 1941, DDI 9, VII, 23; Ciano to Pavelić, 30 April 1941, DDI 9, VII, 34; Casertano to Ciano, 4 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 48; Casertano to Ciano, 5 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 54; Ciano to Casertano, 6 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 63; Ciano to Casertano, 8 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 72; Ciano to Casertano, 30 June 1941, DDI 9, VII, 331; and, Mussolini to Pavelić, 30 June 1941, DDI 9, VII, 332. The border between Croatia and Italian-occupied Montenegro was formalized at the end of October 1941. Pietromarchi to Ciano, 30 October 1941, DDI 9, VII, 699.

<sup>240</sup> Monzali, “La difficile alleanza,” 63–67. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:327–28. Mussolini’s advisors warned of the need for a customs and monetary union in order to keep Croatia within Italy’s economic *spazio vitale*. “Organizzazione politica ed amministrativa del nuovo Stato di Croazia,” 18 April 1941, in Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:366–68. Donato Menichella to Mussolini, 17 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 131.

<sup>241</sup> Ciano diary, 30 June 1941.

<sup>242</sup> Monzali, “La difficile alleanza,” 76.

relationship and held one another in high regard.<sup>243</sup> Casertano admitted that Pavelić lacked popular support after his long absence in exile, and that the resulting insecurity led him too easily to give into the intransigent demands of his ultranationalist collaborators. However, Casertano remained convinced that Pavelić himself was loyal to Mussolini and Fascism, and that he posed the most effective obstacle to German influence in Croatia.<sup>244</sup> Well into 1943, Casertano continued to champion the idea of establishing Croatia as a protectorate within the Fascist Imperial Community, by way of a personal union.<sup>245</sup> Casertano's optimism that Pavelić and other political figures in Croatia remained pro-Italian ensured that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs never considered its alliance with the Ustaše a completely lost cause.<sup>246</sup>

Mussolini's own views towards Croatian affairs remained ambiguous. His main interest in the Ustaša movement through the 1930s involved its potential role as a fifth column to disturb the status quo in Yugoslavia. With the disintegration of the Yugoslavian state, this role was no longer necessary and the Ustaše became expendable, especially if they stood in the way of Mussolini's continued aspirations for permanent Italian expansion in Croatia.<sup>247</sup> Mussolini therefore left all doors open in 1941, which resulted in contradictory policies subject to infighting. Certainly, Mussolini's preoccupation with German interference in southeastern Europe led him to see Pavelić as one of the few obstacles to German domination over Croatia.<sup>248</sup> But, this did not stop Mussolini from delaying the formal recognition of Croatian independence in April,

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<sup>243</sup> Pavelić had initially asked that Paolo Cortese, his contact with the Foreign Ministry during his days in exile, be named ambassador to Croatia. However, Pavelić was so pleased with Casertano that he formally withdrew his request. Pavelić to Ciano, 2 June 1941, DDI 9, VII, 203.

<sup>244</sup> Casertano to Ciano, 6 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 65. Casertano to Ciano, 25 July 1941, DDI 9, VII, 424.

<sup>245</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 60.

<sup>246</sup> Casertano to Ciano, 8 October 1941, DDI 9, VII, 626. By the end of 1941, Ciano believed German influence in Zagreb was beginning to wane, to Italy's advantage. Meeting between Ciano and Pavelić, 15 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 26.

<sup>247</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 96.

<sup>248</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 50.

pressuring Pavelić to give into Italian demands over Dalmatia.<sup>249</sup> By June 1941, Mussolini realized that the Germans had the upper hand in Croatia, economically and politically. He confided to Ciano his doubts that a Savoia prince would ever sit on the throne in Zagreb, despite the dynastic union established on paper the previous month.<sup>250</sup> At this stage Mussolini mainly blamed German intrigue for his problems, but he also began to regret his decision not to annex more territory in Dalmatia, lamenting that “it is not possible to share sovereignty” [*non è possibile una sovranità in mezzadria*].<sup>251</sup>

In August, during a meeting with Bastianini, Mussolini now admitted that his reliance on Pavelić had been a mistake: “I begin to ask myself if I have not bet on the wrong card!” Bastianini considered this an “indication of a new direction [*orientamento*] of the *Duce*.”<sup>252</sup> Days later, Mussolini ordered Italian troops to reoccupy sovereign Croatian territory. The well-connected industrialist, Alberto Pirelli, had the impression that the occupation of the remainder of the Dalmatian coast was not merely a military expedient but was intended to be “forever.”<sup>253</sup> As Gobetti argues, Mussolini had given up on a useful Croatian alliance by summer 1941, at which point he reverted to a “decidedly nineteenth-century imperialist policy, based on territorial conquest rather than political-economic hegemony.” This was a policy which Italian generals were perfectly able to comply with.<sup>254</sup>

As we shall see, Italian military authorities in Yugoslavia had been lobbying for such a policy for some time. But they were not alone. The army found allies within the regime, from Fascist hierarchs and diplomats that were unsatisfied with the Rome Accords. Initially, this included Luca Pietromarchi, who headed the Foreign Ministry’s Croatia Office. And, despite their conflicts in other areas, when it came to Croatian affairs Italian generals frequently saw eye to eye with the Governor of Dalmatia,

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<sup>249</sup> De Ferraris to Ciano, April 1941, DDI 9, VI, 912. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:307–309.

<sup>250</sup> Ciano diary, 10 June 1941.

<sup>251</sup> Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:333.

<sup>252</sup> Ortona diary, 12 August 1941.

<sup>253</sup> Pirelli, *Taccuini*, 314.

<sup>254</sup> Gobetti, “The Royal Army’s Betrayal,” 199.

Giuseppe Bastianini.<sup>255</sup> The diaries of Bastianini's secretary, Egidio Ortona, reveal that functionaries within the Governorate — including those with diplomatic backgrounds — considered the Foreign Ministry incompetent in its handling of negotiations with Pavelić, and thought that Casertano was too closely bound to the Croatian point of view.<sup>256</sup> Bastianini and Ortona felt that the Croats were “more intransigent on the border question” than the Germans; from their perspective, the Ustaše were the most immediate threat to Italian interests in Dalmatia.<sup>257</sup>

Indeed, conflict between Fascist and Ustaša militias had resulted in fatalities when the Italians entered Šibenik in April. Through the remainder of 1941, Bastianini accused Zagreb of supporting anti-Italian resistance in Dalmatia and of halting the flow of foodstuffs to the annexed territories. This led Italian civil authorities in Dalmatia to share the army's point of view, and indeed to cooperate with their military counterparts, when it came to implementing anti-Croatian and anti-Ustaša measures.<sup>258</sup> Alongside Pietromarchi, Bastianini — arguing that Croatia had become a “little Austria, administered by functionaries of the old monarchy, but enfeoffed by Berlin,” and that Pavelić was too weak a leader to hang on to power against the pro-German clique in Zagreb — played a key role convincing Mussolini to authorize the military occupation of Croatian territory in August, not only to secure Dalmatia from the threat posed by the anti-Ustaša rebellion underway in Croatia but also with a view to extending Dalmatia's borders after the war.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Monzali, “La difficile alleanza,” 77.

<sup>256</sup> Ortona diary, 1 and 7 May 1941, and 4 August 1941.

<sup>257</sup> Ortona diary, 27 April 1941.

<sup>258</sup> Suppieri to Mussolini, 19 April 1941, DDI 9, VI, 942. “Studenti di Spalato,” 12 October 1941, NARA T-821/402/0125–26. Bastianini to Pietromarchi, 10 July 1941, DDI 9, VII, 371. The VI Corps also reported that Croatian officials impeded the transport of goods into Dalmatia. “Notiziario n. 67,” 9 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati. Gubernatorial police cooperated with Second Army and the Italian military attaché in Zagreb to force the Croatian government to transfer ostensibly anti-Italian functionaries away from the border with Dalmatia. See, for example, “Guardia di finanza croata Bosic,” 15 November 1941, NARA T-821/402/0406.

<sup>259</sup> Ortona diary, 10 and 12 August 1941. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 77–78.

Although the army was hardly unique in its opposition to the Croatian alliance, it nevertheless faced charges of disloyalty and anti-Fascism based on its aversion to the Ustaša movement and regime. Casertano's frustration with the army largely stemmed from jurisdictional jealousy: he complained that Italian functionaries in Croatia followed two different lines of conduct, "one military and one political."<sup>260</sup> But the most polemic diatribe against Second Army came from Eugenio Coselschi, the Fascist Party's delegate in Zagreb, who deemed the army's anti-Croatian and pro-Serb attitude "not only ambiguous and absurd but even paradoxical." Coselschi attributed the army's anti-Ustaša bias to ignorance of Croatia's history, but also to anti-Fascism among Italian officers, citing similar opposition in military circles to the "anarchic" Italian *squadristi* of the 1920s.<sup>261</sup>

Coselschi's personal background provides the context for his opinions. Despite his invocation of the squadrist past, Coselschi did not join the Fascist Party until 1924 and has been considered a relatively moderate figure within Italian Fascism.<sup>262</sup> Nonetheless, serving as Gabriele D'Annunzio's private secretary in Fiume had bequeathed him a deep-rooted hatred of the Yugoslavian state and the Serbs who dominated its politics.<sup>263</sup> Coselschi became a prominent propagandist during the Fascist period and served as head of the *Comitati d'Azione per l'Universalità di Roma* [CAUR], which emphasized a transnational "universal" brand of Fascism.<sup>264</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that Coselschi would advocate collaboration with the proto-fascist Ustaša party. As Gobetti argues, the Foreign Ministry's reliance on political alliances with ideologically kindred groups in its Yugoslavian policy largely fit into this vision, whereas the army — but ultimately also Mussolini — adopted a more traditional imperialist

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<sup>260</sup> "Situazione in Croazia," 1 August 1941, DSCS, 4/II:208–212; DDI 9, VII, 443.

<sup>261</sup> Coselschi to Serena (Secretary of the Fascist Party), 21 August 1941, NARA T-821/395/0080–83. Prior to taking his post in Zagreb, Coselschi on Second Army's books as a reserve Lt. Col. attached to the Civil Affairs office. "Elenco nominativo degli ufficiali in servizio presso questo comando alla data del 1 luglio 1941," 1 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>262</sup> Aristotle Kallis, *The Third Rome, 1922–1943: The Making of the Fascist Capital* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 229.

<sup>263</sup> Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 68. Cuzzi, "La Slovenia italiana," 224.

<sup>264</sup> *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, s.v. "Coselschi, Eugenio."

policy based on territorial conquest.<sup>265</sup> But, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Coselschi belonged to a relatively marginal strand of Italian Fascism — a strand whose legitimacy and importance was renewed through the ideological transition towards the transnational concept of an Imperial Community, but whose proponents nonetheless remained on the fringes of the regime.<sup>266</sup> Even Casertano could not stand Coselschi and, together with Ambrosio, he petitioned for Coselschi's replacement at the end of 1941.<sup>267</sup>

Coselschi's allegations of anti-Fascism on the army's part were largely hyperbole, but it remains necessary to ascertain the motives behind Second Army's policy towards its Croatian allies. There may well have been an anti-Croatian predisposition among Italian officers, particularly among those who fought in the Great War against Austria-Hungary. For decades after Italian unification, public opinion in Italy tended to equate Croats with the Austrian Empire that had stood in the way of Italian unity.<sup>268</sup> During the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference that followed, Italian military propaganda had portrayed Croats as particularly beastly enemies whose territorial aspirations, like Austria's, conflicted directly with Italy's.<sup>269</sup> Some of the Croatian

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<sup>265</sup> Gobetti, "The Royal Army's Betrayal," 202–203.

<sup>266</sup> Mussolini had not favoured the notion of universal fascism in the 1920s, focusing instead on nationalist revolution and the subordination of the Fascist Party to his dictatorial state apparatus. Under Bastianini, the *Fasci Italiani all'Estero* sought to spread fascist ideology abroad — primarily within Italian diaspora communities — but it was incorporated into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1928. Luca De Caprariis, "Fascism for Export? The Rise and Eclipse of the Fasci Italiani all'Estero," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 2 (2000): 151–83. The push to establish a genuine Fascist International in the 1930s came mainly from a new generation of Italian Fascist intellectuals that had grown frustrated with the stagnation of Mussolini's regime. Their ideas were vague and their influence remained limited through the 1930s. Michael Arthur Ledeen, *Universal Fascism: The Theory and Practice of the Fascist International, 1928–1936* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1972). The CAUR — whose name reflected the growing prominence of *romanità* among Fascist myths — gained official support. The *comitati* were established in 1933 but never met after 1935 and were disbanded in 1939, as a result of foreign policy changes emanating from the creation of the Rome-Berlin Axis. Universalist *romanità* remained prominent within Fascist rhetoric thereafter, but "more as a defensive counterpoise to National Socialism." Kallis, *Third Rome*, 229–35. Also on the CAUR, see Marco Cuzzi, *L'internazionale delle camicie nere: I CAUR, Comitati d'azione per l'universalità di Roma, 1933–1939* (Milan: Mursia, 2005).

<sup>267</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 139.

<sup>268</sup> The apparent lack of Croat resistance to Austrian rule led Italian nationalists to regard Croats as lacking "political awareness" and unworthy of independence. Carlo Ghisalberti, "L'Italia e la Serbia nella prima guerra mondiale," *Clio* 46, no. 1 (2010): 32, 35–36.

<sup>269</sup> See "Il soldato italiano al croato!," *La Tradotta: Giornale della Terza Armata*, 15 April 1919, 1, and "Il Croato," *La Tradotta: Giornale della Terza Armata*, 1 July 1919, 2.



generals of 1941 had indeed served in the Habsburg Royal-Imperial Army. Their pro-German leanings now rekindled traditional enmity held by Italian officers and elites towards their old enemies. Ambrosio considered the Croatian commander-in-chief, Slavko Kvaternik, to be “100% Austrian,” exhibiting the political “mentality of the Habsburg army of 1914.”<sup>270</sup> As late as 1943, Second Army’s intelligence officers justified their hostility towards the Pavelić regime in precisely such terms, pointing out — like Bastianini — that Croatia had taken the place of the Austrian empire in the Adriatic: “Our interests for this sea are clearly in conflict and we cannot help revive and worse still rebuild, in a Great Croatia, the old *Austria*.”<sup>271</sup>

In this respect, an anti-Croatian bias on the Italian side had similarities to the Serbophobic tendencies of many German officers — especially those of Austrian origin, drawing upon their collective memory of the First World War — that contributed to their brutal treatment of Serbs and to their commitment to support the Ustaša regime. In terms of the mentality of *Wehrmacht* commanders serving in the Balkans, Ben Shepherd argues, there was a great deal of continuity between 1914 and 1941.<sup>272</sup> From the Italian perspective, too, the Balkan campaign can be understood as the culmination of a thirty years’ war. But for Italian generals, it was not the Serbs who represented the old enemy or who inhabited the unredeemed lands that Italy’s “mutilated victory” had failed to acquire. Rather, the Independent State of Croatia assumed the mantle of Habsburg Italophobia and obstructionism in the Adriatic.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> “Politica croata nei territori della 2<sup>a</sup> e 3<sup>a</sup> zona,” 23 January 1942, DSCS, 6/II:36–41. The pro-German leanings of the Croatian senior officer corps also caused concern among Casertano and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Casertano to Ciano, 25 July 1941, DDI 9, VII, 424. Casertano to Ciano, 5 September 1941, DDI 9, VII, 538. Casertano to Ciano, 6 February 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 243.

<sup>271</sup> “Coloquio tra le Eccellenza Robotti e Petrucci avvenuto a Ronchi,” 11 August 1943, NARA T-821/31/0268–71. Emphasis in original.

<sup>272</sup> Shepherd has argued that the disproportionately high number of Austrian officers commanding *Wehrmacht* divisions in Yugoslavia contributed to the radicalization of German behaviour in occupied territory. These officers tended to be more brutal towards Serbs, due in large part to a lingering enmity towards Serbs based on their experience or collective memory of the First World War. Shepherd thus views the conflict in the Balkans as part of a thirty years’ war. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 255–56.

<sup>273</sup> The hostility of Italian nationalists towards Austria-Hungary prior to the First World War was due to irredentism as well as competing interests in the Balkans. Alexander J. De Grand, “The Italian Nationalist Association in the Period of Italian Neutrality, August 1914–May 1915,” *Journal of Modern History* 43, no. 3 (September 1971): 395–99. On the mutual hatred of the Italian and Austrian military leaderships and

The legacy of the First World War was vital both to the army's self image and to Fascist mythology.<sup>274</sup> Italian and Croatian memory of that conflict coexisted uneasily in former Yugoslavia. For example, Italian units held ceremonies and erected monuments on Croatian territory for their fallen compatriots from the Great War. With local Croatian dignitaries present, the Sassari Division reinterred twenty-two Italian prisoners of war that had died in Habsburg custody while working on the Sušak–Ogulin–Split railroad. Speeches to commemorate the dead awkwardly sidestepped the fact that Italians and Croats had fought against one another in that war. The commander of the Sassari's CC.NN. Legion feebly affirmed that the newly entombed soldiers could now be treated with honour as "friends of a free Croatia." But, the presiding chaplain claimed that the prisoners, through their forced labour on the railroad, had brought "civilization and progress" to the region, and represented the ideal Fascist worker-soldier.<sup>275</sup> It is not clear what the Croats present at the ceremony made of these words, which seemed to belittle their own level of civilization, or whether they were translated into Serbo-Croatian at all. For their part, Croatian authorities irked the Italians by awarding benefits to decorated veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army and by celebrating historic Habsburg victories in which Croats had participated, including the 1866 naval battle of Lissa [Vis], where an Austrian fleet decisively defeated a much larger Italian one.<sup>276</sup> The legacy of past conflict

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middle classes during the Great War, see Mark Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front, 1915–1919* (New York: Basic, 2008), 79–80. On the eve of the First World War, German observers were struck by the degree of anti-Austrian sentiment within the Italian army. Milan N. Vego, *Austro-Hungarian Naval Policy: 1904–14* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 120. Although initially prepared to join the war as part of the Triple Alliance, once the Italian government announced its neutrality in 1914 the Italian general staff immediately began lobbying to side with the Entente in order to seize the Trentino and Trieste from Austria-Hungary. John Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 58–64. Claiming that Austrian authorities maltreated Italian prisoners and populations, wartime Italian propaganda called for violent revenge. See, for example, the following pieces in *La Tradotta: Giornale della Terza Armata*: "La fabbrica dei manifestini," 21 March 1918, 2; "I prigionieri italiani in Austria," 21 April 1918, 1; "Cortesia," 16 May 1918, 2; and, "La pena del taglione," 3 November 1918, 4.

<sup>274</sup> Minniti, "Gli ufficiali di carriera," 90.

<sup>275</sup> "Inaugurazione monumento," 29 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>276</sup> "Notiziario n. 186," 6 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati. "Marina da guerra croata," 5 June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:112–15.

probably was harmless on its own; but, combined with geopolitical calculations and local circumstances, it served to heighten antipathy between Italian military authorities and Croatian functionaries.

The most immediate motivations for the army's anti-Croatian attitude were administrative, military, political, and moral in nature. As proved the case in annexed Dalmatia and Slovenia, Italian military leaders in Croatia favoured a straightforward military administration that would not limit their freedom of action.<sup>277</sup> They would rather not share power with Croatian authorities. Militarily and politically, it soon became apparent to the generals of Second Army that the Pavelić regime had failed miserably as a puppet government. If the purpose of establishing Croatia as a satellite was to guarantee security with little Italian expense and to extend Italian political and economic influence in the region, the Ustaša regime fulfilled none of these roles. Instead, Italian generals believed that it actively threatened Italian *spazio vitale* and functioned as a tool of German influence. These concerns were accompanied by genuine moral outrage towards the brutal persecution of Orthodox Serbs by the Ustaša. The war diaries of the Sassari Division reveal how attitudes towards the Ustaša regime and, to an extent, Croats in general steadily worsened through 1941, due to this combination of motives.

During the first half of May 1941, the Sassari Division was deployed to western Bosnia and southern Lika, with garrisons spread out over 120 kilometres between Šibenik and Drvar, and 60 kilometres between Knin and Gračac. The division's commander, Furio Monticelli, immediately concluded that the region was made up mostly of Serbs, "currently favourable to Italy." Monticelli believed that local Serbs feared annexation by the new Croatian state and preferred incorporation into Italy, for political and economic reasons.<sup>278</sup> However, the 19 May Rome Accords recognized Croatian sovereignty over almost all the territory occupied by the Sassari Division. Legally, Italian forces were now

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<sup>277</sup> This preference was shared by their German counterparts. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 63.

<sup>278</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 4, 11, and 12 May 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941. Monticelli estimated that the population of Knin comprised 23,800 Orthodox Serbs and only 3,000 Catholic Croats. The industrial city of Drvar, north of Knin, was also thought to be made up largely of Orthodox Serbs. "Notiziario giornaliero," 12 May 1941, and "Relazione sulla situazione di Drvar," 12 May 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941, allegati.

considered “troops stationed on the territory of the friendly and allied Independent State of Croatia,” without policing powers. Pavelić and Kvaternik requested their withdrawal as soon as possible; but, Ambrosio ensured that the redeployment of Second Army took place gradually, and Monticelli delayed ceding military and civil powers to the Croats.<sup>279</sup> In the meantime, Monticelli and his immediate superior, VI Corps commander Renzo Dalmazzo, urged their officers “not to play politics” or make “futile” interventions in “conflicts and massacres” between Croats and Serbs.<sup>280</sup>

Very quickly, Italian commanders concluded that maintaining impartiality in internal Croatian affairs without jeopardizing Italian prestige as “the victorious army” and self-proclaimed “defenders of order” was impossible.<sup>281</sup> The Sassari Division witnessed first-hand the escalation of ethnic cleansing measures against Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia. Ustaša ideology cast Serbs as the inferior, eastern, or Balkan “other,” and blamed them for the “subjugation” of Croats in the old Yugoslavia. The Ustaše envisioned an independent Croatia as an ethnically homogenous nation-state. The country’s 2.2 million Orthodox Serbs, amounting to one-third of the new state’s population, were to be eliminated through violent persecution or forced assimilation. Ustaša mass violence against Serbs thus had ideological roots and, to an extent, was centrally directed, but it was not systematic. Levels of violence varied, according to local demographics, the responses of the victims themselves, the proximity of Italian and German personnel, the level of Partisan or Četnik resistance, and the extent of popular participation in the expropriation and expulsion of Serbs. During spring and summer 1941, Ustaša violence accelerated from individual murders to mass arrests and occasional massacres before a concentration camp system was established. During this period, some

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<sup>279</sup> See Mussolini to Ambrosio, 20 May 1941; “Accordi presi con le autorità croate circa l’occupazione del territorio del nuovo stato,” 21 May 1941; and, “Passaggio di competenza dall’Autorità italiana alla Autorità croata,” 21 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, April–May 1941, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 24 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May 1941.

<sup>280</sup> “Direttive,” 20 May 1941, and “Direttive ai commandanti per l’attuale periodo di transizione,” 23 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), April–May 1941, allegati.

<sup>281</sup> “Direttive,” 20 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), April–May 1941, allegati.

100,000 Serbs were killed and another 200,000 expelled to German-occupied Serbia.<sup>282</sup> Ustaša mass violence prompted an anti-Croatian response among Italian officers, for humanitarian but also political-military reasons.

Coselschi and Casertano both complained that Second Army's misplaced humanitarianism, or "pietism," towards persecuted Serbs and Jews was the main obstacle to cordial relations between Italy and Croatia.<sup>283</sup> There is no doubt that many Italian officers reacted strongly against the inhuman treatment of Serbs by the Ustaše. Even before the Treaty of Rome, Dalmazzo commented that among his men "the word 'ustaša' is becoming synonymous with devil." The general diplomatically urged his officers to distinguish between the "true" or legitimate Ustaša military and political authorities — who should be considered allies — and the "thugs" that sought profit from plunder and violence.<sup>284</sup> However, as Italian and Croatian personnel increasingly came into contact with one another, relations in the field deteriorated. This was partly in response to the "haughtiness and reservedness" with which Italian soldiers were met by Croats who resented their presence in now sovereign territory, and partly because of the cruel violence meted out by the Ustaše before Italian eyes. The chief of staff of the Sassari Division, Colonel Gazzino Gazzini, later complained that "the Croats did not even have the political sensitivity and respect to wait for the departure of our troops, before giving free vent to their beastly instinct for revenge and blood."<sup>285</sup>

Southeastern Lika, where the Sassari Division was stationed, became a hot-spot of Ustaša terror in June. Militia raided Serb villages, searching for weapons, arresting able-bodied men, and looting or killing along the way. The violence culminated at the end of the month with the deportation or "cleansing" of entire Serb communities from parts of

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<sup>282</sup> Alexander Korb, "Understanding Ustaša Violence," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12 (2010): 1–18. This period is also thoroughly examined by Goldstein, *1941*. See also Jonathan Steinberg, "Types of Genocide? Croats, Serbs and Jews, 1941–5," in *Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*, ed. David Cesarini (London: Routledge, 1994), 175–93.

<sup>283</sup> "Situazione in Croazia," 1 August 1941, DSCS, 4/II:208–212; DDI 9, VII, 443. Coselschi to Serena, 21 August 1941, NARA T-821/395/0080–83.

<sup>284</sup> "Direttive," 15 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), April–May 1941, allegati.

<sup>285</sup> "Premessa al Diario storico militare, bimestre: giugno–luglio," AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June–July 1941.

Lika.<sup>286</sup> The officers and men of the Sassari Division bore witness to these measures, recovering bodies from rivers and photographing the evidence, and they received daily pleas for help from persecuted Serbs. Gazzini was particularly struck by the illegal and arbitrary manner with which the Ustaše plundered Serb property — “even the beds” — and by their increasing tendency to target women and children in mass slayings.

Numerous children were slaughtered because they were the offspring of Serbs. Terrible, undocumented, rumours ran among our troops: that the children were asked by their executioners to make the sign of the cross; those children who made the sign of the cross in the Orthodox fashion had their throats slit.<sup>287</sup>

As guests on allied territory, all the Italians could do legally was to appeal to Croatian authorities. But local Ustaša leaders and functionaries proved unrepentant or claimed to be acting under orders from Zagreb. Through these exchanges, the officers of the Sassari Division came to grasp the extent of the ethnic cleansing envisioned by the Ustaša, although Monticelli found it hard to believe that the total removal of the Orthodox population was seriously being contemplated, given the region’s dependence on Serb peasants for agricultural production.<sup>288</sup>

Ultimately, individual officers and soldiers offered limited aid to fleeing Serbs who were fortunate enough to reach them. The command of the Sassari Division supported, tolerated, and participated in this behaviour, even if it undermined Croatian sovereignty. Gazzini claimed that, given “the traditional goodness and chivalrous spirit of our soldiers, they could not remain indifferent for long to the pleas for help from the Serb population.” Officers lodged themselves in Serb homes, rendering those dwellings inviolable; hundreds of Serbs found refuge behind barbed wire at Italian barracks; soldiers shared their rations with Serb refugees and escorted them to Dalmatia. Several

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<sup>286</sup> Goldstein, *1941*, 151–56.

<sup>287</sup> “Premessa al Diario storico militare, bimestre: giugno–luglio,” AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941. Monticelli reported the arrest, looting, and expulsion of Serbs from Knin, as well as the arming of Croats that precipitated a massacre in Gračac. “Notiziario giornaliero,” 22 and 25 June 1941, and “Situazione politica di Gracac,” 7 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>288</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 9 and 13 June and 27 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

standoffs between Italian troops and Ustaša militia threatened to become violent.<sup>289</sup> Confronted with protests from Ustaša authorities, Monticelli defended the “humane” behaviour of his troops and promised that Italian interference would cease as soon as the Ustaša “regime of terror” came to an end.<sup>290</sup> Monticelli warned Dalmazzo that he could not guarantee that his men would continue to avoid violent intervention. His informal letter to Dalmazzo reflected genuine humanitarian concern. Monticelli complained that the arbitrary targeting of Serbs went “against any sense of humanity and justice,” and that he felt a moral duty to intervene: “Remaining inactive spectators, one has the feeling of becoming complicit in this violence and brutality that will certainly be condemned by history.” A by-product of this humanitarianism was the utter contempt with which the officers of the Sassari Division came to hold the Ustaše and Croats in general. According to Monticelli, his men now shared

a feeling of contempt and repugnance for this rabble that is neither capable of controlling itself nor of exercising control and that is not equal to the task of governing like a civilized people. Any feeling of sympathy for the Croatian nation ceased when forced to witness these excesses.<sup>291</sup>

Likewise, Gazzini concluded “that the political maturity of the citizens of the free state of Croatia was still very much deficient and backward.”<sup>292</sup>

Undeniably, moral concerns played a prominent role informing the Sassari Division’s blatantly pro-Serb and anti-Croatian attitude during spring and summer 1941. But, humanitarianism was not the only, nor necessarily the strongest, factor behind the

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<sup>289</sup> “Premessa al Diario storico militare, bimestre: giugno–luglio,” AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941. The active protection of Serbs appears to have been most prevalent towards the end of July, when Ustaša violence peaked corroborated in other official reports. The techniques of lodging officers in Serb dwellings and sheltering Serbs in barracks are corroborated in other official documents. See, for example, “Notiziario giornaliero,” 25 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati; and, Leonardi memorandum, 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>290</sup> “Situazione politica in Tenin,” 18 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>291</sup> “Situazione politica in Tenin,” 16 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati. Monticelli’s language found echoes in VI Corps reports on troop morale. “Relazione mensile del servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 maggio al 15 giugno 1941,” 28 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati.

<sup>292</sup> “Premessa al Diario storico militare, bimestre: giugno–luglio,” AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941.

army's decision making. Monticelli's moral qualms were inseparable from his own obsession with Italian military and political prestige. The legal conditions established by the Rome Accords had made his troops appear impotent in the face of brash Ustaša activity. When Monticelli appealed for calm in Knin, the seat of his command, and promised that "no reprisals could be tolerated as long as Italian troops remained in the area," many Serbs nonetheless opted to head for the hills, demonstrating a lack of faith in Italian strength and status.<sup>293</sup> Like Monticelli, the commander of the Bergamo Division also warned that standing idly by in the midst of Ustaša atrocities threatened "the authority and prestige of our army."<sup>294</sup>

Military prestige was connected closely to the ability to impose order and normalcy; Italian commands had less of a problem with the persecution of Serbs, per se, than with the chaotic nature of Ustaša methods. Initially, Monticelli and his staff hoped merely to force Croatian authorities to adopt "a legal form of action against the Serbs."<sup>295</sup> Moreover, humanitarian concern did not necessarily result in humanitarian action. With reports of Ustaša excesses mounting throughout VI Corps's zone of occupation at the end of June, Dalmazzo's response was to withdraw garrisons of the Bergamo and Marche Divisions in order to better concentrate his forces, but also "to prevent our units from being witnesses to the conflicts and reprisals between Serbs and Croats."<sup>296</sup> This order, which anticipated the scheduled withdrawal of troops from sovereign Croatian territory, effectively abandoned persecuted local populations to avoid further conflicts between Italian troops and Ustaša militia. The Sassari Division pulled back to Dalmatia in mid-July, but it maintained a garrison at the important railroad hub of Knin.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 20–22 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941.

<sup>294</sup> "Notiziario n. 57," 28 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati.

<sup>295</sup> Introduction to Sassari Division Command war diary, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August–September 1941. See also "Situazione politica in Tenin," 18 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>296</sup> "Dislocazione truppe," 27 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati.

<sup>297</sup> "Alleggerimento delle nostre forze in Croazia," 12 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.



With their troops garrisoning Croatian and Dalmatian territory, Monticelli and Dalmazzo also came to share Bastianini's political concerns regarding the irredentist claims of the Ustaše over Dalmatia. While a border commission worked to clarify the precise boundary between Croatia and Dalmatia, Italian and Croatian authorities — and occasionally military patrols — bickered over the location of border posts.<sup>298</sup> Meanwhile, Italian military intelligence accused Zagreb of inciting local Croats to spread irredentist propaganda and provoke “incidents” in Dalmatia.<sup>299</sup> In July, the VI Corps reported the existence of an underground Ustaša movement in Split, numbering 2,000 members, that was preparing an insurrection against Italian authorities.<sup>300</sup> The *Carabinieri* arrested Dalmatian Croats suspected of sharing intelligence with relatives in Zagreb, forwarding them to Second Army tribunals.<sup>301</sup> The Sassari Division blamed Ustaša propaganda, alongside the food shortages that were likewise attributed to Croatian intrigue, for damaging its relations with the native Croatian population of Dalmatia.<sup>302</sup> The Cacciatori delle Alpi Division — which transferred from Montenegro to Dalmatia in September 1941 and had not, therefore, encountered the worst of the Ustaša massacres firsthand — quickly adopted a similar impression, noting that former Ustaše continued to harbour and spread anti-Italian irredentist sentiment.<sup>303</sup> By this point, staff officers of VI Corps were

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<sup>298</sup> “Linea di vigilanza militare provvisoria,” 25 and 26 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati. “Ricognizione e rastrellamento della zona di Nos Kalik,” 23 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>299</sup> “Croazia,” 7 May 1941, DSCS, 4/II:12. “Notiziario giornaliero,” 25 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>300</sup> “Notiziario n. 69,” 11 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati. For a similar case, see “Notiziario n. 85,” 27 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>301</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>302</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 19, 21, and 27 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>303</sup> “Relazione informativa,” 24 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September 1941, allegati.

convinced that irredentism, above all else, had placed the Independent State of Croatia firmly in the German camp.<sup>304</sup>

Mutual political suspicion extended to sovereign Croatian territory as well, resulting in petty disputes that demonstrated the touchiness of Italian commands to any threats to their prestige and Italy's imperial grasp over the region. They complained that, while Croatian government publications and speeches exalted the role of the Ustaše and Germans, they gave no thought "to Italy and the Italians that did so much for the independence of the new state."<sup>305</sup> The Sassari command in Knin noted that ordinary Croats and local Ustaša authorities disparaged Italy and the Italian army, while implementing prohibitions against such things as Italian playing cards.<sup>306</sup> Monticelli complained when Croatian authorities unexpectedly shut off the water supply to the barracks of an Italian artillery regiment, and he was troubled by rumours that next time they intended to poison the water.<sup>307</sup> Trivial and spiteful matters of this sort repeatedly arose between Italian and Croatian officials, in the very midst of Ustaša massacres and Serb revolt. More so than other Italian functionaries, military personnel worked in close proximity to local Croatian authorities, with whom they had a vaguely defined legal relationship. This lower-level squabbling, which further contributed to the army's increasingly intransigent opposition to the Croatian alliance, was the result.

By July 1941, Monticelli and Dalmazzo had lost patience with the Ustaša regime. Doubting that Pavelić could draw upon popular support even among Croats, they regretted that Maček had not been given the reins in Zagreb.<sup>308</sup> Their various complaints and criticisms filtered up to the command of Second Army. Ambrosio himself became

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<sup>304</sup> "Notiziario n. 56," 27 June 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati.

<sup>305</sup> "Croazia – Propaganda paveliciana," 17 May 1941, DSCS, 4/II:24. "Notiziario giornaliero," 12 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>306</sup> "Notiziario giornaliero," 3 June and 22 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>307</sup> "Notiziario giornaliero," 27 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>308</sup> "Notiziario n. 60," 1 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati. "Notiziario giornaliero," 27 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

vociferously anti-Croatian. Even before the outbreak of revolt at the end of the month, Ambrosio wrote Rome that its alliance with the Croats was effectively dead. He laid the blame entirely at the feet of the Ustaša. Although he considered Pavelić a true friend and ally, Ambrosio argued that the rest of the Croatian political and military leadership had adopted a “cold and calculated distrust” of Italy that, along with their Habsburg heritage, had prompted them to gravitate towards Germany. Ambrosio saw the Croatian government’s favourable relationship with Germany — in terms of military training and provisioning and economic deals — as being opposed to the spirit of the Rome Accords. Moreover, given Italy’s annexation of Dalmatia, Ambrosio argued that Croatian hostility would be permanent. He hinted that the Italians would do well to seek out new allies among the Serbs and Jews that looked to Italy for protection.<sup>309</sup>

The massive Serb uprising against the Ustaše in late July was the final blow to Italo-Croatian relations. Having already cast doubt on the regime’s political usefulness, Italian military authorities now blamed Zagreb’s policies for sparking revolt that threatened to destabilize the entire region and necessitate the intervention of tens of thousands of Italian troops. The effort to obtain an occupation on the cheap by parcelling out responsibility to Croatian authorities and security forces had failed. Already at the end of May, Monticelli had noted that groups of armed Serbs were banding together to defend their communities from the Ustaše, even before the withdrawal of Italian troops.<sup>310</sup> This trend accelerated through June, as Zagreb’s policies increasingly targeted Serbs in Lika. Following the first great deportation of Serbs from the Independent State of Croatia at the end of the month, many Serb villagers fled to the forests of Lika. Ustaša militia responded with a “cleansing operation” in early July that targeted women and children in mass executions. These developments, along with growing knowledge of the Ustaša concentration camp system, rendered life impossible for Serbs. On 27 July, a general uprising broke out in Lika and Bosanska Krajina that rapidly spread through

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<sup>309</sup> “Situazione politica in Croazia,” 23 July 1941, DSCS, 4/II:180–89.

<sup>310</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 29 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May 1941.

much of the Independent State of Croatia.<sup>311</sup> Italian field commands immediately, and correctly, blamed the revolt on unbridled Ustaša violence.<sup>312</sup>

Second Army received little guidance from Rome on how to respond to the revolt. The *Comando Supremo* was preoccupied with the new situation created by Operation *Barbarossa* and by an anti-Italian uprising in Montenegro. Clearly caught off guard, a confused Cavallero noted in his diary that “in Croatia things are developing in a somewhat curious fashion.”<sup>313</sup> The formation of policy was left to the military authorities on the spot. Ambrosio was content to allow Croatian military prestige to suffer. He limited his troops to protecting key railroads and ordered his unit commanders not to adhere to requests from local Croatian authorities to participate in police operations.<sup>314</sup> Dalmazzo, citing the persistence of counterproductive Ustaša massacres even in the face of revolt, suggested occupying everything up to the Italo-German demarcation line, “followed immediately by the complete transfer of civil and military powers into our hands without compromise.”<sup>315</sup> This would require many more troops, so Ambrosio presented both options to the SMRE and *Comando Supremo* for consideration: either leave the Croats to fend for themselves or undertake a massive occupation of Croatia under total control of the Italian military.<sup>316</sup> Full backing for the Croatian ally was not one of Ambrosio’s options. Cavallero, who had been so quick to order Pirzio Biroli to crush resistance in Montenegro, remained silent over the situation in Croatia.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Goldstein, *1941*, 151–59.

<sup>312</sup> “Notizie sui ribelli nella zona di Tenin,” 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati. Dalmazzo to Ambrosio, 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>313</sup> Cavallero diary, 3 August 1941.

<sup>314</sup> See Ambrosio to Dalmazzo, 30 July 1941, and “Colonello Gentilini telefona ore 12.30 che Comando 2<sup>a</sup> Armata esplica circa nota azione,” 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>315</sup> Dalmazzo to Ambrosio, 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>316</sup> “Provvedimenti per fronteggiare attuale situazione in Croazia,” 4 August 1941, DSCS, 4/II:148–49.

<sup>317</sup> For Cavallero’s response to the Montenegrin uprising, see Cavallero diary, 14, 16, and 24 July 1941.

At the lower level, confusion reigned. With Serb rebels advancing on Knin, Croatian civil and military authorities fled the city on 29 July. The Sassari Division's 151st Infantry Regiment remained in Knin, and Monticelli assumed civil and military powers there.<sup>318</sup> Although theoretically in contravention of the Rome Accords, this action received the blessing of Ambrosio, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Bastianini, who suggested that the Italian army assume control throughout the Dalmatian hinterland.<sup>319</sup> Italian officers in Knin feared that counterproductive Ustaša reprisals would undermine their defence of the city. Monticelli ordered that anyone not belonging to the regular Croatian army caught in possession of firearms or anyone guilty of committing violence against persons or property would be summarily shot.<sup>320</sup> This decree was aimed more at local Ustaše than Serb rebels. When a patrol of the Sassari Division mistakenly came under fire from two Croatian soldiers and an armed civilian, the Italians consigned the soldiers to the nearest Croatian military command but they shot the civilian as a *franc tireur*. In other cases, officers of the division vented their frustration from the previous months by arresting local Ustaše who had "offended" them.<sup>321</sup> Not until 9 August did the *Comando Supremo* finally order Monticelli to restore civil powers in Knin to Croatian authorities.<sup>322</sup>

Relations between Italian and Croatian military authorities were not uniformly bad. Italian officers did not consider the regular Croatian army [the *Domobranstvo*] fully complicit in Ustaša massacres.<sup>323</sup> The command of the Sassari Division got along reasonably well with the commander of troops in Gospić, General Mihajlo Lukić, who

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<sup>318</sup> "Relazione sulle operazioni contro i ribelli comunisti dal 7 al 25 settembre 1941," 31 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August-September 1941, allegati.

<sup>319</sup> Ambrosio to Dalmazzo, 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati. Pietromarchi to Ciano, 2 August 1941, DDI 9, VII, 448. Ortona diary, 30 July 1941.

<sup>320</sup> "Avvenimenti verificatisi il giorno 29 luglio," 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June-July 1941, allegati. Monticelli decree, 1 August 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 568, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), August-September 1941, allegati.

<sup>321</sup> Dalmazzo to Ambrosio, 7 August 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati.

<sup>322</sup> "Cessione poteri civili Tenin alle autorità croate," 8 August 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati.

<sup>323</sup> "Notiziario n. 105," 16 August 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati.

readily adhered to Italian requests and suggestions on the conduct of anti-partisan operations.<sup>324</sup> The division also had few qualms over participating alongside Ustaša militia in operations aimed against Communist Partisans.<sup>325</sup> But, on the whole, Monticelli was unimpressed by the Croatian military response to the revolt:

The material and moral capacity of the regular Croatian units is below minimum. Units sent against rebels turn to dust by their own accord at the smallest sign of enemy reaction; units tasked with holding a position abandon it for various reasons. [...] The capacity of the regular and irregular Croatian forces does not provide any assurance for the maintenance of order in the area of the Independent State of Croatia where our troops are located.<sup>326</sup>

Gazzini described the Ustaša militia and regular army as “supremely cowardly.”<sup>327</sup> The immediate aftermath of the general uprising thus added an additional motive for Italian field commanders to repudiate the alliance with the Croats: military incompetence. According to Italian reports, the Croatian army could not even draw upon additional recruits because so few Croats answered the call to service.<sup>328</sup>

Disgusted by Ustaša violence, offended by Ustaša behaviour, and convinced that the Croatian government and military was only dead weight, Monticelli favoured the total reoccupation of Lika and western Bosnia by Italian troops.

One has the definite feeling that so long as these areas inhabited in absolute majority by Orthodox populations are subjected to the rule of a Croatian minority that chooses to assert itself with well-known methods, the situation cannot return quiet. [...] Likewise one is certain that now and before new factors come into play, the situation would immediately return to normal after the effective occupation of the region by Italian troops with the total exclusion of the presence of Croatian civil authorities and forces.

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<sup>324</sup> For example, the Sassari Division maintained close communication with General Mihajlo Lukić, the Croatian commander of troops in Gospić who proved willing to adhere to Italian requests and suggestions relating to anti-partisan operations. See “Notiziario giornaliero,” 11 and 19 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, August–September 1941, allegati.

<sup>325</sup> See, for example, operations outside Sinj, which involved the collaboration of CC.NN. units with Croatian regulars and Ustaša militia against a band of “enthusiastic communists” from the coast. “Notiziario n. 105,” 16 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati.

<sup>326</sup> “Avvenimenti verificatisi il giorno 29 luglio,” 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>327</sup> “Premessa al Diario storico militare, bimestre: giugno–luglio,” AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941.

<sup>328</sup> “Notiziario n. 87,” 29 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

Chief among the new factors that Monticelli referred to was the rise of communism. He feared that well-organized Communist groups — unleashed in the aftermath of *Barbarossa* — could take advantage of the anarchic situation to attract Serb rebels into their ranks. An immediate Italian occupation would prevent the anti-Ustaša revolt from transforming into something more dangerous to Italian interests: a multi-ethnic rebellion coordinated by international communism spreading across the border into Dalmatia.<sup>329</sup> While correctly seeing the revolt in its early stages as fundamentally anti-Ustaša in nature, the command of the Sassari Division conceitedly assumed that “the recognition of our age-old political maturity” would enable the Italian army quickly and bloodlessly to pacify the region and maintain calm among its Croat, Serb, and Muslim populations. Monticelli and Gazzini were swayed in this belief by the relative quiet that had greeted their initial occupation of the zone in April and May 1941.<sup>330</sup> They did not consider that such a response was to be expected following the rapid and shocking collapse of the Yugoslavian armed forces and state apparatus.

Monticelli’s arguments passed up the chain of command and were reflected in Rome’s official reasoning behind extending Italian authority into Croatia. The external threat to Italian Dalmatia and instability in Croatia compromised Italy’s general conduct of the war. Moreover, as we have seen, by this time Mussolini himself had come to regard the Rome Accords as temporary, envisioning an enlarged Dalmatia at Croatia’s expense after the war.<sup>331</sup> On 16 August, Mussolini asked Pavelić to consent to the reoccupation of the Dalmatian hinterland [Zone II] by Second Army. Pavelić initially refused and tried to negotiate better terms, but German pressure and Croatian military defeats forced him to give way. Second Army assumed military powers in Zone II on 1 September, followed by full civil powers on 7 September. An Ambrosio decree promised a return to order and announced the equal treatment of all ethnicities and religions. Croatian civil functionaries and regular army units remained in the area under Italian

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<sup>329</sup> “Notizie sui ribelli nella zona di Tenin,” 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>330</sup> “Premessa al Diario storico militare, bimestre: giugno–luglio,” AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941.

<sup>331</sup> Monzali, “La difficile alleanza,” 77–79.

supervision and control. The Ustaše were expelled altogether.<sup>332</sup> Humiliated and jobless, many of these men transferred to eastern Bosnia, where they committed new atrocities.<sup>333</sup>

Although in some places the Ustaše had accelerated their massacres before the arrival of Italian troops, Italian military intelligence claimed that the reoccupation of the demilitarized zone was a resounding success in political terms. Reports indicated that there was support for permanent Italian expansion in Yugoslavia. One particularly optimistic officer claimed that the masses of Zagreb hoped that the Italian army would occupy all of Croatia. At the very least, the army was convinced that its advance had bolstered its own prestige among the local populations.<sup>334</sup> In fact, the peace established by Second Army was fragile. Italian troops were spread thinly, especially outside the major urban centres. Locals doubted their ability to keep the Ustaše in check. Italian commanders admitted that they had no way to identify Ustaša perpetrators, who either hid in civilian clothing or joined the regular Croatian army so they could remain in Italian-held territory. Serbs were disillusioned that Italy continued officially to support the Ustaša regime.<sup>335</sup> Nonetheless, Monticelli and Dalmazzo both claimed that their troops had the unanimous support of the occupied populations, if not the Croatian political authorities, and Ambrosio declared Second Army's mission a near total success in terms of providing security to the region.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 188. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 77–78. Mussolini to Casertano, 14 August 1941, DDI 9, VII, 479. Casertano to Ciano, 16 August 1941, DDI 9, VII, 486. Casertano to Ciano, 19 August 1941, DDI 9, VII, 488. Anfuso to Casertano, 20 August 1941, DDI 9, VII, 492. "Occupazione zona demilitarizzata," 30 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati.

<sup>333</sup> Korb, "Understanding Ustaša Violence," 6.

<sup>334</sup> "Notiziario n. 120," 31 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati. "Cause che hanno direttamente od indirettamente provocato i disordini verificatesi, nel periodo 25 agosto – 4 settembre, nel territorio di giurisdizione df. 'Marche'," n.d., AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. "Croazia – Riflessi dell'occupazione della zona demilitarizzata di Zagabria," 4 September 1941, DSCS, 5/II:28.

<sup>335</sup> "Notiziario n. 149," 30 September 1941, NARA T-821/402/0132–35. "Relazione informativa," 8 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>336</sup> "Notiziario giornaliero," 7 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August–September 1941, allegati. "Notiziario n. 133," 14 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. "Situazione nella zona demilitarizzata dalla pubblicazione del Bando del 7 settembre 1941 ad oggi," 7 October 1941, DSCS, 5/II:44–46.



At this point, Casertano and Pietromarchi were fully on board with the extension of the military's presence in Croatia which, they reported, had secured Pavelić's leadership over his unruly party and militia.<sup>337</sup> When the Germans announced at the end of September that they intended to send two new divisions to Croatia to conduct anti-partisan operations up to the Italo-German demarcation line, Casertano urged that, "for obvious reasons of our prestige," a reinforced Second Army should reoccupy the entire zone behind the demarcation line "and if need be threatened localities outside said zone."<sup>338</sup> Mussolini had already consented to such a move, and Second Army extended its occupation from the coastal belt up to the demarcation line in October.<sup>339</sup> Italian troops began reoccupying Croatian territory up to the German demarcation line [Zone III] on 9 October.<sup>340</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs believed that the conditions were in place to achieve a rapprochement with Zagreb. To appease the Ustaše, Italian diplomats convinced Mussolini not to give Ambrosio full civil powers in Zone III. But the mere act of reoccupation had already damaged Italo-Croatian relations irreparably.<sup>341</sup>

Italian military authorities were less enthusiastic about the results of their occupation of Zone III. While they promised to bring "order and justice" to the sector, in reality they had little influence over local Croatian authorities. They were unable to prevent Ustaša reprisals and they complained of optics that made it appear as though Italian troops were merely present in order to prop up the Ustaša regime.<sup>342</sup> By the end of 1941, Italian authorities noted a growing disappointment among Serbs in Zones II and III

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<sup>337</sup> Casertano to Ciano, 8 October 1941, DDI 9, VII, 626. Pietromarchi to Ciano, 30 October 1941, DDI 9, VII, 699.

<sup>338</sup> Casertano to Ciano, 25 September 1941, DDI 9, VII, 587.

<sup>339</sup> Ciano to Casertano, 23 September 1941, DDI 9, VII, 584.

<sup>340</sup> Second Army Command war diary, 9 October 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 724, DS Second Army, October–November 1941.

<sup>341</sup> Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 80–82.

<sup>342</sup> "Notiziario giornaliero," 21 October 1941, and Leonardi memorandum, 4 November 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 569, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, October–November 1941, allegati. "Questioni giuridiche conseguenti dagli eccidi e massacri commessi dagli ustascia," 9 October 1941, NARA T-821/402/0078-79. See, for example, the burning of largely Muslim villages around Konjic as reprisal for the activity of "Četnik-Partisans" in the area. "Notiziario informativo n. 84," 25 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 514, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

with Italian rule.<sup>343</sup> Italian generals showed no desire to improve relations with Zagreb; they preferred to impose Italian political influence through territorial occupation. Dalmazzo and Monticelli even suggested that the Serb populations of Lika and Bosnia would support annexation by Italy.<sup>344</sup> Once again, the generals of Second Army found themselves in conflict with Italian diplomats that still hoped to salvage something from their relationship with the Ustaše.

And once again, the army's relations with Croatian authorities deteriorated, especially in Zone III where the latter — resentful of Italian interference — wielded its autonomy in civil affairs. The same issues that had plagued Italo-Croatian relations through the spring repeated themselves that autumn, leading Italian generals to conclude that no form of compromise with Zagreb could bear fruit. Indeed, they repeatedly accused Croatian authorities of sabotaging Italian policy and prestige. The VI Corps continued to report anti-Italian manifestations conducted by Croatian civil and military officials. These included the boisterous singing of patriotic and irredentist songs that were “offensive to the Italian Army [and] the Duce,” as well as drunken boasting that Croatia would soon be at war with Italy.<sup>345</sup> Dalmazzo, who by this time considered the Ustaše and Communists to be “equally enemies of order,” accused Croatian telephone service personnel of intentionally obstructing Italian communications.<sup>346</sup> The Italian garrison commander at Varcar Vakuf [Mrkonjić Grad] claimed that local Croatian officials had set several buildings on fire and then blamed it on Serb rebels in an attempt

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<sup>343</sup> “Notiziario n. 211,” 1 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>344</sup> “Notiziario n. 156,” 7 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. “Notiziario giornaliero,” 11 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati.

<sup>345</sup> “Notiziario n. 168,” 19 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. “Notiziario informativo n. 73,” 14 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

<sup>346</sup> “Notiziario n. 156,” 7 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. “Funzionamento gendarmeria croata,” 16 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

to show that the Italian army could not guarantee security.<sup>347</sup> Nor did the lower courts of Croatia, which still operated for lesser offenses in Zones II and III, deliver the impartial justice that Italian decrees had promised.<sup>348</sup>

Moral factors also continued to play a role. Although the pace of Ustaša violence slowed during autumn 1941, evidence of past massacres kept alive the horrific memories from the summer.<sup>349</sup> Ordered to adopt more “courteous” behaviour towards Croatian authorities, the officers of the Sassari Division nonetheless continued to document evidence of Ustaša atrocities.<sup>350</sup> In the town of Ključ, for example, Italian officers uncovered what they described as an Ustaša “slaughterhouse” [*scannatoio*].

The floor and wooden baseboard are soaked in blood, one wall is riddled with bullet holes, all the walls are bloodstained with numerous traces of cerebral matter. A piece of scalp with a tuft of hair is still stuck to one wall. The stairs are completely soaked in blood because, apparently, the bodies of the slain were rolled down them and thereafter buried.<sup>351</sup>

It is impossible to discount the impact that such scenes made on officers and men alike. As before, moral contempt for the Ustaše reinforced the political and military calculations of Italian commands in assessing the utility of the Croatian alliance.

In military terms, nothing in the fall and winter of 1941 did anything to alter the Italian army’s dismissive view of the capabilities of its Croatian counterpart. Internal bulletins commented wryly that, whereas Italian garrisons managed to fend off attacks by Communist Partisans, Croatian defences were typically overwhelmed after only “brief fighting.”<sup>352</sup> Others lamented the “exceptional lack of discipline of Croatian soldiers that

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<sup>347</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 1 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

<sup>348</sup> “Notiziario n. 170,” 21 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>349</sup> The successful Serb uprising forced the Ustaše to adopt less-radical policies, switching from mass murder of Orthodox Serbs to religious conversion, in late 1941 and 1942. Korb, “Understanding Ustaša Violence,” 5–6, 12.

<sup>350</sup> Leonardi memorandum, 4 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati.

<sup>351</sup> “Notiziario n. 170,” 21 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>352</sup> “Notiziario n. 208,” 28 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

commit abuses and vandalism and spend nearly the entire day carousing in bars.”<sup>353</sup> More sympathetically, a later report attributed discipline problems in the Croatian army to irregular pay and postal service, insufficient rations, and exhaustion.<sup>354</sup> For Dalmazzo, the ineffective Croatian security forces drained rather than bolstered Italian resources. He complained that “it is not possible every day to have our units run to wherever the Croats report trouble, real or imaginary.” When it came to beleaguered Ustaša militia, he confided that he did not care to help them at all.<sup>355</sup> During the winter, units of the Sassari Division fought alongside Croatian forces, holed up in garrisons cut off by snow and Partisans. These conditions had the potential to establish a sense of camaraderie between the two armed forces, but Italian officers remained contemptuous not only of the Croatian army, but of the general population as well. When the isolated garrisons were relieved in the spring, Monticelli decided to transport the bodies of his fallen troops towards the coast, “so as not to leave them abandoned in the hands of populations that are not worthy of keeping them.”<sup>356</sup> There is no doubt that the *Domobranstvo*, which counted 70,000 men at the end of 1941, was indeed worse than second rate. One commentator has described Croatian troops as “among the most poorly equipped and unenthusiastic soldiers in the history of modern warfare.”<sup>357</sup>

There were examples of effective collaboration between Italian military authorities and Croatian functionaries, mostly when Italian generals felt that the latter accepted their subordinate position, or when local Serb rebels adopted an anti-Italian stance. The commander of the Marche Division, General Amico, got along well with his Croatian counterpart in Trebinje, who had the wisdom to thank Italy for its leading role in

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<sup>353</sup> “Notiziario n. 216,” 6 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>354</sup> “Notiziario n. 233,” 23 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>355</sup> “Conflitto tra gendarmi e cetnici-comunisti a Vrdolje,” 23 March 1942, NARA T-821/402/0137.

<sup>356</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 27 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, April 1942. It was eventually decided to transport the bodies to Dalmatia. Sassari Division Command war diary, 12 and 14 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May–June 1942.

<sup>357</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 18–19.

bringing about Croatian independence and to acknowledge Croatia's status as Italy's "small but loyal ally."<sup>358</sup> Monticelli and Dalmazzo were pleased with the work of David Sinčić as vice-prefect and Ustaša party secretary of Knin. They judged him balanced and capable, with a desire to collaborate with the Italians in favour of normalization.<sup>359</sup> However, after Sinčić became deputy civil commissioner attached to Second Army command — acting as a liaison between the Italian army and Croatian civil authorities — opinions changed for the worse. Monticelli now complained that Sinčić was stepping on the feet of Italian military authorities, by issuing his own orders to Croatian police. Monticelli saw the police as part of a military campaign against guerrillas that should be conducted solely by military authorities.<sup>360</sup> The situation paralleled Armellini's in Dalmatia. Indeed, the commander of the XVIII Corps chimed in on the dispute, lamenting that Sinčić "now believes that he has the commands of Italian divisions under his orders!"<sup>361</sup> The Italian army's desire for complete administrative and jurisdictional control in a theatre that it considered an active war zone further limited the chances of a genuine rapprochement with the Croatian government.

As the revolt in Croatia crescendoed in winter 1941–42, for the first time placing Italian formations in real peril, the generals of Second Army closed ranks. They unanimously blamed the revolt on the terroristic methods and unpopularity of the Ustaše, and they lobbied Rome to formally withdraw its support for Pavelić. Monticelli considered the revolt "a natural reaction" to Ustaša policy. He was convinced that Zagreb's belated calls for dialogue with Serb leaders would amount to nothing, since the ideological and economic issues behind the revolt remained, and since Croatian officials were more concerned with demonstrating their sovereignty than effectively addressing

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<sup>358</sup> "Notiziario n. 342," 13 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati. On the anti-Italian attitude of rebel forces in the Marche Division's sector, see "Notiziario n. 244," 3 January 1942, and "Notiziario n. 272," 31 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>359</sup> "Notiziario n. 211," 1 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>360</sup> "Amministrazione della giustizia," 23 April 1942, NARA T-821/402/0916–20.

<sup>361</sup> "Prefetto Sincic," 26 April 1942, NARA T-821/402/0912–13.

the problems that limited it.<sup>362</sup> Like Monticelli, V Corps commander Riccardo Balocco considered Ustaša efforts towards ethnic cleansing absurd, since “it is not possible to think seriously of the annihilation and waste of one and a half million people.” This statement may indicate that generals like Monticelli and Balocco operated on a different moral plane than the fascist Ustaše, but it also reflected political and military calculations on the part of Italian generals: Zagreb’s policies were counterproductive to any Italian objectives. Balocco criticized the Pavelić regime for its “institutional lack of spirit, the immaturity of the ruling classes and the distrust and discredit that surround all its measures.” He still believed that an impartial Italian regime could turn things around, but not if the population considered the Italian army “tied to the cart of their oppressors.” Thus, he recommended that the Italian government and Fascist Party withdraw its support of the Ustaše.<sup>363</sup>

These opinions were shared at the apex of Second Army. By January 1942, Ambrosio had become violently anti-Croatian. He brought this attitude with him to his new posting at the SMRE. After taking over as Chief of the Army, Ambrosio penned a long report on Croatian policy, in which he claimed “impartial objectivity.” He summed up the themes espoused by his subordinates in their reports since the summer of 1941 and, although he too claimed that Italian occupation had rectified the military problem in Croatia, he argued that nothing had changed in terms of Italo-Croatian relations. For Ambrosio, the only “firm point” in Croatian politics was “the growing aversion to Italy and the equally firm aspiration to take away from our control the territories occupied by us,” including annexed Dalmatia. He saw, not without reason, an anti-Italian conspiracy orchestrated by the Croatian government, military, and Ustaša party, against which the “weak Italophile” Pavelić offered little help. German and Croatian armed forces cooperated at Italy’s expense, pushing rebels into Italian-occupied territory. While Croatian authorities impeded the export of badly needed supplies to Italian Dalmatia, Ambrosio was certain that “wagons and wagons of goods, corn, fat etc. travel daily

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<sup>362</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 25 November 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati. “Relazione sulle operazioni contro i ribelli comunisti dal 7 al 25 settembre 1941,” 31 December 1941, NARA T-821/60/0329–39.

<sup>363</sup> “Situazione politico-militare nella zona di occupazione,” 3 February 1942, NARA T-821/402/0483–86.

towards Germany.” He also accused the Pavelić regime of dithering on the reintegration of Orthodox Serbs into Croatian society. The government had acquiesced to Italian demands and offered an amnesty to Serb rebels on Christmas, but many Serbs had not regained their property or livelihood. Ambrosio believed that this was an intentional effort by Croatian authorities to undermine Serbs’ trust in the Italian army and its ability to protect them. Likewise, Ambrosio opined that recent attempts by Croatian officials to negotiate with Serb leaders and rebels were mainly intended to drive a wedge between Italians and Serbs. Finally, the Croats continued to spread anti-Italian propaganda in Dalmatia and Ambrosio accused them of providing intelligence to rebels, which had resulted in ambushes against Italian personnel.<sup>364</sup>

Mussolini adopted Second Army’s interpretation. As early as November 1941, Mussolini, Ciano, and Casertano reconsidered their earlier decision to allow the Ustaša to retain civil authority in Zone III. Mussolini made total occupation up to the demarcation line, with full powers, the basis of Italian policy in Croatia.<sup>365</sup> In a meeting with Hermann Göring, Mussolini placed the blame for the troublesome situation in the Balkans entirely at the feet of the Croatian government. In particular, he criticized the regime’s “oppressive” treatment of Orthodox Serbs as ludicrous, given that Serbs within the Independent State of Croatia numbered over a million and were tied to the land by history.<sup>366</sup> But Mussolini found Hitler unwilling to abandon the Ustaše. The Nazi dictator may have had a soft spot for their extremism; certainly, ousting a radical government in favour of a more conservative one would have been bad propaganda. More importantly, Berlin had thus far successfully exploited Ustaša mistrust of Italy to give it leverage in Zagreb, and Hitler did not wish to replace even the useless Croatian forces with German troops. German-Croatian relations did not reach a breaking point until after Italy’s capitulation in September 1943, when Second Army was no longer there to act as a buffer between the two.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> “Politica croata nei territory della 2<sup>a</sup> e 3<sup>a</sup> zona,” 23 January 1942, DSCS, 6/II:36–41.

<sup>365</sup> Monzali, “La difficile alleanza,” 87.

<sup>366</sup> Meeting between Mussolini and Goering, 28 January 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 211.

<sup>367</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 94–95, 217–18, 237, 241.

For Italian military authorities in the theatre, dealings with their Croatian allies were more frequent, pressing, and frustrating than were their contacts with the Germans. Several factors were behind this steady deterioration of relations in 1941. As an institution, the army held an anti-Croatian bias emanating from the legacy of Italo-Habsburg conflict during the Risorgimento and the First World War. Like other armed forces, the Italian army naturally preferred a straightforward military occupation with well-defined jurisdictions; this was not the case in Croatia, where its legal status was constantly in flux and it had to share power with Croatian civil authorities. Contacts at the local level ranged from feigned cordiality to petty bickering to near-violent confrontation, as Italian military authorities discovered that the Ustaše were not the compliant political puppets that Rome had counted on to spread its influence and reduce the costs of occupation. Croatian irredentism undermined Italian imperial aspirations in Dalmatia and beyond, and Italian generals were convinced that Zagreb consciously worked to sabotage Rome's interests while moving closer to Berlin. The humanitarian response of Italian military personnel, including senior officers, to brutal Ustaša mass violence played an important role in worsening relations, but was not necessarily the result of an innately humane Italian national character. Most German observers — including the Italophobic Edmund Glaise-Horstenau and local *Wehrmacht* or SS representatives — also were “horrified” by Ustaša violence against Serbs, which they considered barbaric and chaotic in comparison to their more systematic and controlled application of terror.<sup>368</sup> Moreover, moral imperatives dovetailed with cold political and military calculations made by Italian generals. They considered Ustaša violence counterproductive because it gave Serbs little choice but to defend themselves through armed insurrection. They criticized Croatian security forces for their incompetent handling of revolt while offering little assistance themselves; instead, Italian generals exploited Croatian military failures to extend their own authority and justify permanent Italian expansion in the region.

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<sup>368</sup> Deak, “Worst of Friends,” 22. Jonathan E. Gumz, “Wehrmacht Perceptions of Mass Violence in Croatia, 1941–1942,” *Historical Journal* 44, no. 4 (2001): 1015–38. Trifković, “Rivalry between Germany and Italy,” 881. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 160. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 722.



None of these motives betrayed an anti-Fascist stance on the army's part, either in ideological or political terms. Local military authorities did not receive clear instructions from Rome and Mussolini very quickly proved willing to abandon, or at least reconsider, the alliance with Pavelić that had been a decade in the making. If some Italian diplomats felt compelled to support the Ustaše as a "totalitarian and revolutionary regime," akin to Italian Fascism, this did not necessarily reflect the nationalism of Mussolini and other Fascists that had never agreed whether fascism really was intended for export.<sup>369</sup> Rather than consciously undermining Fascist policy, the senior officers of Second Army approached Croatian affairs with the aim of assisting the broader war effort by maintaining security while spreading Italian influence and prestige the best way they knew how: with boots on the ground.

### *Italo-Serb Relations*

By the end of 1941, Italian military authorities in Yugoslavia had effectively abandoned their alliance with the Independent State of Croatia. Division, corps, and army commanders pressed Rome to formally renounce collaboration with the Ustaša regime. In its stead, they recommended establishing some form of political and military relationship with local Serb leaders, including nationalist Četniks, and the armed bands that had formed spontaneously in response to Ustaša persecution.<sup>370</sup> The Italian army's employment of nationalist Serb irregulars has been the subject of much debate. Some argue that, as the primary manifestation of the army's anti-Croatian stance, the alliance with Serb nationalists provides evidence of a fundamental divide between the army and Mussolini's regime. Rather than accepting Rome's official alignment with the Ustaše, the army pursued an alternative policy on its own accord. Mussolini and Cavallero, the argument goes, opposed Second Army's pro-Serb orientation but were compelled by

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<sup>369</sup> The quotation is from Casertano to Ciano, 5 July 1941, DDI 9, VII, 357.

<sup>370</sup> The Četnik movement was a monarchist and nationalist Serb guerrilla organization that emerged in Serbia during 1941 under the nominal leadership of Draža Mihailović. The Četnik movement and its leadership had a limited presence in Italian-occupied zones of Yugoslavia before 1942. Italian documents often referred to non-communist Serb detachments in 1941 generically as Četniks. Matteo J. Milazzo, *The Četnik Movement and the Yugoslav Resistance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 59.

military necessity to give Ambrosio and Roatta a free hand. According to Luciano Monzali, the army's display of autonomy represented its lack of faith in Fascism and caused Mussolini's regime to lose its "monopoly on Italian political power."<sup>371</sup> Eric Gobetti agrees that the army's commitment to Fascist strategy certainly was most questionable here.<sup>372</sup> The Četniks, after all, were at least loosely coordinated under General Draža Mihailović, who represented the Royal Yugoslavian government-in-exile and enjoyed British support. This has led to speculation that British agents infiltrated the Italian military leadership in Yugoslavia, resulting in the convergence of British and Italian policies through 1943.<sup>373</sup>

Others have argued that the army's decisions concerning the Serbs and Četniks were driven by practical military and political considerations that ultimately dovetailed with Fascist objectives. The army's approach was consistent with Mussolini's "divide and conquer" strategy in the Balkans: before 1941, this meant supporting Croat separatism to undermine Serb-dominated Yugoslavia; after 1941, supporting Serbs against Croats was a natural extension of this tactic and of the regime's characteristic opportunism. Italian commanders saw the Četniks as tools for expansion at the expense of Croatian and German interests.<sup>374</sup> Examining the gradual development of Second Army's relationship with non-Communist Serb formations in 1941, it is clear that the alliance emerged primarily as a response to local conditions, but that Italian generals at all levels were fully aware of the political ramifications and potential of their actions. Second Army's pro-Serb bearing was both a symptom and cause of its opposition to the Ustaše. Many Italian officers sympathized with the Serb populations, which they considered innocent victims of pointless excesses. But, in coming to the aid of Serbs and openly compromising Croatian sovereignty, Italian authorities also hoped to exploit

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<sup>371</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 280. Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 98–101.

<sup>372</sup> Gobetti, "The Royal Army's Betrayal," 194.

<sup>373</sup> Massimo Copetti, "I rapporti tra italiani e cetnici nella storiografia in lingua italiana e inglese," *Quaderni, Centro ricerche storiche Rovigno* 22 (2011): 271–74.

<sup>374</sup> Conti, *L'occupazione italiana dei Balcani*, 71–72. Bucarelli, "Disgregazione iugoslava e questione serba," 58–59.

Ustaša persecution in order to attract a significant portion of the new state's population into Italy's political orbit.

There is some evidence that the army's traditional anti-Croatian bias was accompanied by pro-Serb tendencies. During the Risorgimento and Liberal eras, Italian popular opinion viewed Serbs as heroic patriots struggling first against Ottoman rule and later, like Italy, against Habsburg hegemony. The House of Savoy married into Montenegrin and Serbian royal families, and some nationalists even suggested an alliance with Serbia against Austria.<sup>375</sup> On the other hand, Italy's experience with Serbia as an ally during the First World War was not positive, especially from the point of view of the Italian establishment. As soon as Italy entered the fray in 1915, it became evident that its territorial and political interests in the Balkans were incompatible with those of Serbia. Italian irredentism in the Adriatic clashed with its ally's vision of a Greater Serbia. In strategic terms, too, the Italian military leadership considered the Serbian army uncooperative and ineffective at tying down Austro-Hungarian troops. By the end of the war, Italian military observers were concerned that Serbia had merely replaced Austria as an impediment in the region.<sup>376</sup> Hatred and disdain for the Croats was a more powerful motivator than any deep-rooted Serbophilia among Italian generals.

Nonetheless, some generals adopted pro-Serb positions well before Ustaša violence and the anti-Axis insurgency reached its peak, suggesting that political calculations played a primary role in their decision making. Monticelli explained his rationale for favouring the Serbs in the Sassari Division's zone of occupation around Knin even before the Rome Accords. Because Serbs made up the majority of the population in his sector, it seemed sensible to Monticelli not to alienate them needlessly. Moreover, he considered Serbs to be less disposed towards "communist ideas" than Croats, and he believed that Serbs would welcome the annexation of Dalmatia and Bosnia to Italy, if only to prevent them from falling under Croatian rule and thereby

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<sup>375</sup> Carlo Ghisalberty, "La scelta del 1915: L'Italia fra la grande Serbia e una più grande Austria," *Clio* 42, no. 4 (2006): 574. Ghisalberty, "L'Italia e la Serbia," 31. Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 95. De Grand, "Italian Nationalist Association," 398.

<sup>376</sup> Ghisalberty, "L'Italia e la Serbia," 38–41. Gooch, *Italian Army and the First World War*, 172. Mirella Colarieti, ed., "Umori e aspirazioni in Serbia dopo il primo conflitto mondiale," *Balcanica: Storia, Cultura, Politica* 2, no. 1 (January 1983): 108–22.

becoming the “slaves of slaves.” Much to the consternation of the Croats, he retained Niko Novaković — an ethnic Serb and former minister without portfolio in the Stojadinović government, and whose brother was a prominent Četnik — as mayor of Knin. Novaković supported a petition to include Knin as part of Italian Dalmatia.<sup>377</sup> In the face of so much anti-Italian hostility from Croats, Monticelli was impressed by the supplication of Serb leaders seeking Italian protection. He genuinely believed that Serbs in Lika and Bosnia would loyally submit to Italian authority, and that their support could be used for long-term political gains.<sup>378</sup> While Monticelli undoubtedly overestimated the level and extent of pro-Italian feeling among Serbs, this calculation — more than pre-existing bias or humanitarian considerations — formed the basis of his pro-Serb policy in the following months.

Dalmazzo agreed with Monticelli that Serb petitions provided an opportunity for Italian expansion, but he warned that their proclamations of loyalty were only motivated out of fear of Croatian reprisals: “We need to exploit this state of affairs with much caution.”<sup>379</sup> Meanwhile, Italian diplomats argued that adopting a pro-Serb line was akin to supporting the concept of a Yugoslavian state, the “forced and fleeting construction of Versailles,” primarily anti-Italian in its scope.<sup>380</sup> But, this feeling was not unanimous. A pro-Serbian or pro-Yugoslavian current existed within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Fascist period, its popularity and potential ebbing and flowing with the course of events. At its heart was the notion that Croats and Slovenes, rather than the ruling Serbs of Yugoslavia, posed the greatest obstacle to Italian aspirations in the Adriatic.<sup>381</sup> As we have seen, this is precisely the realization that dawned upon Italian generals in Croatia during the spring and summer of 1941.

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<sup>377</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 12 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May 1941, allegati.

<sup>378</sup> See “Notiziario giornaliero,” 16 and 18 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May 1941, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 18 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May 1941.

<sup>379</sup> “Direttive,” 15 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), April–May 1941, allegati. Underlined in original.

<sup>380</sup> Arduini to Ciano, 8 May 1941, DDI 9, VII, 73.

<sup>381</sup> Bucarelli, “Disgregazione iugoslava e questione serba,” 11–17.

When open revolt broke out in Lika in July, Serb rebels exploited the political and moral sympathy they enjoyed from Italian commands as well as a by now full-blown Italo-Croatian rivalry, entreating the Italians not to engage them in combat. In their contacts with local Italian authorities, individual rebel leaders deliberately appealed to the anti-communist and anti-Croatian mentality of the Italians, while shrewdly praising Italian civilization and military prestige.<sup>382</sup> They were largely preaching to the converted; the Sassari Division had tolerated the presence of armed bands of Serbs that had formed for self-defence since May.<sup>383</sup> At the end of July, when Serb emissaries met with the commander of the division's 151st Regiment, they insisted that they were not communists and that, while they flew the old Yugoslavian flag, "this does not mean that they want to re-establish Yugoslavia." The rebels claimed that their objective was "that of freeing Serbs from the ferocity of the Croats and of obtaining annexation to Italy." They promised not to attack Italian units or garrisons and they assured Italian officers that Croatian prisoners were treated humanely. The regiment's commander, Colonel Leonardi, concluded that "their claims seemed truly sincere; I read in their eyes the distress of their souls [*dolore delle loro anime*], but also the cold determination to continue to fight to the last."<sup>384</sup> Negotiations of this sort continued at the lower level through the summer, with Italian garrison and battalion commanders maintaining regular contact with Serb leaders.<sup>385</sup>

After taking over the defence of Knin at the beginning of August, the command of the Sassari Division actively established communication with rebel leaders and found

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<sup>382</sup> One rebel group contacted officers of the Sassari Division, assuring them that they were not communists and asking for Italian occupation and protection from Ustaša persecution. "Ribelli," 29 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June-July 1941, allegati. Such contacts were forwarded from divisions to corps and army commands. Dalmazzo to Ambrosio, 28 July 1941, and "Notiziario n. 87," 29 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>383</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 29 May 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941.

<sup>384</sup> "Sintesi del colloquio avvenuto in Tenin il 31.7.1941," 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June-July 1941, allegati.

<sup>385</sup> See, for example, "Notiziario giornaliero," 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June-July 1941, allegati; and, "Notiziario giornaliero," 6 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August-September 1941, allegati.

them cooperative, agreeing to halt their advance short of Knin.<sup>386</sup> When the Italian army announced its formal reoccupation of Zone II at the end of the month, Italian generals expected rebel groups to disband, but they also considered employing them against Communist Partisan formations. In typically colonial fashion, as they reoccupied Zone II, Italian column commanders offered “protection” in return for “submission to Italy” and for “collaborating actively and loyally for the elimination of communists.”<sup>387</sup> The response seemed encouraging: some Serb leaders offered to form armed bands to fight alongside Italians on all fronts, including in the Soviet Union.<sup>388</sup> By the end of October, the VI Corps had established a system of informal alliances with armed groups of Serbs in Lika and Bosnia. These alliances had the military aim of quickly stabilizing the newly occupied territories and the political aim of consolidating Italy’s presence there. Dalmazzo was convinced that his policies, while alienating some Croats, had gained the genuine loyalty of the Serb population.<sup>389</sup> He officially sanctioned “negotiations with rebels,” so long as officers did not make any definite promises to them.<sup>390</sup>

In Zone III, the Italians encountered greater hostility.<sup>391</sup> Communist propaganda had won over many Serb nationalists, who participated in operations alongside Partisan formations. Monticelli credited this in part to the fact that Ambrosio’s decree in September, announcing the Italian reoccupation of Croatian territory, effectively admitted that the Italians would leave at the end of the war.<sup>392</sup> Much depended upon the attitude of individual Serb bands and their leaders. In late February 1942, Partisan and Četnik forces

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<sup>386</sup> “Relazione sulle operazioni contro i ribelli comunisti dal 7 al 25 settembre 1941,” 31 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, August–September 1941, allegati.

<sup>387</sup> “Notiziario n. 150,” 1 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>388</sup> “Notiziario gironaliero,” 29 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, August–September 1941, allegati.

<sup>389</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 settembre al 15 ottobre 1941,” 31 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>390</sup> “Direttive ed osservazioni,” 14 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>391</sup> “Notiziario n. 272,” 31 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>392</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 11 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942.

launched a joint attack on the Italo-Croatian garrison at Varcar Vakuf. The leader of one Četnik band, Monticelli reported, “proved himself on this occasion our friend” by warning the Italians of the attack and keeping his band out of it.<sup>393</sup>

The attitudes of rebel groups and of Italian commands in Herzegovina were particularly ambiguous. Events in this region, also under the jurisdiction of VI Corps, demonstrate that behaviour and Italian policies towards Serb rebels varied according to local circumstances through winter 1941–42. Armed revolt began in eastern Herzegovina earlier than elsewhere, at the end of June 1941, but here Italian and Croatian forces quickly worked to contain it. The Marche Division was involved in sporadic fighting against “bands of Serb rebels.”<sup>394</sup> At the end of the year, Pivano’s Cacciatori delle Alpi Division took over the sector occupied by the Marche Division. Pivano, too, found Četnik forces in the area to be hostile. Moreover, he noted that these formations had not banded together merely for self defence, but that they shared a political aim of obtaining independence for Bosnia and Herzegovina, while cleansing it of Croats and Muslims.<sup>395</sup> The experience of the Kalinovik garrison during the winter left Pivano disenchanted with the prospects of a general pro-Serb policy. While Četnik emissaries professed their friendship to the Italian garrison commander, they also issued what amounted to an ultimatum for the Italians to evacuate Kalinovik.<sup>396</sup> Although the Italians had intended to withdraw from Kalinovik before snow hemmed them in, such an act now would have been a serious blow to Italian prestige. The garrison commander replied that, “where the Italian flag waves, Serbs, Croats, [and] Muslims are equally protected and defended,” and he fortified Kalinovik and the neighbouring village of Ulog. A standoff followed, with

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<sup>393</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 25–26 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942.

<sup>394</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 28. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 50. “Rapporto situazione periodo 15 Giugno–15 Luglio,” 25 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>395</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 71,” 12 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

<sup>396</sup> “Notiziario operativo n. 6,” 19 December 1941; “Notiziario informativo n. 79,” 20 December 1941; “Situazione nei vari presidi,” 25 December 1941; “Avvenimenti nel settore Nevesinje,” 29 December 1941; and, “Convegno di Mostar,” 29 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

Italian and Croatian troops remaining behind barbed wire while Četnik bands hunted down Croats and Muslims in the countryside. Only when the Italians threatened to shell nearby Serb villages did the Četniks reduce their pressure on the isolated garrisons.<sup>397</sup>

The experience at Kalinovik prompted Pivano to clamp down on the initiative of his subordinates in political affairs, asking him to consult his command before conducting negotiations or deciding policy.<sup>398</sup> For his part, Pivano pessimistically saw no natural allies in Herzegovina: the Croats resented Italian interference; the Muslims would align themselves with whoever appeared strongest; the Orthodox Serbs wanted to restore the Yugoslavian state, which paralleled the objectives of the Communist Partisans.<sup>399</sup> Nor did Italy's military attaché in Zagreb, Colonel Gian Carlo Re, share Second Army's enthusiasm towards the Četniks. While hardly a friend of the Ustaše, he regarded the so-called "anti-communist" Serb bands as equally unreliable, being in contact with Moscow and London and having refused to disarm and return to "peaceful labour" after the pacification of their home regions. Instead of relying on the Četniks, Re favoured an influx of Italian troops, ready to occupy all of Croatia when, he predicted, the Pavelić regime collapsed.<sup>400</sup>

As with its policy towards the Ustaše, Rome's official line towards Serbs and Četniks in 1941 was unclear. That the Ministry of Foreign Affairs opposed the army's approach is not surprising, given its unwillingness to abandon its long-held anti-Serb policy or its alliance with Pavelić.<sup>401</sup> In September, Mussolini and Cavallero urged Ambrosio to "do whatever necessary so that our position in Croatia does not exhibit even

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<sup>397</sup> "Notiziario operativo n. 24," 6 January 1942; "Situazione nella zona di Ulog," 10 January 1942; and, "Situazione nel sottosectore di Kalinovik," 11 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 652, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, January-February 1942, allegati.

<sup>398</sup> "Operazioni contro i ribelli," 1 February 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 652, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, January-February 1942, allegati.

<sup>399</sup> "Notiziario informativo n. 96," 6 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 652, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, January-February 1942, allegati.

<sup>400</sup> Re to Casertano, 16 January 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 163.

<sup>401</sup> Gobetti, "The Royal Army's Betrayal," 196.



the slightest shade of philo-Serbism.”<sup>402</sup> While this seemed like a clear renunciation of the army’s pro-Serb attitude, it did not carry the weight of a formal decree. Moreover, Mussolini’s words must be understood in the context of circumstances and events in Serbia that month, when Mihailović’s Četniks temporarily joined sides with Tito’s Communist Partisans in open revolt against German occupation forces.<sup>403</sup> These circumstances did not correspond to the situation at the time in Croatia, where Serb nationalists largely avoided conflict with Italian troops, instead greeting them with shouts of “Živio Italia” and “Dobro italiano.”<sup>404</sup>

In an attempt to meet Rome’s recommendations part way, the ardently pro-Serb Monticelli tried to rein in the Serbophilia of his subordinates, reminding them that their task was to ensure order and suppress communism in order to consolidate the Independent State of Croatia. The Serb population, he admitted, was the greatest threat to stability, whether through communism or pan-Serb nationalism. However, unwilling to abandon the fruitful relationships his command had established with local Serbs, Monticelli ordered his men to adopt different attitudes towards communist and non-communist armed bands. Whereas the former “must be constantly pursued and inexorably suppressed,” Monticelli asked his officers merely to keep an eye on formations of armed Serbs and to take action against them only if they directly attacked Italian troops.<sup>405</sup> Monticelli’s contradictory directive demonstrates the Italian army’s growing preoccupation with the Communist Partisan movement at the end of 1941, when German divisions drove Tito’s formations out of Serbia and into Italian-held zones.<sup>406</sup> This coincided with the end of the alliance between Mihailović and Tito, after which

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<sup>402</sup> Cavallero diary, 10 September 1941. The *Duce* reiterated these instructions in early November. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 60.

<sup>403</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 110.

<sup>404</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 1 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

<sup>405</sup> “Direttive sull’attività politico-militare,” 10 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

<sup>406</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 143.

Četniks and Partisans engaged one another more frequently in open combat.<sup>407</sup> A policy of attraction towards nationalist Serbs was not just politically useful; it was now seen as militarily feasible and necessary. By December, Italian dialogue with Serb bands focused less on protection from Ustaša persecution and more on military collaboration against communism.<sup>408</sup>

In neighbouring Montenegro, a pro-Četnik policy had been the cornerstone of Italian counterinsurgency strategy since the summer. Italian commanders exploited factionalism within the Montenegrin rebel movement by brokering deals with local nationalist bands. The military governor of Montenegro and former governor of Amhara, Alessandro Pirzio Biroli, became the earliest and strongest advocate of a semi-formal military alliance with the Serbs.<sup>409</sup> From across the border, Dalmazzo's VI Corps followed Pirzio Biroli's policies and suggestions closely.<sup>410</sup> In August, Pirzio Biroli had urged Rome to give political backing to Serb and Montenegrin nationalists, on the basis of racial or tribal stereotypes.

All told, the Serbs, despite their rough nature, still seem the best to me. The Croats are unctuous and false; true hypocrites, with a deep-rooted cowardliness that contrasts with the warlike and chivalrous spirit of the Serbs and Montenegrins.

Aside from the political error of the Serbs in going against the Axis (but this owes to immoral and corrupt leaders and illusions of Russian strength), it is preferable to support national aspirations among the Serbs and Montenegrins rather than the Croats and Albanians. They are all more or less untrustworthy, but the least untrustworthy are still the Serbs. With the collapse of Russia, in my opinion, it would not be bad policy to bring the Serbs into Rome's orbit. [...]

Serbia, referring to the old Serbia, is the most homogenous and compact racial group and is undoubtedly the best in all the Balkans. Rough and warlike, the Serb has qualities of spirit, intellectual capacities and temperament that clearly distinguish him from the Croats, Albanians, Bulgarians and Rumanians.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> "Notiziario n. 302," 4 March 1942, NARA T-821/402/0426-32.

<sup>408</sup> "Notiziario n. 230," 20 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>409</sup> See Caccamo, "L'occupazione del Montenegro."

<sup>410</sup> "Notiziario n. 152," 3 October 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>411</sup> "Montenegro," 12 August 1941, DSCS, 4/II:243-45.

Several generals, including Roatta, believed that Serbs belonged to a martial race.<sup>412</sup> Quirino Armellini — a fellow veteran of the war in Amhara, where he had opined on the relative fighting qualities of tribal groups — likewise reported that Orthodox Serbs were “more combative and seem on the whole more clearly anti-communist; the [Croats] are persuaded more to fight to protect their homes and property.”<sup>413</sup> This tendency to view the populations of Yugoslavia as indigenous tribal groups that could be divided and conquered suggests a traditional colonial mindset among Italian generals.<sup>414</sup> Yet, it was not incompatible with more modern Fascist notions of a European Imperial Community. Pirzio Biroli argued that Montenegrins were capable of forming a “state within the framework of the Roman Empire.”<sup>415</sup>

In light of these arguments and the changing military circumstances in Yugoslavia, Mussolini eased his tone towards a pro-Serb policy at the end of 1941. In December, when Ambrosio raised the possibility of negotiating with Serb rebels to ease the potential Italian occupation of Bosnia, Mussolini voiced no opposition.<sup>416</sup> Meanwhile, Second Army’s pro-Serb policy found an unusual ally in the Julian Fascist, Italo Sauro, a confidant of Mussolini who had advocated the expulsion of Slavs from Venezia-Giulia before the war. In a letter to Mussolini at the end of January 1942, Sauro argued in favour of a more or less formal alliance with Bosnian Serbs, supporting their desire for national independence from Croatia if need be. Sauro believed that Second Army’s policies genuinely had won over Serbs; full-scale collaboration would enable the army to focus its military efforts solely against Communist Partisans, it would bring the natural resources

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<sup>412</sup> Gobetti, “The Royal Army’s Betrayal,” 197.

<sup>413</sup> “Relazione periodica,” 3 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>414</sup> A similar tendency has been noted among Nazi administrators in Poland and Ukraine. Furber and Lower, “Colonialism and Genocide,” 381.

<sup>415</sup> “Montenegro,” 12 August 1941, DSCS, 4/II:242. Pirzio Biroli’s reliance on Montenegrin separatists ultimately failed to garner a broad base of support for his administration, given the overwhelming anti-Italian sentiment in Montenegro. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 44.

<sup>416</sup> Ambrosio memorandum, 18 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 40.

of Bosnia and Herzegovina into Italy's orbit, and it would bolster Italy's position against Croatian, Bulgarian, and German meddling.<sup>417</sup>

There is little doubt that army generals were already thinking along similar lines. As authors like Gobetti, Bucarelli, and Milazzo have argued, the army's pro-Serb policy was rooted equally in utilitarian military and political motives. Through 1941, this policy had developed informally and inconsistently as a response to local circumstances, including the behaviour of individual Serb bands and their leaders. Early advocates, such as Monticelli, were driven in part by humanitarian impulses to protect Serbs from Ustaša persecution, in part by the pragmatic fear of alienating such a large portion of the population, and in part by the "political intent" of obtaining and protecting Italy's *spazio vitale* against the Germans and Croats.<sup>418</sup> Only at the end of the year did operational military concerns play a central role in the army's rationale. Mussolini, as in most matters concerning Balkan affairs, provided little clear direction for policy. By 1942, according to a note in Cavallero's diary, he regarded all players in Croatia to be "enemies."<sup>419</sup> Effectively, he permitted Second Army to pursue strategy and politics as it saw fit.

### *Operation Trio*

The Italian army's interconnected policies towards the Germans, Croats, and Serbs came to a head in the first half of 1942, when Italian ambitions in Yugoslavia reached their zenith. This is exemplified by the case of Operation Trio, a joint Italo-German-Croatian anti-partisan operation conducted in eastern Bosnia during April and May 1942. Operation Trio illustrates the Italian army's fear of German encroachment, its contempt for the Croatian Ustaše, and its use of nationalist Serb and Četnik bands as tools for Italian political and imperial expansion. Ostensibly undertaken to eliminate Tito's Partisans — which had regrouped around the town of Foča near the Italo-German

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<sup>417</sup> "Situazione Bosnia-Herzegovina," 21 February 1942, DSCS, 6/II:42–44. Sauro addressed his letter to Mussolini on 29 January. It was forwarded from *Comando Supremo* to the SMRE in February.

<sup>418</sup> Gobetti, "The Royal Army's Betrayal," 197. Bucarelli, "Disgregazione iugoslava e questione serba," 53–54. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 53, 60. Milazzo concludes that until 1942 the Italians "barely had a policy" towards the as yet uncoordinated and disorganized Četnik movement.

<sup>419</sup> Cavallero diary, 31 March 1942.

demarcation line — during its planning stages the operation developed into a thinly veiled attempt to expand Italy's political influence and territorial jurisdiction in Bosnia.

Mussolini, the Foreign Ministry, and Second Army had their eyes set on Bosnia since the autumn of 1941. In November, Pietromarchi asked the army to be prepared to extend its occupation deeper into Bosnia if requested to do so by Zagreb. Cavallero was lukewarm to the idea, but Dalmazzo, whose VI Corps already occupied Herzegovina and parts of Bosnia, was more enthusiastic. He ventured that the 10,000 Serb rebels threatening Sarajevo north of the demarcation line would melt away if Italian troops occupied the city, and he claimed that educated opinion there favoured the complete occupation of Croatia by the Italian army for a period of no less than twenty years.<sup>420</sup> Dalmazzo's "wishful thinking" was bolstered by the declarations of Bosnian Četnik leaders, who for their own tactical reasons favoured an Italian incursion into Bosnia at the expense of the Ustaše and Communist Partisans.<sup>421</sup> Dalmazzo believed that Bosnian Serbs would welcome the idea of a separate state of Bosnia and Herzegovina under Italian protection. Indeed, Dalmazzo mused, even the Muslims of the region might accept Italian overlordship, thanks to Italy's reputation of "civility and liberality" towards minorities, its respect of the Islamic faith in Africa and Albania, and its Mediterranean orientation.<sup>422</sup> In reality, Italian support of nationalist Serb detachments that raided Muslim villages rendered such a scenario unlikely.

In mid-December, circumstances appeared to favour Dalmazzo's schemes. Hitler decided to pull German forces out of Yugoslavia for deployment on the eastern front, and he offered Italy full territorial and military jurisdiction over Croatia. Mussolini was "skeptical" but pleased by the opportunity to solidify Croatia as part of Italy's "*Lebensraum*." Roatta, who as army chief had previously warned against expansion into Croatia, now proved "favourable to the thing" as an opportunity to reverse German

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<sup>420</sup> Cavallero diary, 11 November 1941. "Notiziario n. 205," 25 November 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati. "Notiziario n. 226," 16 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>421</sup> Milazzo, *The Četnik Movement*, 67.

<sup>422</sup> "Notiziario n. 272," 31 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati. "Notiziario n. 354," 25 April 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati.

encroachment on Italy's *spazio vitale*. Ambrosio likewise saw the German offer as a chance to “seize [*impadronirsi*] Croatia, not only militarily, but also politically and economically.”<sup>423</sup> In other words, Mussolini and his generals hoped to use the physical occupation of territory by Second Army to do what diplomacy thus far had failed to accomplish: bring Croatia under Italian control as a functioning part of Fascism's Imperial Community. But this development — which would have eradicated any lingering pretenses to Croatian sovereignty — was quickly halted when the Germans changed course. Facing complaints from Zagreb and Belgrade, Berlin rescinded its offer on 24 December. The Germans announced their intention to reoccupy territory up to the demarcation line, and they called for military cooperation between Axis forces in Croatia. This apparent German-Ustaša plot angered the Italians and would further undermine effective collaboration between Axis forces.<sup>424</sup>

Italian generals were not immediately deterred by this reversal. On the contrary, Ambrosio and Dalmazzo now believed that they had received a specific mandate from the *Duce* to pursue territorial expansion in the Adriatic at Croatia's expense. After meeting with Mussolini at the end of the month, Ambrosio concluded that the *Duce* intended to expand Dalmatia's boundaries exponentially to include the entirety of Zone II. Mussolini reportedly informed Ambrosio that

I now consider the current borders imposed by circumstances of the moment to be superseded. You can gradually and tactfully proceed with the elimination of Croatian influence in the 2nd zone up to the Dinarides. Respond to U[staša] action. Expel hostile political authorities and civil servants [*capivilla*] from the 2nd zone. Prevent the increase of Croatian garrisons.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> “Estensione dell'occupazione italiana a tutto il territorio croato,” 18 December 1941, DSCS, 5/II:97. Ciano diary, 17 December 1941. Ambrosio memorandum, 18 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 40.

<sup>424</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 172. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 68–69. Pietromarchi to Casertano, 29 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 81. “Riassunto degli argomenti tratti dall'Eccellenza Ambrosio nella riunione tenuta presso il Comando della 2<sup>a</sup> Armata il 30-XII-41,” 31 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. “Politica croata nei territori della 2<sup>a</sup> e 3<sup>a</sup> zona,” 23 January 1942, DSCS, 6/II:36–41.

<sup>425</sup> “Riassunto degli argomenti tratti dall'Eccellenza Ambrosio nella riunione tenuta presso il Comando della 2<sup>a</sup> Armata il 30-XII-41,” 31 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

While consolidating their hold over the Dalmatian hinterland, Mussolini and his generals still hoped to bring Bosnia into Rome's orbit. Berlin's call for joint operations — which the Italian army heretofore had resisted in order to protect their sphere from German interference — now offered an opportunity to expand. Given the Italian army's significant numerical superiority over the Germans in Croatia, and given Hitler's unwillingness to expend resources in the Balkans, joint operations could result in more territory coming under Italian occupation. Mussolini immediately agreed to the idea of joint operations, starting in Bosnia.<sup>426</sup>

Logistical difficulties and weather conditions prevented Second Army from participating directly in operations that the Germans launched in January. Their failure prompted another call from Wilhelm Keitel of the German armed forces high command [OKW] for military cooperation.<sup>427</sup> Ambrosio and Pietromarchi insisted that the time was ripe to press for changes to the demarcation line. The Germans had proven incapable of mastering the situation without Italian help; now Second Army could swoop across the boundary and, via *fait accompli*, establish full military control over Croatia, an “indispensable premise for making it our true *spazio vitale*.”<sup>428</sup> This argument convinced Cavallero, who tried to define Bosnia as a strictly Italian zone of operations and influence. He suggested to Keitel that the Italian army would focus its efforts on Bosnia while the Germans launched supporting operations in Serbia.<sup>429</sup> Keitel agreed at least to a unified command under Second Army's new head, General Mario Roatta.<sup>430</sup> Replacing Roatta at the SMRE, Ambrosio continued to play a lead role in the project.

After the preliminary discussions between the *Comando Supremo* and OKW, Ambrosio, Roatta, and their staffs met with their German and Croatian counterparts in the Istrian resort town of Abbazia [Opatija] during 2 and 3 March to iron out the details of

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<sup>426</sup> Mussolini to Hitler, 29 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 79. Cavallero diary, 29 December 1941.

<sup>427</sup> Castellani to Ciano, 13 January 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 139. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 238. Keitel to Cavallero, 4 February 1942, DSCS, 6/II:36–41. Pietromarchi to Ciano, 13 February 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 263.

<sup>428</sup> Pietromarchi to Ciano, 16 February 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 274.

<sup>429</sup> Cavallero to Keitel, 18 February 1942, DSCS, 6/II:79–80.

<sup>430</sup> Cavallero diary, 27 February 1942.

Operation Trio. Keitel and Cavallero's correspondence notwithstanding, the German representatives were alarmed by Ambrosio's insistence that joint operations only take place on the German side of the demarcation line but under Italian command.<sup>431</sup>

Ambrosio also argued that the available forces were enough only to tackle one area: eastern Bosnia. There, the demarcation line would have to be nullified and civil authority granted to whoever happened to occupy an area.<sup>432</sup> These proposals were meant to avoid German incursions that might compromise Italy's sovereignty in its occupied and annexed territories, while paving the way for an extended Italian presence around Sarajevo. The Croats rightly feared that the Italians intended to remain in eastern Bosnia, and German Commander Southeast, General Walter Kuntze, privately concluded that "an effort should be made to limit the presence of Italian troops in the area [...] to the shortest possible period."<sup>433</sup>

Ambrosio came out of the meeting convinced that, while the Germans and Croats had worked together to try to "exclude us from any interference or penetration in eastern Bosnia," the "logic" of his arguments — exploiting the concentration of rebel forces around Sarajevo and Italy's material advantage in the upcoming operation — had won the day. By effectively erasing the demarcation line in Bosnia "indefinitely," Ambrosio felt that he had

guaranteed for as long a time as possible the permanence of our troops in the area beyond the demarcation line. [...] I think such conditions can constitute a favourable starting point for the work that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can conduct towards making permanent the occupation of the areas in which our troops will have entered [...] to ensure that the well-known 'spazio vitale' becomes, for the region in question, an effective reality.<sup>434</sup>

For Ambrosio and Roatta, the objectives of Operation Trio were primarily political in nature. They aimed to reverse German encroachment on an Italian sphere of interest, undermine the hated Ustaša regime, and expand Rome's influence in territory that Fascist directives and propaganda had proclaimed to be part of Italy's Imperial Community. The

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<sup>431</sup> Hehn, *German Struggle*, 109.

<sup>432</sup> "Riunione preliminare italo-tedesca," 2 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0307-312.

<sup>433</sup> Hehn, *German Struggle*, 113-15.

<sup>434</sup> Ambrosio to Cavallero, 5 March 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 339. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:176-79.



military objective of destroying Tito's Partisan forces was of secondary importance; at this stage, Italian generals remained convinced that the formal transfer of territory to an Italian occupation regime rather than a German or Croatian one would suffice to end the revolt, such was their faith in the virtues of Italian civilization and prestige. As Eric Gobetti argues, the army's project in Bosnia — far from an alternative to the pro-Ustaša policy of the regime or a manifestation of the army's anti-Fascism — was consistent with the concept of working “towards the *Duce*.”<sup>435</sup>

But the Abbazia conference was not a complete Italian success. Ambrosio and Roatta made two concessions that later undermined their schemes. The first was placing German General Paul Bader in charge of the actual field operations in Bosnia. Although Roatta still had overall command of Operation Trio, this concession proved significant. Two weeks after the conference, Ambrosio complained that Bader's initial marching orders for German and Croatian troops “constitutes clear proof of their intention not to allow (or to allow it only for a small depth) our penetration into eastern Bosnia.” He urged Roatta to use his position to ensure that operational plans would “secure the presence of our units in the zones beyond the demarcation line for as long as possible.”<sup>436</sup> Roatta spent the following weeks fending off German and especially Croatian efforts to revise the agreements made at Abbazia. Against Croatian complaints, Roatta insisted that Italian troops would pass through Sarajevo at the beginning of the operation, that military authorities would assume full civil powers, and that he would have the final say on where and for how long German and Italian garrisons would remain in operational territory.<sup>437</sup>

The other concession made by Italian representatives at Abbazia was their agreement “not to negotiate either with the Cetniks or with the Communists.”<sup>438</sup> By the

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<sup>435</sup> Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 66.

<sup>436</sup> “Operazione in collaborazione con i tedeschi e i croati in Croazia,” 19 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0333.

<sup>437</sup> “Riunione pomeridiana del 28 marzo 1942,” 28 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0433–36. Roatta to Bader, 13 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0392.

<sup>438</sup> The quote is from the German minutes of the meeting. Hehn, *German Struggle*, 113. The Italian version was worded more vaguely, but Ambrosio and Roatta agreed on a common line not to distinguish between the two groups of rebels during Operation Trio. “Riunione italo-tedesca-croata,” 3 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0317–20.

beginning of 1942, many of the Serb bands in eastern Bosnia had aligned themselves with the Bosnian Četnik movement, which was in communication with the Četnik leadership in Serbia and Montenegro but functioned largely autonomously.<sup>439</sup> As we have seen, despite the difficulties encountered at the local level with some of these bands, the commands of Second Army and VI Corps wanted to use the Bosnian Četniks to ease their military task against the Communist Partisans and to establish a base of support for Italian political expansion in Bosnia. German military authorities in Serbia, including Bader, shared a similar rationale and favoured some form of accommodation with the Četniks in order to give Serbia's collaborationist regime more popular backing and prevent Serb nationalists from joining Tito's Partisans. However, Berlin vetoed Bader's efforts to negotiate with Četnik leaders in Serbia or Bosnia, partly due to pressure from pro-Ustaša German political officials in Croatia, partly due to mistrust following the Serbian Četniks' temporary alliance with the Communist Partisans in late summer 1941, and partly due to Hitler's own Serbophobia and reluctance to accommodate any form of non-German nationalism in occupied Europe.<sup>440</sup> In his discussions with Keitel before the Abbazia conference, Cavallero had hastily but vaguely agreed to avoid military collaboration with the Četniks.<sup>441</sup> In practice, Roatta continued Second Army's informal and decentralized approach from 1941, directing his commands to "avoid any talks [*trattative*] with the Četniks," but permitting "contacts [*contatti*] with Četniks that could be advisable for contingent situations and local convenience."<sup>442</sup>

Changing circumstances after the Abbazia meetings in March led the Italian army to re-evaluate the potential role of Bosnian Četniks in Operation Trio. In light of the German-Ustaša solidarity witnessed at Abbazia, Ambrosio proposed establishing an

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<sup>439</sup> Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 61–66.

<sup>440</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 153–55. Christopher R. Browning, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985), 43. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 158–59, 237–41. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 28–30, 66. Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 247–48.

<sup>441</sup> Keitel to Cavallero, 4 February 1942, and Cavallero to Keitel, 18 February 1942, DSCS, 6/II:74–75, 79–80. Cavallero diary, 28 February 1942.

<sup>442</sup> "Linea di condotta," 22 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), February–March 1942, allegati.

opposing “Italo-*Četnik* bloc.”<sup>443</sup> Meanwhile, Italian contacts with the *Četnik* movement became more concrete. *Četnik* emissaries convinced Italian generals that their movement was better organized and coordinated than it actually was. Roatta and Dalmazzo conducted high-level talks intended to establish collaboration between Italian and *Četnik* forces throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>444</sup> In March, with the knowledge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Italian agents entered negotiations with Milan Nedić, the quisling leader of German-occupied Serbia who offered *Četnik* support in Montenegro and Bosnia in return for Italian backing of a resurgent Serbian state. These discussions fell apart in June because the Italians realized that Nedić exercised little control over *Četnik* formations outside of Serbia, but they reflected the increasing formalization and centralization of the army’s policy towards the *Četniks* through the spring of 1942.<sup>445</sup> Roatta believed that Bader — who had tolerated Nedić’s contacts with *Četniks* and had himself conducted negotiations with the Bosnian *Četnik* leader Jezdimir Dangić — agreed with his strategy in principle. Moreover, the Italian general was encouraged by the fact that Croatian authorities had opened negotiations with *Četnik* leaders in Herzegovina; he used this as a pretext to do the same in Bosnia. At the end of the month, Roatta proposed talks with Bosnian *Četniks* to achieve their allegiance or neutrality — to “at least chloroform the *Četniks*” — during Operation Trio.<sup>446</sup>

Bader’s final operational directives for Trio seemed an Italian success. Italian and German military divisions would have control over civil affairs and non-resisting *Četniks* would not be considered rebels.<sup>447</sup> However, as the operation’s start date of 15 April approached, Italian military and political plans began to unravel. Negotiations with the *Četniks* and the logistical difficulties involved with transferring three Italian divisions to

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<sup>443</sup> Gobetti, “The Royal Army’s Betrayal,” 198.

<sup>444</sup> Milazzo, *The Četnik Movement*, 72–74.

<sup>445</sup> Bucarelli, “Disgregazione iugoslava e questione serba,” 42–47. Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 149–54.

<sup>446</sup> “Sintesi della riunione tenuta il giorno 28 marzo 1942,” 28 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0427–32. Roatta to Ambrosio, 30 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0340. “Trattative coi ‘cetnici’,” 31 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0324–27.

<sup>447</sup> Italian translation of Bader’s directives, 21 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0346–57.

their starting points beyond the demarcation line forced Roatta to postpone the commencement of operations, first to the 20th, then to the 25th. Bader complained that these delays would enable Tito's forces to escape.<sup>448</sup> German political authorities, already alarmed by Roatta's "surprising turn" regarding the Četnik question, considered the Italian delays duplicitous. The postponement of operations seemed to confirm that the Italian army had no interest in actual military operations, but that "a political aim, the occupation of Sarajevo and East Bosnia, was probably the motive of their tactics."<sup>449</sup>

Regardless of the reasons behind Second Army's delays, the Germans and Croats more or less correctly deduced Italian plans for eastern Bosnia. They now sought to avoid Italian penetration into Bosnia altogether. When on 9 April, an Ustaša unit disregarded Roatta and Bader's orders and suddenly advanced against rebel forces around Srebrenica, Kuntze decided to exploit the manoeuvre to "clear up the situation in East Bosnia north of the demarcation line before the beginning of the joint operation."<sup>450</sup> On 20 April, German and Croatian units began a methodical advance along the Drina River. Effectively, they launched the opening phase of Operation Trio early, before the Italian divisions were in position. Now, it was the turn of Italian generals to blame their allies for "political interference."<sup>451</sup> Umberto Fabbri, the chief liaison officer attached to Bader's command, noted that the German and Croatian advance followed "the sudden arrival" in Sarajevo of the Croatian foreign minister, Lorković, and secret police chief Dido Kvaternik, as well as the Croatophile Austrian General Glaise-Horstenau. He concluded that the "Germans and Croats, adhering to a clear cut political manoeuvre, advanced the start date of operations, managing to avoid an Italian contribution in Bosnian territory."<sup>452</sup> Indeed, on 21 April, Bader announced that the situation in Bosnia was so greatly improved that a large-scale operation was no longer necessary. The Italian command did

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<sup>448</sup> "Riunione antimeridiana del 29 marzo 1942," 29 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0438-42. "Relazione B.O.," n.d., NARA T-821/70/0605-36. Hehn, *German Struggle*, 123-24.

<sup>449</sup> Hehn, *German Struggle*, 119, 125.

<sup>450</sup> Hehn, *German Struggle*, 123.

<sup>451</sup> "Relazione B.O.," n.d., NARA T-821/70/0605-36.

<sup>452</sup> "Relazione sulle operazioni in Bosnia Orientale," 20 May 1942, NARA T-821/70/0877-89.

not accept Bader's explanation, which "compromised [Italian] political intentions of putting a solid foot in Bosnia." Roatta responded that without word from Rome and Berlin, Operation Trio must go ahead as planned. He accelerated orders for Italian divisions to cross the demarcation line and he instructed Dalmazzo to visit Sarajevo personally, taking with him a large escort of motorcyclists and armoured cars displaying large Italian flags.<sup>453</sup>

In the face of Italian complaints, Keitel ordered Kuntze to continue operations "in accord with the command of the Italian Second Army."<sup>454</sup> However, by this point, the bulk of the Partisan forces had relocated south of the demarcation line around Foča, where the remainder of Operation Trio would play itself out in the first half of May. Tito once again escaped the Axis noose, and Roatta was left consoling himself that at least his divisions had proven more adept at mountain warfare than those deployed by the Germans.<sup>455</sup> On 15 May, Roatta announced that Operation Trio was over. During its course, only the Taurinense Division had established any sort of permanence north of the demarcation line. Most of its units reached Sarajevo by train at the end of April, where they found Ustaša officials intent on making their stay "as comfortless as possible." Now, the Taurinense Division was ordered back to the Italian side of the demarcation line, surrendering its northern garrisons to German and Croatian forces.<sup>456</sup>

Operation Trio ended in failure for the Italian Second Army. Militarily, Tito's Partisan formations had suffered a significant blow and were driven out of their bases, but their command and elite core remained intact.<sup>457</sup> Politically, Second Army's attempt to extend its influence into eastern Bosnia was completely thwarted by circumstances and

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<sup>453</sup> "Interferenze politiche sulle operazioni in Bosnia," 25 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0328-32. "Direttive ed ordini dati dal Comando 2<sup>a</sup> Armata alle truppe dipendenti in merito alle operazioni in Bosnia," n.d., NARA T-821/70/0592-601.

<sup>454</sup> Roatta to Ambrosio, 24 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0376.

<sup>455</sup> "Relazione B.O.," n.d., NARA T-821/70/0605-36.

<sup>456</sup> Roatta to Dalmazzo, 14 and 15 May 1942, and "Notiziario n. 377," 18 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati. The two other Italian divisions involved in Operation Trio were the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division and the Pusteria Division, which was temporarily assigned from Pirzio Biroli's command in Montenegro.

<sup>457</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 233, 238.

by German and Croatian countermeasures. The operation thus epitomized the dysfunctional nature of the Axis coalition in occupied Yugoslavia: political rivalry and mistrust between the three partners contributed to their military ineffectiveness. During Trio's planning phase, Ambrosio and Roatta sacrificed the operation's military potential in favour of pursuing their expansionist agenda. Their desire to have thousands of Italian troops criss-cross eastern Bosnia in order to impose an Italian presence in the region caused inevitable delays that eliminated any chance of surprise against the Partisans. Their poorly concealed political schemes raised suspicions among their allies, ensuring that communications between the participating commands were neither frank nor timely. Italian generals were indignant that their allies dared oppose their intentions in an area that they considered to belong within Rome's orbit. As in 1941, the Croatian government and Croatophile "Austrians" drew most of their ire as the main obstacles to success.

### *The Četnik Controversy*

Operation Trio marked the height of Second Army's power in Yugoslavia. Italian generals never again found themselves in such a favourable position in relation to their allies. Reinforcements from Italy dried up and Italian forces found it increasingly difficult to contain the Partisan movement. Immediately following the conclusion of Trio, the *Comando Supremo* informed Second Army that it would have to give up two infantry divisions before the end of the year. Needs on other fronts and imminent operations in Slovenia demanded the withdrawal of troops and garrisons from Croatia.<sup>458</sup> Thus, Dalmazzo turned over the hard-won garrisons of Foča, Kalinovik, and Jelec in Zone III to the Croats as VI Corps concentrated further south in Herzegovina.<sup>459</sup> On 19 June 1942, Roatta and Pavelić signed an accord in Zagreb that called for the withdrawal of all Italian troops from Zone III and the return of civil powers to Croatian authorities in Zone II.

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<sup>458</sup> "Sintesi della riunione tenuta dall'Eccellenza il capo di Stato Maggiore Generale il 17 maggio 1942," in *Verbali delle riunioni tenute dal capo di SM generale [VCSMG]*, ed. Antonello Biagini and Fernando Frattolillo (Rome: USSME, 1985), 3:487–88 (cited as volume: page number). Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 104.

<sup>459</sup> Dalmazzo to Vivalda, 22 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati.

Second Army would focus on defending the annexed territories and securing major communications lines along the Adriatic coast.<sup>460</sup>

The middle of 1942 has thus been depicted as a dividing line for Italian policy in the Balkans: up to that point, the Italians sought to expand their territorial control in the region; afterwards, the Italian army was in retreat.<sup>461</sup> With their shift to the defensive after Operation Trio, military necessity played a larger role in the decision making of Italian generals, but this did not mean that they had divested themselves of their long-term political aims in Yugoslavia, or that they had resigned themselves to German and Croatian predominance in the region. They jealously defended their jurisdiction and status from the Ustaše, while continuing their policy of attraction towards Serbs through increasingly formal relationships with Četnik bands. Indeed, the Italian army's relationship with the Četniks became most controversial in 1942 and 1943. As Trio had demonstrated, the Italian and German leaderships were fundamentally at odds over military collaboration with nationalist Serb bands. Moreover, with Trio, the Germans accepted a more active and permanent role in Croatia. During the remainder of the occupation, the Italian army's most serious disputes with German and Croatian authorities arose over the Četnik question.<sup>462</sup>

The army's motives for its alliance with the Četniks in 1942 were essentially the same as its reasons for attracting Serbs in 1941; only the relative weight of those motives changed in relation to new realities. Pragmatic military considerations played a larger role in Roatta's policies than they had for his predecessor, Ambrosio. During the buildup to Operation Trio, Roatta had emphasized the military common sense behind negotiations with Četnik leaders, arguing that "it is hardly worthwhile to double needlessly the number of our adversaries." Roatta considered the Serbs experts in the guerrilla-style warfare that the Communist Partisans had forced upon Second Army.<sup>463</sup> Rather than "to

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<sup>460</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 109. "Accordo di Zagabria del 19 giugno 1942," 25 June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:202–208.

<sup>461</sup> Gobetti, "The Royal Army's Betrayal," 198.

<sup>462</sup> Trifković, "Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia," 879.

<sup>463</sup> "Trattative coi 'cetnici'," 31 March 1942, NARA T-821/70/0324–27. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrophe d'Italia*, 1:218.

drive these accidental allies into the enemy's ranks," Roatta wanted to "give support to the Chetniks, in order to make them fight against the communists" or, as he cynically put it, to have the two rebel groups "slit each others' throats."<sup>464</sup>

Both the efficacy and necessity of this strategy seemed borne out by the results of Operation Trio. Thanks to competition between the Četnik and Communist leaderships, the Partisan "state" in eastern Bosnia already was weakened from within by the time of the Axis offensive. Partisan units and commanders deserted to the Četniks and Tito was forced to abandon the region and undertake his "long march" westward to Bosanska Krajina.<sup>465</sup> This brought the Partisans onto the edge of the sector occupied by Armellini's XVIII Corps, where the Italians already faced a strong Communist-led local resistance movement. Aware of Second Army's dwindling manpower situation and imminent withdrawals to the coast, Armellini considered Četnik formations "extremely useful in the struggle against communism."<sup>466</sup> General Paolo Berardi, who replaced Monticelli as commander of the Sassari Division in May 1942, envisioned exchanging Italian occupation in Zone III with a Četnik "buffer zone" [*fascia di sicurezza*] to keep pressure off of Italian coastal garrisons and the Dalmatian provinces.<sup>467</sup> Military and utilitarian objectives thus were paramount in the formalization of Italo-Četnik cooperation by the middle of 1942. Eric Gobetti rightly cautions against interpreting Roatta's cynicism as evidence of a coherent "divide and conquer" strategy that intentionally pitted Serbs and Croats against one another, fuelling genocide. Ideally, Roatta wanted to unite the Ustaše and Četniks in a common front against the Partisans. The Italian army's actions, Gobetti notes, remained the incoherent product of compromises made by individual commanders in response to immediate circumstances.<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> Roatta memorandum, 6 March 1942, NARA T-821/53/1062. Cited in Gobetti, "The Royal Army's Betrayal," 197.

<sup>465</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 201–206. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 75.

<sup>466</sup> "Situazione," 25 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>467</sup> "Promemoria per l'Ecc. il comandante del XVIII Corpo d'Armata circa azione bande anticomuniste," 2 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May–June 1942, allegati.

<sup>468</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 109–111. For a recent argument that Italians intentionally fomented ethnic conflict in the Balkans, see Conti, *L'occupazione italiana nei Balcani*, 71–72.



Nonetheless, even during this period of retreat, political motives remained significant among Italian commanders at all levels. Although their push into eastern Bosnia had failed, Italian generals stubbornly guarded their influence south of the demarcation line from German and Croatian encroachment. On the face of it, the Zagreb Accord of 19 June seemed to reverse Italian gains from the previous autumn by returning sovereignty to Croatian authorities. However, the terms of the agreement — developed initially by the *Comando Supremo* and the Italian Foreign Ministry, then finalized in Roatta's meeting with Pavelić — included a number of conditions and stipulations that sought to maintain Supersloda's status as final arbiter in its half of Croatia. The Italians retained the right to station troops and conduct operations anywhere in Zones II and III. They kept police powers along the coast, in areas of operations, and wherever they had garrisons. Croatian forces on the Italian side of the demarcation line were prohibited from operating under German control. Moreover, Italian commands retained veto power over Croatian civil authorities in the interest of public order. Finally, Croatian officials agreed to honour commitments made by Italian authorities. This included collaboration with Serb guerrilla formations, which were to be codified as “anti-communist bands.” The Italians could continue to organize such bands for local protection so long as their members recognized Croatian sovereignty.<sup>469</sup>

The subsequent establishment of the *Milizia Volontaria Anticomunista* [MVAC] in summer 1942 was intended to fill Supersloda's need for manpower against the Partisan movement while providing legal cover for continued cooperation between the Italian army and nationalist Serb leaders. The MVAC formations theoretically were to include Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. In practice, Italian commands merely formalized the alliances that they had already made with local Četnik groups, many of which maintained contacts with Mihailović and the Četnik organization.<sup>470</sup> For example, Momčilo Đujić's

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<sup>469</sup> “Truppe italiane in Croazia. Esercizio poteri civili,” 6 June 1942, and “Accordo di Zagabria del 19 giugno 1942,” 25 June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:98–102, 202–208.

<sup>470</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 294. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 114–15.

Četnik band, which had operated alongside the Sassari Division since early 1942, was simply transformed into an MVAC unit.<sup>471</sup>

The Zagreb Accord and the planned withdrawal of Italian troops that followed it demanded increased collaboration with Croatian authorities and personnel as well. Roatta may well have genuinely desired a rapprochement with Zagreb on military grounds, in order to concentrate forces against the ever growing Partisan threat.<sup>472</sup> However, his subordinates — and eventually Roatta himself — placed little faith in the Croats and preferred to rely on Serbs and Četniks as more politically reliable allies. Italian generals were convinced that military cooperation with Croatian forces only served to fuel some sort of German-Ustaša plot.

Dalmazzo accused the Ustaše of using joint operations with his forces in Herzegovina to regain influence in the important city of Mostar. Although the Italians had requested a single company of Croatian militia for an anti-partisan operation 60 km outside the city, an entire Ustaša battalion arrived, accompanied by secret police and a German liaison officer who intended to remain in Mostar. The battalion was led by Jure Francetić, who had conducted the sudden advance on Srebrenica that upset Roatta's plans during Operation Trio and whose "cleansing" operations in eastern Bosnia had claimed thousands of lives. Predictably, Dalmazzo found Francetić unwilling to recognize Italian authority in the city. Only after Dalmazzo personally detained Francetić at Mostar's airport and ordered Italian troops to escort the police and German officer back to Sarajevo was the crisis resolved.<sup>473</sup> During the operations that followed, Italian troops reportedly fired "with great joy" on Ustaša militia.<sup>474</sup> In order to prove that Francetić's attitude was emblematic of "the mentality of the leadership of the Croatian state,"

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<sup>471</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 1 September 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, September–October 1942.

<sup>472</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 109.

<sup>473</sup> "Battaglione Ustascia," 22 May 1942, Dalmazzo to Roatta, 22 and 23 May 1942, Dalmazzo to Giambertone, 23 May 1942, and "Notiziario n. 384," 25 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati. Rory Yeomans, "'For us, beloved commander, you will never die!' Mourning Jure Francetić, Ustasha Death Squad Leader," in Haynes and Rady, *In the Shadow of Hitler*, 194. Hehn, *German Struggle*, 123.

<sup>474</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 92.

Dalmazzo later forwarded Roatta intercepted communications between Zagreb and Berlin calling for closer commercial relations between Germany and Croatia at Italy's expense.<sup>475</sup>

Charges of Ustaša sabotage, intrigue, and military incompetence or unreliability continued to pour in from Spigo's XVIII Corps as well.<sup>476</sup> Such reports convinced Roatta that the Croatian high command was "incapable of any respectable undertaking."<sup>477</sup> He lamented that correspondence from the Croatian General Staff carried "a tone that is inappropriate to relations with a high military command of a great allied power."<sup>478</sup> Moreover, Zagreb's inability to properly garrison towns abandoned by Second Army led Roatta to conclude that the Croatian government — which for so long had lobbied for the withdrawal of Italian forces — had acted in bad faith. He complained that the Croats distributed their forces unequally, keeping most of their troops on the German side of the demarcation line.<sup>479</sup> Roatta failed to mention that Croatian security forces had largely been pushed behind the demarcation line at the behest of Second Army in 1941.

By the end of 1942, Roatta's hopes for a rapprochement between Italians, Croats, and Serbs were dashed. Despite the moderation of the genocidal policies of the Ustaše, on-and-off talks between Croatian and Četnik emissaries, and a major cabinet shuffle in Zagreb — which included the removal and exile of Slavko and Dido Kvaternik — the political situation seemed worse than before for the same reasons as before: the Croatian armed forces were ineffective; Ustaša functionaries were incompetent; and, the

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<sup>475</sup> "Trasmissione di documento," 22 September 1942, NARA T-821/402/0780-86.

<sup>476</sup> "Kecet Neda di Giuseppe," 12 June 1942, and "Attività croata," 24 June 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), June-July 1942, allegati. Collaborazione italo-croata," 13 September 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April-September 1942, allegati. Spigo to Roatta, 13 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October-November 1942, allegati.

<sup>477</sup> "Contatti col Governo Croato," 20 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April-September 1942, allegati.

<sup>478</sup> "Collaborazione con i cetnici," 11 May 1942, NARA T-821/66/0608-609.

<sup>479</sup> "Applicazione accordo Zagabria e provvedimenti per efficace collaborazione truppe italo-croate," 4 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April-September 1942, allegati. Roatta memorandum, 11 August 1942, DSCS, 7/II:312-14.

government was unable to feed its population.<sup>480</sup> In December, Roatta drew up plans for the “occupation of Zagreb in case of seditious or sinister attempts [*tentativi sediziosi o torbidi*] in Croatia.” Project “Z” envisioned units from XI Corps making a blitz from Slovenia to the Croatian capital.<sup>481</sup> These plans were justified as a contingency against a Communist threat to Zagreb, but their vaguely defined purpose allowed for other scenarios that could well have included action against the Ustaša regime.<sup>482</sup> At the very least, the existence of Project “Z” at the end of 1942 demonstrates that Roatta had not given up on protecting and expanding Italy’s *spazio vitale* in Croatia.

Given their suspicions of German-Croatian intrigue and their scant regard for Croatian military capabilities, Italian generals never were fully committed to a rapprochement with Pavelić and his functionaries. Certainly, they were not willing to jettison their Serb allies as the cost for improved relations with Zagreb. Italian commands remained convinced that, if they had to choose between working with the Ustaše or the Četniks, the latter were more reliable, militarily and politically. Initially lukewarm towards collaboration with nationalist Serb bands, the command of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division was impressed by the behaviour of Četnik formations who during Operation Trio offered their services against the Communist Partisans. Allowing that opportunism had played an important role in these defections, the division’s propaganda officers felt that Serb sympathies could be won over permanently with a clear declaration of support from Rome.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> “Notiziario politico militare n. 68,” 15 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati. Zagreb negotiated temporary agreements with Bosnian Četniks in summer 1942, mainly in response to military necessity and German prodding. Milazzo, *The Četnik Movement*, 79–80. The two Kvaterniks also were removed at the behest of the Germans, who blamed them for Croatia’s military difficulties. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 439–40.

<sup>481</sup> See “Progetto ‘Z’,” and “Operazione ‘Z’,” 9 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati. Operational plans to occupy Zagreb already existed, but the redeployment of V Corps prompted Roatta to modify Project ‘Z’ in December 1942, giving XI Corps the lead role in the operation.

<sup>482</sup> Zagreb was an important hub of Partisan activity throughout the war. Marko Attila Hoare, “Whose is the Partisan Movement? Serbs, Croats and the Legacy of a Shared Resistance,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 15, no. 4 (2002): 27–28.

<sup>483</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 197,” 28 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, March–April 1942, allegati.

Under its new commander, Berardi, the Sassari Division remained enthusiastic about pursuing an alliance with the Četniks. Even as its units abandoned and laid waste to territory in Lika and Bosanska Krajina in summer 1942, the division optimistically reported that Serbs near the Dalmatian border favoured incorporation “either with Serbia or with Italy.”<sup>484</sup> Despite Italian withdrawals, the command of the Sassari Division continued to adhere to Mussolini’s postwar aims of expanding the boundaries of Italian Dalmatia. At the same time, Berardi and his chief of staff, Gazzini, grew frustrated at the inability of Croatian and Četnik formations to coordinate against the Partisans. Although the Četniks openly flouted the Zagreb Accord by flying the Serbian flag during joint operations, Gazzini placed the blame solely at the feet of Croatian authorities whose touchiness, he concluded, derived from “the quibbling mentality of certain people that come up from nothing believing themselves great men.”<sup>485</sup>

By September, Berardi was willing to renounce any form of collaboration with Croatian authorities and populations in favour of closer ties with the Četniks. In a private letter to Spigo, he warned that “the constitution and armament of Croatian formations (the army included) and in particular of the Ustaše is in brief dangerous for us because the Croats are our enemies [...] even if their leader follows a policy of loyalty towards us.” He accused Croatian authorities of actively supporting the Partisan movement for anti-Italian motives, whereas “the only ones that are loyal to us [...] are the Orthodox Serbs.” Responding to Spigo’s call to make more use of Croatian forces, Berardi countered that arming Croats “threatened to neutralize the advantage that we have begun to obtain by arming the Četniks.”<sup>486</sup>

Having transferred from Greece only in May 1942, Berardi was not driven by the same humanitarian concerns that had contributed to Monticelli’s pro-Serb bearing. He

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<sup>484</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero informativo,” 3 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>485</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 22 and 25 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May–June 1942. The results of the first operation which units of the Sassari Division conducted alongside Croatian troops and Četnik irregulars were not encouraging. Before the operation was complete, the Croats and Četniks each returned to their respective camps, exposing the Italians’ flanks.

<sup>486</sup> The contents of the letter were copied verbatim in the hand-written Sassari Division Command war diary, 15 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942.

inherited a command staff with deeply entrenched anti-Croatian sentiments, and his own military and political calculations led him to build upon the policies of his predecessor.<sup>487</sup> Berardi flaunted his alliance with Đujić's Četniks before Croatian authorities in Knin. While he prudently turned away a band of Četniks that showed up to a public funeral waving the Serbian flag, the same day Berardi hosted a luncheon for Serb MVAC officers. Speaking on their behalf, Đujić affirmed his desire to liberate Serbia from "the Croats" through "Italo-Serb friendship." In his own speech, Berardi insinuated that the political objectives of the Četniks could only be achieved through collaboration with Italy against the Communist Partisans.<sup>488</sup> When Croatian authorities accused the Italian army of supporting the Četnik project to restore the old Yugoslavian state, Berardi disingenuously feigned ignorance as to who the Četniks were, since the Italians permitted only the existence of MVAC formations open to any creed.<sup>489</sup> Officially, Roatta chastised his subordinates for their continued philo-Serbism and their hostility towards the Croats.<sup>490</sup> But, he too was convinced that the Orthodox Serbs were more loyal to Italy than were the Croats.<sup>491</sup>

As in 1941, Italian generals overestimated the degree and extent of support they enjoyed from Serb populations and nationalist Četnik leaders. However, they did not embark on a policy of collaboration with the Četniks out of naïveté. From their negotiations with Četnik emissaries, Italian generals understood that Great Serb

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<sup>487</sup> Similarly, Burgwyn notes that Roatta's support for the Četniks "was no do-gooder's gesture but an exercise in Realpolitik." Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 271.

<sup>488</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 5 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, September-October 1942.

<sup>489</sup> "Ritorno prefetto Sincic," 14 December 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, November-December 1942, allegati. The Sassari Division only made an effort to recruit Croats in September, but this was suspended almost immediately by higher-level decisions to establish Ustaša militia units in Zone II under Italian control. Sassari Division Command war diary, 6 and 16 September 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, September-October 1942.

<sup>490</sup> "M.V.A.C.," 31 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October-November 1942, allegati. After a meeting with Pavelić, Roatta ordered the particularly pro-Serb VI Corps to stop allowing MVAC personnel to wear the Serbian eagle on their caps. "Rapporto tenuto nei giorni 27 e 28 ottobre 1942-XX in Sebenico ai comandati il VI e XVIII Corpo d'Armata," 28 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October-November 1942, allegati.

<sup>491</sup> "Notiziario politico militare n. 68," 15 December 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November-December 1942, allegati.

nationalism threatened their own interests in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Dalmatia. However, they calculated that this would only pose a danger after the war in the event of an Axis defeat. Through most of 1942, despite their own local troubles, Italian generals anticipated that the Axis would win the war.<sup>492</sup> In the case of an Axis victory, it was unlikely that Serb lobbying would threaten Italian interests, given Hitler's hostility towards the Serbs. Thus, while Roatta knew that his "Četnik" MVAC leaders were in contact with the more anti-Axis and pro-British General Mihailović, and that their long-term political goals were incompatible with Italy's expansionist aims, he did not believe that the time had come to "throw them out the window."<sup>493</sup>

While they entailed significant risk, these calculations proved more or less correct, mainly because the Allies did not attempt a landing in the Balkans during 1942 or 1943. Second Army's reliance on Četnik auxiliaries had militarily negative repercussions in the form of excesses committed against Croat and Muslim populations, and it ensured that cooperation with the German and Croatian allies would not improve. Nevertheless, the alternate loyalties of the Četnik leadership did not manifest themselves in practical form during the Italian occupation of Yugoslavia. Četnik leaders continued to cooperate in Italian operations aimed against the Partisans, and they would go on to do so with the Germans after Italy's departure from the theater in 1943.<sup>494</sup>

While agreeing that Second Army's motivations in its dealings with the Četniks were the result of cynical *Realpolitik*, some historians have argued that Italian generals were guilty of "defying Mussolini's orders" by supporting the Četnik movement. This argument is based in part on the assumption that Mussolini fully backed Pavelić's regime.

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<sup>492</sup> Through summer 1942, Ambrosio believed that the Axis would ultimately triumph in the war. Only with the British El Alamein offensive at the end of October, coupled with signs of a planned Soviet counteroffensive around Stalingrad, did Ambrosio's optimism wane. By January 1943, he was convinced that Germany would lose the war. Ciano diary, 4 August and 31 October 1942, and 20 January 1943. "Notiziario n. 332," 3 April 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati. Meetings with Četnik representatives in Herzegovina clearly revealed the political objectives of the Četnik movement, aimed at establishing a Great Serbia or, at minimum, an independent Bosnia. At the end of 1942, Mihailović himself proposed a return to prewar boundaries. Bucarelli, "Disgregazione jugoslava e questione serba," 54-57. See also, "Colloquio con i capi cetnici," 23 September 1942, DSCS, 8/II:30.

<sup>493</sup> "M.V.A.C.," 31 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October-November 1942, allegati. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 98-99. Ciano diary, 6 January 1943.

<sup>494</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 308-312. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 235.

As we have seen, this was not the impression that Italian generals had of the *Duce*'s policy. It is also based on contradictory directives from Rome that have been interpreted as criticism of the latter's pro-Četnik demeanour.<sup>495</sup> Certainly, functionaries of the Foreign Ministry continued to oppose the army's policy. Luca Pietromarchi was still wedded to the Croatian alliance and, by summer 1942, he was convinced that the Četniks had become uncontrollable.<sup>496</sup> But, the *Comando Supremo* ordered Roatta to intensify the constitution of MVAC forces in August.<sup>497</sup> The following month, Mussolini warned Roatta to use caution in collaborating with Četnik forces. Already having to deal with Croatian irredentism, he was concerned about opening the door to Serb claims. Even so, he ultimately approved Roatta's negotiations with Četnik leaders.<sup>498</sup> This hardly amounted to a prohibition against support for the Četniks, nor was it a ringing endorsement of the alternative Croatian alliance. By the end of 1942, policy in the Balkans was no longer a priority for Mussolini. His war plans for 1943 neglected the theatre altogether, and in November Second Army was forced to offer up another division for the defence of Italy.<sup>499</sup>

Pressure from Berlin proved a more crucial obstacle to Supersloda's policies than did pressure from Rome. Through 1942, German military authorities complained about the activity of irregular Serb formations, including MVAC units.<sup>500</sup> By the end of the year, the Germans enjoyed much more leverage in Croatia than they had twelve months earlier. As Italian strength dwindled, the *Wehrmacht* re-equipped its occupation forces

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<sup>495</sup> Trifković, "Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia," 899. Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 97–98, 123. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 260, 271–73, 310–11.

<sup>496</sup> "Rapporti Itali-croati nella 2<sup>a</sup> zona occupata," 26 April 1942, NARA T-821/402/0942–46. Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 106.

<sup>497</sup> Cavallero diary, 12 August 1942.

<sup>498</sup> Cavallero to Roatta, 17 September 1942, NARA T-821/63/0682. "Sunto del colloquio col Voivoda Trifunovic del 10 settembre 42," 11 September 1942, NARA T-821/63/0690–93.

<sup>499</sup> Cavallero diary, 30 August 1942. "Sintesi della riunione tenuta dall'Eccellenza il capo di Stato Maggiore Generale il 30 agosto 1942," and "Sintesi della riunione tenuta dall'Eccellenza il capo di Stato Maggiore Generale il 21 novembre 1942," VCSMG, 3:785–87, 898–900.

<sup>500</sup> See, for example, Bonfatti to Roatta, 10 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati; and, Re to Roatta, 6 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati.



already in the theatre and reinforced them with three new divisions.<sup>501</sup> The new commander of German forces in southeastern Europe, the Austrian General Alexander Löhr, declared the entire region a “unitary theatre of operations” under his direction. He unilaterally announced that the demarcation line would no longer apply during large-scale anti-partisan operations.<sup>502</sup> Following their defeats in North Africa, the Germans were urgent to destroy all guerrilla forces in Croatia before the Allies could launch an amphibious landing in the Balkans. They asked the Italians to participate in a new joint operation, *Weiss*, under German command.<sup>503</sup>

As part of the operation, Hitler demanded “brutal action” against Serb nationalists and Četniks. On this point, Cavallero was from the beginning noncommittal. He feared that, despite their assurances, the Germans intended to “intrude politically” into Italy’s sphere of influence.<sup>504</sup> Roatta, Pirzio Biroli, and Dalmazzo, now commanding the Italian Ninth Army in Albania, all defended the Četnik alliance. Mussolini and Cavallero agreed that the Germans merely refused to negotiate with the Četniks for their own political reasons and that Serb bands had thus far collaborated effectively with Italian forces against Communist Partisans. They were not willing to renounce collaboration altogether, but they felt that they had to throw a bone to Hitler. Cavallero returned to the Germans with a compromise: he pledged to stop delivering arms to anti-communist formations and he announced that General Roatta, whose relationship with the Germans had been very rocky since Operation Trio, would be transferred out of the Balkans.<sup>505</sup> After Operation *Weiss* began on 20 January 1943, Cavallero continued to permit the “temporary use” of “volunteer units” and he looked the other way as Supersloda continued to supply MVAC forces with arms. When Cavallero was himself removed from command in early

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<sup>501</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 218.

<sup>502</sup> “Direttive germaniche per le operazioni contro le bande,” December 1942, DSCS, 8/II:135–36.

<sup>503</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 219. Cavallero diary, 2 January 1942.

<sup>504</sup> Cavallero diary, 18 and 20 December 1942. German plans were to disarm the Četnik bands in the third phase of Operation *Weiss*, after using them against the Partisans. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 219.

<sup>505</sup> Cavallero diary, 3–4 January 1943.

February, his replacement, Ambrosio, proved even more reluctant to carry out anti-Četnik activity at Germany's behest.<sup>506</sup>

Exasperated by the Italian army's vacillation, at the end of February Ribbentrop and Hitler demanded that Supersloda disband its Četnik MVAC units. Mussolini defended the army's policy, arguing that it was first necessary to pacify the region before disarming the anti-communist formations, but in the end he gave into German pressure. Luciano Monzali has described Mussolini's defence of the army's position as "hesitant and weak."<sup>507</sup> But, given Mussolini's by now total reliance on Germany to obtain any of his objectives, it is significant that he offered any opposition at all. Hitler's personal intervention and insistence on the matter carried decisive weight. In this context, it is unlikely that Italian generals in the field afterwards felt that they were trying to "boycott" Mussolini's directives to disband the anti-communist militia.<sup>508</sup> Supersloda's new commander, Robotti, immediately informed the *Comando Supremo* that he planned to disarm the MVAC units gradually to avoid a violent reaction.<sup>509</sup> After the Germans announced their intention to extend Operation *Weiss* by occupying Mostar, well within Second Army's jurisdiction, Robotti conferred with Ambrosio and Mussolini. They agreed not to pull MVAC units out of the area as the Germans had requested.<sup>510</sup> In the eyes of Supersloda and Rome, the Četniks remained tools in the struggle to avoid German hegemony in the Adriatic.

Operation *Weiss* marked the peak of Italo-Četnik collaboration and the high tide of the Četnik movement, coinciding with Mihailović's planned offensive against the Partisans in Bosnia. However, as Tito's forces sought to escape the Axis trap, they dealt a serious blow to Četnik detachments on the Neretva River. At the end of March the Partisans escaped to southeastern Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, where they

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<sup>506</sup> Milazzo, *The Četnik Movement*, 114–20.

<sup>507</sup> "Riassunto delle riunioni itali-tedesche avvenute in Roma," 2 March 1943, NARA T-821/31/0342–44. Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 121–22.

<sup>508</sup> Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 123.

<sup>509</sup> "Organizzazione cetnica di Draza Mihajlovic," 8 March 1943, NARA T-821/31/0335–36.

<sup>510</sup> Drechsler to Robotti, 6 March 1943, and Robotti to Drechsler, 6 March 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, fasc. "Marzo 1943 (U.S. Jug.)."

stepped up their attacks on the Četniks. Meanwhile, the Germans began disarming Četnik forces in Serbia. This effectively marked the end of Četnik prospects in Yugoslavia. Although many bands remained intact, their leadership had been discredited and shattered by failure.<sup>511</sup> In mid-May, the Germans launched a follow-up operation, named *Schwarz*, intending to finish off the Četnik movement while again targeting Tito's command. Although most of the operation would take place in Montenegro, the Germans concealed their plans from the Italians until the last moment.<sup>512</sup>

Confronted with a *fait accompli*, Mussolini ordered the army to cooperate with the Germans and disarm "Četnik and nationalist formations loyal to the Mihailović movement." Even at this stage, Rome was unwilling to completely renounce collaboration with nationalist Serb forces. Mussolini, Ambrosio, Robotti, and Pirzio Biroli did not believe that all Četnik bands were loyal to Mihailović, and they resisted German pressure to disarm Orthodox MVAC formations in general. During meetings on the topic in June, Löhr insisted on total disarmament, but allowed that the Italians could proceed gradually over two months.<sup>513</sup>

At no point did Mussolini display particular anxiousness to repudiate Second Army's policy towards Serbs and Četniks in Yugoslavia. Italian generals in the theatre interpreted Mussolini's ambiguous actions and statements as a green light to continue their activities without bowing to German demands. It has been argued that the army's continued support of the Četniks in 1943 was due to its recognition that the Axis was doomed and that, by cultivating relations with pro-Allied Četniks, Italian generals hoped to facilitate Italy's exit from the war.<sup>514</sup> While Mussolini irrationally continued to envision postwar territorial expansion in Croatia, leading Fascists, diplomats, and

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<sup>511</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 143–45. Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 329–40. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 131–40.

<sup>512</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 240–41. Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 143–45. Trifković, "Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia," 902.

<sup>513</sup> "Riassunto del colloquio di Salonicco," 2 June 1943, NARA T-821/31/0327–32.

<sup>514</sup> Trifković, "Rivalry between Germany and Italy in Croatia," 899. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrophe d'Italia*, 1:219.

military men lost faith in his “growing lack of political realism.”<sup>515</sup> But, it is remarkable how wedded Italian generals were to the same objectives of imperialist expansion and prestige, even after Mussolini’s fall on 25 July.

During the period between July and September 1943, Italian generals in Yugoslavia demonstrated a considerable degree of continuity with their attitudes and policies from 1941 and 1942. Robotti remained keen to demonstrate to the Germans and Croats that “Italy has by no means renounced, nor intends to renounce, its influence in the Balkans.”<sup>516</sup> He complained of German intrusions in his area of jurisdiction, warned of excessive German influence in Zagreb, reported German agents in Dalmatia, and resisted German efforts to establish posts in Italian-held territory.<sup>517</sup> Likewise, relations with Croatian authorities were plagued by the same issues as before. Robotti remained touchy when bulletins or government speeches in Croatia failed to mention Italy’s contribution to its independence and war effort.<sup>518</sup> He accused Croatian authorities of intentionally preventing foodstuffs from reaching Italian Dalmatia and Carnaro, and he threatened to make requisitions directly from Croatian territory.<sup>519</sup> Italian officers complained of Ustaše singing irredentist songs, and they sequestered firearms from Croatian militia.<sup>520</sup>

After spring 1943, the Italians received more evidence that Četnik commanders planned to attack their units as soon as the Allies landed on the Adriatic coast, and the

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<sup>515</sup> Monzali, “La difficile alleanza,” 119–20.

<sup>516</sup> “Amnistia a favore di cittadini corati condannati dal Tribunali militari italiani,” 11 July 1943, NARA T-821/294/0260–61.

<sup>517</sup> “Situazione politico-militare (relazione),” 31 July 1943, NARA T-821/31/0247. “Cricca tedesco-croata in Zagabria,” 8 August 1943, NARA T-821/31/0275. “Agenti tedeschi sul Litorale croato,” 28 June 1943, NARA T-821/294/0345–46. “Posto germanico di vigilanza ferroviaria,” 3 August 1943, NARA T-821/294/0126.

<sup>518</sup> “Situazione nella zona di Biokovo,” 1 September 1943, NARA T-821/294/0004–05. “Discorse del Pogliavnik,” 28 August 1943, NARA T-821/294/0031.

<sup>519</sup> “Approvvigionamento delle popolazioni civili dalmate e del fiumaro,” 19 August 1943, NARA T-821/294/0067–68.

<sup>520</sup> “Manifestazioni irredentiste di militari croati,” 13 July 1943, NARA T-821/294/0268–69. “Perquisizioni illegali nel villaggio di Struge e disarmo di militi croati,” 25 July 1943, NARA T-821/294/0165.

Italian army attempted to disarm certain Četnik groups in Montenegro and Herzegovina.<sup>521</sup> Nonetheless, Italian intelligence officers calculated that the lack of leadership or unity within the Četnik movement following Operations *Weiss* and *Schwarz* mitigated its danger and was ultimately “good for us.”<sup>522</sup> Italian commanders remained convinced that the Četnik movement was a bastion against communism. Mihailović’s refusal to align himself with Tito, Robotti argued, had thwarted British efforts to unite the Partisans and Četniks against the Axis.<sup>523</sup> While the V Corps voiced concern that local Četniks appeared satisfied with the prospects of an Allied victory, it also noted that they continued to participate loyally in Italian-led anti-partisan operations.<sup>524</sup> The VI Corps was even hopeful that the Germans might finally be coming to understand that the Četniks were “the only truly anti-communist combatants” in the region.<sup>525</sup>

The army, on the whole, maintained its philo-Serb outlook due to its military reliance on Četnik manpower and its conviction that the Četniks were more politically reliable than any other potential allies in Yugoslavia. In its view, “a Greater Croatia favourable or friendly towards Italy is *impossible*.” For its part, too, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintained its pro-Croatian stance after Mussolini’s fall. This further suggests that disagreements over policy towards the Ustaše and Četniks were not based on conflicting interpretations of the *Duce*’s will nor upon ideological considerations, but on differing strategic opinions between state institutions.<sup>526</sup>

Although their policies towards Croats and Serbs were in large part ad hoc responses to complex and difficult local circumstances, Italian generals displayed a great deal of consistency in the pursuit of political aims in Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1943. They shared Rome’s fear of Nazi dominance in the Adriatic and sought to keep German

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<sup>521</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 262–63.

<sup>522</sup> “Esame dei documenti catturati al maggiore (cetnico) Stude,” 23 June 1943, NARA T-821/288/0259–61.

<sup>523</sup> “Situazione politico-militare (relazione),” 31 July 1943, NARA T-821/31/0246–56.

<sup>524</sup> “Relazione mensile,” 28 August 1943, NARA T-821/287/0381–85.

<sup>525</sup> “Informazioni,” 16 August 1943, NARA T-821/288/0308.

<sup>526</sup> The opinions of both sides are summarized well in “Coloquio tra le Eccellenze Robotti e Petrucci avvenuto a Ronchi,” 11 August 1943, NARA T-821/31/0268–71. Emphasis in original.

boots out of Italy's declared sphere of influence. Within months, they concluded that the puppet state established in Zagreb would serve neither to defend nor extend Italian interests in the region. Considering the Independent State of Croatia an enemy to Italian expansion, they searched for allies elsewhere and pursued policies that sought to claw away at territory and influence held by Ustaša authorities. Cooperation with Serb nationalist leaders began primarily for these political purposes and later crystallized into a quasi-official alliance with the Četniks, who Supersloda wanted to use militarily against the Partisans and politically against the Germans and Croats. These developments certainly conflicted with Rome's initial decision to cultivate its relationship with the Ustaše, but Italian generals believed that they enjoyed Mussolini's consent and approval in making this departure. Their greatest conflicts came firstly with Croatian authorities and secondly with the Germans, who disagreed with Second Army's military strategy but also correctly ascertained its political intentions.

### *The Treatment of Jews*

If the Italian army's policies towards the Serbs and Četniks produced an insuperable rift with its German and Croatian allies, its treatment of Yugoslavian Jews widened the chasm even further. While the Nazis and Ustaše actively persecuted Jews, the Italian military appeared to protect them. Since the 1950s a number of scholars have examined and attempted to explain Second Army's confusing policy towards Jewish refugees in occupied Yugoslavia.<sup>527</sup> There is general agreement that several thousand foreign Jews

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<sup>527</sup> See Jacques Sabille, "Attitude of the Italians to the Persecuted Jews in Croatia," in *Jews under Italian Occupation*, by Léon Poliakov and Jacques Sabille (Paris: Éditions du Centre, 1955; New York: Fertig, 1983), 129–50; Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev ed. (New York: Viking, 1965; New York: Penguin, 2006), 176–80; Daniel Carpi, "The Rescue of Jews in the Italian Zone of Occupied Croatia," in *Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Efraim Zuroff (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977), 465–525; De Felice, *Jews in Fascist Italy*, 387–402; Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, and Survival* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 74–100; Menachem Shelah, "The Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews, 1941–1943," in *The Italian Refuge: Rescue of Jews During the Holocaust*, ed. Ivo Herzer, Klaus Voigt, and James Burgwyn (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 205–217; Steinberg, *All or Nothing*; Menachem Shelah, *Un debito di gratitudine: Storia dei rapporti tra l'Esercito italiano e gli ebrei in Dalmazia, 1941–1943* (Rome: USSME, 1991); Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 362–407; Davide Rodogno, "Italiani brava gente? Fascist Italy's Policy Toward the Jews in the Balkans, April 1941–July 1943," *European History Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2005): 213–40; Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 186–95; MacGregor Knox, "Das Faschistische Italien und die 'Endlösung' 1942/43," trans. Hermann Graml,

survived the Holocaust at least in part because of the attitude and behaviour of the Italian army in its zones of occupation.<sup>528</sup> Historians agree on the narrative and timeline of Italian policies towards Jews in Yugoslavia, which were developed after mid-1942 by the command of Supersloda in conjunction with officials from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, largely in response to German and Croatian pressure to hand over Jewish refugees for deportation. Most scholars also agree that Italian policy was motivated by multiple factors: military, political, diplomatic, ideological, ethical, and local. However, there is less agreement on the relative importance of each of these factors on the Italian army's decision making — particularly, whether humanitarian concerns trumped pragmatic calculations or vice versa. There is also disagreement over the extent to which Italian officers and diplomats in Yugoslavia truly represented a coherent, coordinated, and consistent “rescue effort.” Finally, historians disagree over the “conspiratorial” nature of the army's policy, concerning the degree to which it consciously undermined Mussolini's central directives and Fascism's officially anti-Semitic stance, as enshrined in the Italian racial laws of 1938.

Certainly, the Italian army's treatment of Jews in Yugoslavia differed significantly from that of its German and Croatian allies. In Serbia, the German army was complicit in the Holocaust from the beginning of the occupation. The Military Commander in Serbia oversaw the “Aryanization” of Serbian businesses and the segregation of Jews, Sinti, and Roma in the country.<sup>529</sup> The *Wehrmacht* also targeted Jews in reprisal actions intended to dissuade the broader Serb population from supporting the communist-led insurgency in Serbia during the summer and autumn of 1941.

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*Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 55, no. 1 (2007): 53–92; Esther Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed: The Rescue and Survival of Jews in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941–1945* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon, 2011), 127–57; and, Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 129–32.

<sup>528</sup> Estimates of the total figure of survivors vary between 3,000 and 7,500. Carpi, “Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia,” 503; Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*, xxvii; and, Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 131. Shelah suggests a survival rate of eighty percent among Jews who fled to Italian occupation zones. Shelah, “Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews,” 216.

<sup>529</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 85–87. Walter Manoschek, “‘Coming Along to Shoot Some Jews?’ The Destruction of the Jews in Serbia,” trans. Roy Shelton, in Heer and Naumann, *War of Extermination*, 39–40.

Equating Jews with communists, German authorities forced the Jewish community to provide hostages on a daily basis. While the German army came to regard the arbitrary arrest and execution of innocent Serbs as a counterproductive security measure, it continued to shoot male Jews as communists until December 1941, when it ran out of victims.<sup>530</sup> The remaining Jews in Serbia, comprising 7,500 women and children, were interned at the Semlin [Zemun] concentration camp near Belgrade. At the end of 1941, the SS took control of the camp and proceeded to liquidate these Jews with the use of a single gas van. By May 1942, Serbia could be declared “free of Jews” [*judenfrei*].<sup>531</sup>

In the Independent State of Croatia, mass violence against Jews originated without German prodding. Anti-Semitism played a relatively minor role in Croatian history and Ustaša ideology, which focused its hatred on Serbs as the inferior yet threatening “other.” Nonetheless, the Ustaša leadership quickly targeted Jews as agents of the Serbs who threatened the racial purity of Croatia.<sup>532</sup> In an attempt to please Hitler, the Pavelić regime introduced anti-Jewish measures — including curfews, marriage restrictions, the registration of property, the Aryanization of the bureaucracy and Jewish capital, and the obligatory donning of yellow badges — in May and June 1941. Mass roundups followed and, by summer, Ustaša guards were murdering Jews and Serbs in death camps such as Jadovno and Jasenovac.<sup>533</sup> The Nazis did not interfere in Croatia’s Jewish question until mid-1942, when they arranged to deport the country’s remaining Jews to their newly built extermination camps in eastern Europe. Out of a prewar population of 35,000 Croatian and Bosnian Jews, between 20,000 and 25,000 died in Ustaša camps, and over 7,000 perished in Nazi gas chambers. Others were killed in Ustaša and Četnik raids or fighting as Partisans.<sup>534</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> Browning, *Fateful Months*, 39–56. Manoschek, “Destruction of Jews in Serbia,” 41–45. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 122–23. Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 300–301.

<sup>531</sup> Browning, *Fateful Months*, 68–85. Manoschek, “Destruction of Jews in Serbia,” 49–50.

<sup>532</sup> Korb, “Understanding Ustaša Violence,” 8.

<sup>533</sup> Goldstein, *1941*, 24, 180, 220, 263–76. Steinberg, “Types of Genocide,” 179–80.

<sup>534</sup> Longerich, *Holocaust*, 363–66. Korb, “Understanding Ustaša Violence,” 7–8. Steinberg, “Types of Genocide,” 175. Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*, xxiii, 27–29.



Italian authorities were aware of these developments. Diplomatic representatives reported the arrest and internment of all Jews by German authorities in Serbia.<sup>535</sup> In a meeting with Ciano at the end of 1941, Croatian secret police chief Dido Kvaternik implicitly admitted to the murder of 20,000 Jews, explaining to the Italian foreign minister that the reduction of Croatia's Jewish population from 35,000 to 12,000 was the result of "emigration." Given the wry smile on Kvaternik's face, Ciano concluded that the word was a euphemism.<sup>536</sup> Military intelligence reports related accusations from Jewish refugees of "abuse, violence and all sorts of crimes" at the hands of German and Croatian authorities.<sup>537</sup> Second Army tracked the formalization of Ustaša persecution, keeping records of Croatian anti-Semitic legislation. At the end of July 1942, the army reported the existence of an agreement between the German and Croatian governments to deport Croatian Jews to the German-occupied eastern territories.<sup>538</sup>

It was not until this revelation in summer 1942 that Supersloda deemed it necessary to devise a formal policy towards Jews and Jewish refugees residing in territories occupied and administered by its units. During the crucial first year of occupation, when most Croatian Jews were driven from their homes, there is scant evidence of a concerted rescue effort by the Italian military leadership in the region. In one of the earliest studies on the topic, Jacques Sabille argued that Italian officers and troops who protected Jews in 1941 did so spontaneously and illegally, and therefore left no documentary evidence of their "rescue work."<sup>539</sup> But, as we have seen, the war logs of the Sassari Division made no effort to disguise — and instead proudly recorded — its protection of Orthodox Serbs from Ustaša persecution. That the same records make no mention of Jews was more likely due to the small Jewish population within the Sassari Division's zone of occupation, whose inland location did not make it a primary

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<sup>535</sup> Mameli to Ciano, 12 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 11.

<sup>536</sup> Meeting between Ciano and Pavelić, 15 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 26.

<sup>537</sup> "Relazione censura postale," 16 December 1941, AUSSME, I-3, b. 31, fasc. "Censura dal 21/6/1944 al 27/12/1945."

<sup>538</sup> "Situazione ebrei," 27 August 1942, NARA T-821/405/0695-97. By mid-1942, Rome was aware of Nazi extermination policy against European Jews. Rodogno, "*Italiani brava gente?*," 221.

<sup>539</sup> Sabille, "Attitude to Persecuted Jews in Croatia," 132.

destination for Jewish refugees seeking asylum in Dalmatia or Italy, and because of the division commander's preoccupation with the much larger Serb population that bore the brunt of Ustaša persecution which most directly threatened stability in the region. Undoubtedly, many Jews benefitted from the Italian army's anti-Ustaša bearing in the spring and summer of 1941. However, alongside recollections of assistance received from individual Italian soldiers, the testimonies of survivors relate instances during this early period in which Jewish refugees managed to flee to Italian zones, only to be apprehended by Italian police and remanded to Croatian authorities.<sup>540</sup>

More recent scholarship has demonstrated that Fascist policies towards Jews in the annexed provinces of Dalmatia and Carnaro in 1941 had few characteristics of a "humanitarian rescue operation." Bastianini's Italianization project envisioned the expulsion of foreign and eventually Dalmatian Jews from the Adriatic coast. Italian police turned away or expelled hundreds of Croatian Jews that sought refuge in Fiume, Zara, Kotor, or Split, while interning Jews that were considered dangerous.<sup>541</sup> The war logs of the VI Corps and the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division, based out of Split between September and December 1941, reveal that military authorities on the spot approved of the government's anti-Jewish policies.

The coastal city of Split was a key destination for Jews fleeing Ustaša and Nazi persecution in 1941 and 1942. There was plenty of accommodation available to rent and it was an important rail hub, allowing refugees from as far away as Zagreb and Belgrade to enter the city clandestinely. From Split, many fugitives hoped to reach the Italian peninsula by boat.<sup>542</sup> Split was also reasonably close to Sarajevo and its community of 10,000 Jews, of whom 2,500 to 3,000 survived the Holocaust by fleeing the city.<sup>543</sup> It is

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<sup>540</sup> Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*, 133–34.

<sup>541</sup> Rodogno, "Italiani brava gente?," 222–25. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 193–94.

<sup>542</sup> Imre Rochlitz, *Accident of Fate: A Personal Account, 1938–1945* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011), 54, 79, 83. "Notiziario n. 187," 7 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati. "Notiziario n. 219," 9 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>543</sup> Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*, 48–49, 54. Many Sarajevan Jews fled in summer 1941. Roundups and deportations by Ustaša police and Gestapo agents in autumn prompted a more frantic flight for survival. By August 1942, Sarajevo's Jewish population had largely disappeared. Emily Greble, *Sarajevo*,

clear that, long before Italian authorities devised a policy for the treatment of Jewish refugees, many Yugoslavian Jews adopted survival strategies that took them to or through Italian-held territories, where they assumed they would be treated more leniently.<sup>544</sup> This reinforces Alexander Korb's observation that even victims of mass violence can exercise a degree of agency, thereby influencing broader policies.<sup>545</sup> But Italian military authorities in Dalmatia saw these Jews and other refugees as a threat. The commander of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division, General Pivano, criticized the local civil administration for giving

refuge to so many Serbs, Bosniaks, Herzegovinians, Croats and Jews from the former Yugoslavian state. Among these refugees who are generally hostile to us, Russian-English propaganda would have an easy task organizing attacks or acts of sabotage against us.<sup>546</sup>

Pivano also suspected the loyalties of local Jews, fearing that the Jewish owner and employees of a cement factory outside Split were “not in favour of the Axis.”<sup>547</sup>

Following a series of urban guerrilla attacks in Split during October and November 1941, authorities there arrested and deported hundreds of non-native Jews, along with some Croats, for internment in isolated Dalmatian islands, Albania, or different parts of Italy.<sup>548</sup> By the end of December, 1,096 Jews had been deported. Commanding the VI Corps, Renzo Dalmazzo praised the arrests and deportations as part

*1941–1945: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Hitler's Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 110–18.

<sup>544</sup> Even before the Treaty of Rome, hundreds of Jews fled German-held Croatian territory for Italian occupation zones along the coast. “Situazione ebrei,” 27 August 1942, NARA T-821/405/0695–97.

<sup>545</sup> Korb, “Understanding Ustaša Violence,” 12.

<sup>546</sup> “Relazione informativa,” 27 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>547</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 32,” 27 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>548</sup> “Notiziario n. 190,” 10 November 1941; “Notiziario n. 192,” 12 November 1941; “Notiziario n. 203,” 23 November 1941; “Notiziario n. 204,” 24 November 1941; and, “Notiziario n. 209,” 29 November 1941 AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati. During the month of November 1941, authorities in Split detained 679 Jews — 105 of whom had arrived from other parts of Croatia that month — and deported them for internment in Italy. “Notiziario n. 215,” 5 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

of effective security measures taken by Dalmatian authorities.<sup>549</sup> Armellini's vehement condemnation of squadrist violence against Jews in Split six months later did not necessarily indicate a more positive view of the Jewish community on behalf of XVIII Corps.<sup>550</sup> His complaints of arbitrary vandalism and brutality committed by Bastianini's militia were intended primarily to undermine the Fascist governor's position in Dalmatia. Beyond the episode of 12 June 1942, Armellini's extensive body of correspondence with Bastianini did not comment on Jewish policy.

For Italian military authorities in the first year of occupation, the Jewish question remained subordinate to other more pressing concerns. Davide Rodogno correctly points out that the army's attitude towards Jews cannot be separated from its general policy towards refugees as a whole. This typically involved the closing of borders, including the Italo-Croatian demarcation line, in order to avoid the economic and public health concerns that came with an influx of refugees.<sup>551</sup> In Split, military authorities supported Bastianini's decision to expel or intern Jewish refugees, not for their protection but as part of counterinsurgency strategy. In Italian-occupied Croatian territory, political considerations justified harbouring Jewish refugees, just as the Italians harboured Serb refugees that requested protection from the Ustaše.<sup>552</sup>

Military authorities wielded Italian "protection" of refugees as a political weapon to consolidate and expand Italy's sphere of influence in the Balkans. Intending to differentiate Italian occupation from Ustaša rule and to normalize the newly occupied Zones II and III as quickly as possible, Ambrosio's 7 September 1941 decree announced freedom of religion and equal treatment for all ethnic groups. As a result, one of

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<sup>549</sup> "Notiziario n. 244," 3 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>550</sup> Sarfatti describes the attack on the synagogue in Split as one of the worst episodes of Fascist violence against Jews before the deportations of 1943-45. Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 48.

<sup>551</sup> Rodogno, "*Italiani brava gente?*," 219-20. Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 365-67.

<sup>552</sup> The Sassari Division reported the flight of large numbers of Serbs from Knin even before the manifestation of Ustaša violence. See Sassari Division Command war diary, 21 and 22 May 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941. Second Army favoured adhering to requests of grateful Serb refugees to remain in Italian-occupied territory. "Serbi ortodossi residenti a Sussa," 19 March 1942, NARA T-821/402/282-84.

Ambrosio's priorities involved ensuring that Italian promises of protection could be kept.<sup>553</sup> While primarily aimed at winning over Serbs, Second Army's policy implicitly extended to Jews as well. Thus, Dalmazzo's VI Corps intervened in favour of Jewish refugees in Mostar, obliging Croatian civil authorities to issue them ration books.<sup>554</sup> Continued Ustaša persecution of these Jews directly threatened Ambrosio's policy as well as Italian suzerainty over Croatian authorities in occupied territory, prompting the commander of Second Army to intervene personally at the end of the year. Ambrosio guaranteed Jews in Mostar the same living conditions as other groups and promised that they would not be "harassed" so long as they did not disturb public order.<sup>555</sup> Staff of VI Corps's Civil Affairs Office later came to regard Jewish refugee policy as a means to undermine Croatian sovereignty and to bolster Italy's irredentist claims on Dubrovnik as well. Noting that the 350 Jews in the city were Ladino-speaking Sephardic Jews — ostensibly "Latinized" rather than "Slavicized Jews" — Italian military and diplomatic officials in the city suggested that they could make the difference in a future plebiscite for annexation.<sup>556</sup>

However, other Italian commands saw Jewish refugees as an unwanted burden. After Pivano's Cacciatori delle Alpi Division was transferred from Split to Mostar in December, the general and his staff bore the brunt of complaints from Croatian and German authorities that such "undesirable elements" exacerbated the food crisis in the city and provided intelligence to insurgents.<sup>557</sup> Pivano's intelligence reports largely agreed with this analysis, adding that "the population does not at all view favourably the

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<sup>553</sup> "Situazione nella zona demilitarizzata dalla pubblicazione del Bando del 7 settembre 1941 ad oggi," 7 October 1941, DSCS, 5/II:44–46.

<sup>554</sup> "Notiziario n. 205," 25 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

<sup>555</sup> "Situazione ebrei," 27 August 1942, NARA T-821/405/0695–97. "Notiziario n. 388," 29 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>556</sup> "Situazione ebrei," 27 August 1942, NARA T-821/405/0695–97. "Noriziario" [*sic*], 13 October 1942, NARA T-821/402/717.

<sup>557</sup> "Notiziario informativo n. 73," 14 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, November–December 1941, allegati. "Notiziario n. 249," 8 January 1942, and "Notiziario n. 257," 16 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

presence of Jews in the city who have come in large numbers from Sarajevo to put themselves, so they say, under the protection of Italian troops.”<sup>558</sup> Pivano considered the Jews to be “against us” [*a noi contrario*] and prohibited his troops from having any contact with them.<sup>559</sup> There is no indication that the attitude of Pivano and his staff was informed by anti-Semitism. The command of the Cacciatori Division considered every group in Herzegovina, including Croats, Serbs, and Muslims, to be hostile to Italy, and the Jews were no exception. Nor does the division’s staff appear to have considered handing Jewish refugees over to the Croats or Germans as a way to rid itself of the logistical dilemmas they posed. This suggests that Pivano, too, accepted the care and tacit protection of Jewish refugees as a necessary component of Second Army’s pacification policy, if not for compassionate grounds.

By June 1942, the Cacciatori Division had been replaced in Mostar by the Murge Division. Its commander, Paride Negri, was more sympathetic to the Jews and maintained a closer relationship with the leadership of Mostar’s Jewish community.<sup>560</sup> In an oft-cited “turning point” for Italian rescue efforts in Yugoslavia, Negri alarmingly reported news of German and Croatian plans to deport all Croatian Jews, including those in Herzegovina, to the east. Informed by a German official of these intentions, Negri replied: “Oh, no, that is totally impossible, because the deportation of Jews goes against the honor of the Italian army.” Negri’s reference to honour indicates that his response was conditioned either by humanitarian principles or by the political need to protect Italian sovereignty in its area of jurisdiction, or both.<sup>561</sup>

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<sup>558</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 102,” 12 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1942, allegati.

<sup>559</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 96,” 6 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1942, allegati.

<sup>560</sup> Two letters from David Hajon, the president of the Jewish community in Mostar, dated 5 January and 27 May 1942, reveal that Hajon felt far more comfortable with, and grateful to, Negri than he had with Pivano. “Notiziario n. 388,” 29 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati. On Negri’s policy of dialogue with the Jews of Mostar, see also Steinberg, *All or Nothing*, 72.

<sup>561</sup> Sabille, “Attitude to Persecuted Jews in Croatia,” 135–36, 164. Carpi, “Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia,” 472–73, 510–11. Shelah, “Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews,” 209. Rodogno, “Italiani brava gente,” 226. Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*, 130–31.

A number of circumstances converged in summer 1942 that prompted Supersloda and the Foreign Ministry to begin coordinating policy towards Croatian Jews. By this point, the remaining Jews in the NDH recognized the nature of the Ustaša camp system and saw flight as the only viable option left to them.<sup>562</sup> News of Italian plans for withdrawals in the aftermath of Operation Trio fuelled a further exodus to the west. In response, Bastianini renewed his calls upon military authorities to prevent this flood of refugees from entering Dalmatia. Now, by planning the total deportation of Croatian Jews, German and Croatian authorities threatened to undermine Italian independence in parts of Croatia controlled by Second Army.<sup>563</sup> On 17 August, the German Foreign Ministry formally requested the Italian army's cooperation in the deportation of Yugoslavian Jews to eastern Europe.<sup>564</sup>

Mussolini immediately complicated the issue by giving his “*nulla osta*” [no objection] to the German request. Some historians have considered these two words — scrawled in the *Duce*'s handwriting across a Foreign Ministry memorandum — as a “short and decisive” central directive or “explicit command,” which Italian functionaries immediately set about “sabotaging.”<sup>565</sup> However, according to Italian bureaucratic usage, a *nulla osta* did no more than leave the final decision up to the competent authorities on the spot.<sup>566</sup> Subsequent events suggest that Mussolini, was not fully wedded either to a policy of protecting or persecuting Jews in Italian-occupied territories. He showed little concern for the fate of Yugoslavian Jews and was willing to turn them over to the Germans in order to avoid a crisis with Hitler.<sup>567</sup> But Supersloda and the Foreign

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<sup>562</sup> Rochlitz, *Accident of Fate*, 52.

<sup>563</sup> Steinberg, *All or Nothing*, 49–51.

<sup>564</sup> Carpi, “Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia,” 474, 512. Shelah, “Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews,” 210. Rodogno, “Italiani brava gente,” 227.

<sup>565</sup> Shelah, “Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews,” 210. Carpi, “Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia,” 475, 512. Zuccotti, *Italians and the Holocaust*, 77. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 188.

<sup>566</sup> Rodogno, “Italiani brava gente,” 227.

<sup>567</sup> While De Felice likely exaggerates the role played by humanitarian instinct in Mussolini's later reluctance to extradite Jews from Italian-occupied zones in Yugoslavia and France, he correctly illustrates the dilemma Mussolini faced in 1942 and 1943 as he tried to walk a tightrope between pursuing an independent strategy and appeasing his powerful German ally. De Felice, *Jews in Fascist Italy*, 400–402.

Ministry quickly convinced him that Italian military and foreign policy had more to gain by refusing to hand over Jewish refugees. Mussolini's position towards the Jewish problem in Yugoslavia was nearly identical to his stance towards the Četnik alliance — he provided few clear instructions and tended to accept and support the line adopted by his generals.

Roatta's justifications for declining to hand over Jewish refugees also bore similarities to the Četnik issue. Indeed, the two policies, in Roatta's mind, were directly linked. In a series of telegrams to Cavallero and Mussolini, Roatta opined that Ustaša meddling was behind the German request. He believed that turning over Jews to Croatian or German authorities "will inflict a serious blow to the prestige of the Italian army in all of Croatia and the Balkans." In other words, relinquishing the Jews would threaten both Italy's sovereignty from Germany and its hegemony over Croatia. Echoing Ambrosio's concerns from the end of 1941, Roatta added that the extradition of Jews would expose Italian guarantees against racial or religious discrimination as meaningless, and would jeopardize the army's relations with the Orthodox Serb populations that placed their trust in Italian promises. Roatta feared that their "Balkan mentality" would lead Serbs and Četniks to believe that the Italians would abandon them next.<sup>568</sup> Thus, Roatta connected the Jewish question not only to concerns of sovereignty and to the army's and Mussolini's shared obsession with prestige, but to his counterinsurgency strategy that increasingly depended on Četnik auxiliary formations and to his designs for future Italian expansionism in the Balkan region based on popular Serb support.

The anti-Croatian motivation behind the army's policy cannot be underestimated. When, on 31 August, Ustaša officials asked Roatta to hand over the Jewish refugees currently residing in Italian zones, the general replied

that the matter is not my business, but rather the jurisdiction of central authorities. I added that — until given orders to the contrary — I would not turn over people that — apart from any declaration by us on the subject — find themselves potentially under our protection.<sup>569</sup>

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<sup>568</sup> Roatta to Cavallero, n.d., NARA T-821/405/0752–54. "Ebrei in Croazia (2<sup>a</sup> zona)," 22 September 1942, NARA, T-821/405/749.

<sup>569</sup> "Convegno di Ragusa," 31 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati.



As Luciano Monzali argues, such a refusal served the purpose of demonstrating to the occupied population Zagreb's weakness, while presenting the Italian army as the true arbiter in the Independent State of Croatia.<sup>570</sup> Absent from the army's official rationale were humanitarian concerns. An internal memorandum later justified the decision not to hand over Jews to the Croats on "moral" grounds, but it is clear that these were primarily connected to the political fallout of appearing to abandon Ambrosio's guarantees.<sup>571</sup>

Within the armed forces, the impetus for a more formal policy towards Jewish refugees in Yugoslavia came from Roatta. At the corps level, commanders and staff officers received the policy with less enthusiasm; indeed, some of their comments suggest the presence of a lurking anti-Semitism within the officer corps. Like Pivano the previous year, Italian corps commanders considered Jews to be a security threat and logistical burden. When Roatta agreed to relieve Bastianini of the 1,500 foreign Jews taking refuge in Dalmatian territory by transferring them to locales under Italian military jurisdiction, the response from V Corps commander Renato Coturri was hardly favourable. He complained that his sector was already "full of Jews and other political refugees that hoped to place themselves under the protection of our Armed Forces." These refugees already posed an extra burden on local economies and resources in coastal towns, threatening the Italian occupation by draining scant local food stocks and causing prices to rise in markets.<sup>572</sup> Dalmazzo envisioned similar problems in VI Corps's zone of occupation. Moreover, he opposed the idea of leaving Jews free to roam within island communities, citing economic concerns but also fears that they would support the local Partisan movement: "It is known that some Jews are ready to side with communism should they be drawn by local circumstances or personal advantage or even hunger."<sup>573</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 95.

<sup>571</sup> "Questione degli ebrei," 26 October 1942, NARA T-821/405/0730-32.

<sup>572</sup> "Ebrei nella zona costiera," 30 June 1942, NARA T-821/405/0724. "Ebrei della Dalmazia," 15 October 1942, NARA T-821/405/0676. On the transfer of foreign Jewish refugees from Dalmatia to Zone II, see "Ebrei della zona litoranea croata della Dalmazia annessa," 16 July 1942, NARA T-821/405/0711-12; Bastianini to Roatta, 19 August 1942, NARA T-821/405/0647; "Sistemazione ebrei," 29 September 1942, NARA T-821/405/0679; and, "Ebrei confinati politici," 22 February 1943, NARA T-821/405/0363-64.

<sup>573</sup> "Ebrei della Dalmazia," 12 September 1942, NARA T-821/405/0685-86.

Distrust of Jews based on racist stereotypes prompted Coturri's top *carabiniere* to complain that, while Jews generally behaved themselves, they were overly alarmist and had "a marked tendency to spread any news of a political nature, even if groundless or distorted [*alterato*], that could in some way effect the racial question." He added that

the distinctive interfering disposition, excessive profiteering [*affaristico*], and generally unscrupulous behaviour, natural qualities of the race, have not failed to characterize the Jewish refugees in the major centres. This, in response, has provoked the unanimous hatred of the population and of the Croatian authorities towards the refugees as well as unfavourable comments about the Italian military authorities.

The *carabiniere* suspected, but could not prove, that some Jews were in contact with the Partisans. He warned that, if Jews appeared loyal and grateful to Italy, "there is no doubt that, deep down, they nurture hatred for the Axis and hope for its military defeat."<sup>574</sup>

The anti-Semitic attitudes apparent within mid-level commands found echoes among Roatta's own command staff as well. When in September the Jewish refugee community in Crikvenica petitioned V Corps to improve their living conditions — by reducing the tourist taxes and rental rates they were forced to pay, by extending their freedom of movement, and by allowing them to purchase food and firewood from military stores — Coturri rejected all their requests.<sup>575</sup> Roatta's chief of staff, Ettore de Blasio, approved Coturri's decisions and, in a memorandum distributed to the V, VI, and XVIII Corps, he complained that "the Jews living here have forgotten their status as 'undesirable' guests and that, with the intrusive spirit characteristic of their race, they want to profit from the measures adopted by us out of a sense of humanity to give themselves a privileged status."<sup>576</sup> Months later, Supersloda's chief of civil affairs, Michele Rolla, dismissed a similar petition from Jews at Kraljevica [Porto Re] as the result of their "age-old ... nature."<sup>577</sup> While not necessarily refuting humanitarianism as a

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<sup>574</sup> "Ebrei nella 2<sup>a</sup> zona," 23 September 1942, NARA T-821/405/0765–66. The same logic — that, given Hitler's anti-Semitic policies, Jews must assuredly be enemies of the Axis — had contributed to the German army's policy of targeting Jews as hostages in Serbia. Browning, *Fateful Months*, 49.

<sup>575</sup> "Promemoria degli ebrei residenti a Cirquenizza," 20 September 1942, NARA T-821/402/1008–9.

<sup>576</sup> Castellani to Rolla, 26 September 1942, and "Promemoria degli ebrei residenti a Cirquenizza," 29 September 1942, NARA T-821/402/1005–6.

<sup>577</sup> "Esposto ebrei internati," 18 February 1943, NARA T-821/405/0132–33. Ellipsis is in original.

motive, such statements and attitudes challenge Jonathan Steinberg's claims that Italian policies towards Yugoslavian Jews stemmed in part from the army's tradition as a "philo-semitic" institution.<sup>578</sup>

At least through October 1942, these ambiguous attitudes towards Jews were paralleled by the incoherent and inconsistent application of policy towards Jewish refugees in Italian occupation zones. On one hand, there is the case of Imre Rochlitz, a young Austrian Jew who fled with his aunt and uncle to Split in spring 1942. In August, following Roatta's agreement with Bastianini to transfer Jewish refugees out of Dalmatia, Italian authorities in Split offered an amnesty to illegal refugees; Rochlitz and his family presented themselves and were sent to *confino libero* — whereby internees could move freely within a community but not beyond it — in Novi Vinodolski, a small resort town on the Croatian coast occupied by V Corps. Although his family "had practically no contact" with the small Italian garrison in Novi, Rochlitz recalled "small acts of kindness" from ordinary Italian soldiers.<sup>579</sup>

On the other hand, there is the case of Bela Kraus and Blanka Soten, Jewish siblings from Osijek — well beyond the Italo-German demarcation line — who managed to reach Novi by their own means around the same time that Rochlitz arrived in the town. Kraus and Soten reported to the Italian garrison and requested asylum. Despite having relatives in Novi who offered to provide for their upkeep, their request was denied. Italian authorities ordered the two sent back to Croatian-administered territory by train, but they managed to escape during the night.<sup>580</sup> Their story highlights the fact that, despite Roatta's references to "protection" of Jewish refugees, local Italian military authorities did not welcome new arrivals from outside their zone of occupation. Indeed, earlier that summer, Coturri had ordered that refugees attempting to enter V Corps's sector illegally should be turned back. This attitude did not differ greatly from that of Italian civil

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<sup>578</sup> Steinberg, *All or Nothing*, 205, 231.

<sup>579</sup> Rochlitz, *Accident of Fate*, 88–89.

<sup>580</sup> "Ebrei Kraus Bela e Soten Blanka," 16 September 1942, NARA T-821/402/1004.

authorities in the annexed territories, who expelled hundreds of illegal Jewish refugees during 1941 and 1942.<sup>581</sup>

Ambiguity and inconsistency between Italian military commands and offices likely contributed to the delayed process of concentrating and identifying Jews in the summer of 1942, often considered the result of intentional dithering as part of an Italian conspiracy to undermine the Holocaust.<sup>582</sup> Cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and logistical challenges further contributed to delays.<sup>583</sup> The XVIII and VI Corps reported difficulties relocating Jews from Split to several Croatian islands because of insufficient local resources, the poverty of many of the refugees, and the hostility of local Croatian authorities. Demonstrating greater moral misgivings than his predecessor Dalmazzo, the VI Corps's new commander, Ugo Santovito, warned Roatta that "it is not humanely permissible to send Jews to the islands and leave them there without provisions."<sup>584</sup> Roatta wanted to wash his hands of the problem completely by interning Croatian Jews in Italy, but the Ministry of the Interior vetoed this option since Fascist racist legislation prohibited the immigration of foreign Jews.<sup>585</sup>

At the end of October, in response to renewed German diplomatic pressure concerning the deportation of Croatian Jews, the *Comando Supremo* finally provided Supersloda with an explicit order to intern "all Jews" within its jurisdiction. Once the Jews were settled in concentration camps or quartered in hotels under Italian surveillance, the military would perform background checks to determine who were to be considered "Croatian Jews." No Jews would be handed over to Croatian or German authorities without further instructions from Rome. By mid-November, the three Italian army corps

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<sup>581</sup> Rodogno, "Italiani brava gente," 223–24, 227.

<sup>582</sup> Carpi, "Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia," 481. Shelah argues that Italian military and diplomatic functionaries after August 1942 established bureaucratic obstacles "to sabotage Mussolini's directive" to deport Jewish refugees. Shelah, "Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews," 211.

<sup>583</sup> Rodogno, "Italiani brava gente," 229.

<sup>584</sup> "Ebrei della Dalmazia," 23 October 1942, NARA T-821/405/0669. "Ebrei della Dalmazia," 23 October 1942, NARA T-821/405/0672–73. Croatian civil authorities in Dubrovnik had earlier refused to provide for Jews. "Situazione degli ebrei," 24 September 1942, NARA T-821/405/0680.

<sup>585</sup> "Questione degli ebrei," 26 October 1942, NARA T-821/405/0730–32.

in Croatia had rounded up some 3,000 Jews.<sup>586</sup> The roundup operations did not go smoothly. A *Carabinieri* report noted that some Jews — convinced that the Italians were about to turn them over to the Germans — fled or committed suicide. Moreover, the report concluded that the operations had “seriously damaged Italian prestige” by undermining Italians claims of justice: arrests and internment appeared arbitrary and harsh. The Ustaše even tried to exploit the move to make them appear more lenient and fair than the Italians. Additionally, local merchants and hoteliers complained of the exodus of Jewish money from their markets.<sup>587</sup>

Such reports confirmed Roatta’s conviction that the Jewish question had broader ramifications on Italian occupation policy. In discussions with the *Duce* during November and December 1942, Roatta thus advised Mussolini once again not to hand over the interned Croatian Jews to the Ustaše or Nazis, given the probable “military and political repercussions” that would follow. Mussolini agreed that no Jews would be deported during the foreseeable future, so Roatta ordered the construction of more permanent camps for Supersloda’s population of Jewish internees.<sup>588</sup> In February and March 1943, the Germans once again pressured Rome to comply with the extradition of Croatian Jews. Mussolini reluctantly assented to their proposal to transfer Jewish internees by sea to Trieste, where they would board German trains. Supersloda’s new commander, Robotti, adopted his predecessor’s point of view and rationale to oppose any transfers of Jews. Mussolini, once again, agreed and told Robotti to make up excuses to prevent their extradition.<sup>589</sup>

Confronted by German diplomatic pressure and with military circumstances that necessitated withdrawals throughout the Balkans, the Italian army decided to transfer its

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<sup>586</sup> Carpi, “Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia,” 480–91, 519. Telescritti n. 11852/AC and n. 12287/AC, 29 October and 8 November 1942, NARA T-821/405/0473 and 0857.

<sup>587</sup> “Internamento degli ebrei residenti nella 2/a zona,” 8 November 1942, NARA T-821/405/0833–35.

<sup>588</sup> Castellani memorandum, 3 December 1942, NARA T-821/405/0480–81. Bolstering Roatta’s case were reports from Giuseppe Pièche, the top-ranking carabinieri in Yugoslavia, that the morale of Italian troops and popular opinion among Orthodox and Muslim minorities in Croatia would be negatively affected by a decision to hand over Jews to the Ustaša. “Ebrei del litorale adriatico,” 14 November 1942, NARA T-821/405/0829.

<sup>589</sup> Carpi, “Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia,” 495–96. Sabille, “Attitude to Persecuted Jews in Croatia,” 148.

interned Croatian Jews to new quarters on the annexed island of Rab [Arbe].<sup>590</sup> However, preparations for the transfer required months, so Italian corps commands remained in charge of caring for the interned Jewish refugees. By February 1943, the XVIII Corps held 615 Jews on the Croatian islands of Hvar [Lesina] and Brač [Brazza]. In the VI Corps's sector, 874 were expensively lodged in hotels and residences in villages surrounding Dubrovnik or on the island of Lopud [Mezzo], also in Croatian territory. The V Corps presided over 1,172 Jews at Kraljevica, across the border from the Italian province of Carnaro.<sup>591</sup> Housed in old overcrowded Yugoslavian army barracks and cavalry stables, conditions at Kraljevica most closely resembled those of a concentration camp, although its population too received rations equivalent to civilians under "protective custody," amounting to 1,234 calories per day.<sup>592</sup> Only between May and July 1943 were the internees transferred to Supersloda's new camp on Rab. Still considered to be in "protective" custody, the Jews at Rab enjoyed better conditions than the Slovenes that had been held there as hostages, although overcrowding remained an issue. Jewish internees could purchase food from outside the camp, bathe in the sea, and organize their own schools, libraries, and entertainment.<sup>593</sup> Most of the Jews at Rab managed to escape to Partisan-held territory or to Southern Italy after the armistice of 8 September.<sup>594</sup>

Not included at Rab were some five hundred Dalmatian Jews that Italian civil authorities had interned on the island of Korčula [Curzola]. Their plight in 1943 reveals the limited nature of the army's "rescue operation" in Yugoslavia and the motives behind its policies. As we have seen, civil authorities in Dalmatia had targeted Jews as undesirable elements that threatened security, and military representatives largely agreed with or accepted this interpretation. In early 1943, staff officers of the VI Corps criticized the Governorate for treating its Jewish *confinati politici* on Korčula too leniently.

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<sup>590</sup> Carpi, "Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia," 497–98. Rodogno, "Italiani brava gente," 230.

<sup>591</sup> "Sistemazione ebrei," 18 February 1943, NARA T-821/405/0131.

<sup>592</sup> Rochlitz, *Accident of Fate*, 96–99. "Vettovagliamento ebrei internati," 20 November 1942, NARA T-821/405/0644.

<sup>593</sup> Carpi, "Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia," 499. "Sistemazione e trattamento ebrei ad Arbe," 14 July 1943, NARA T-821/405/0844–45. Rochlitz, *Accident of Fate*, 112.

<sup>594</sup> Carpi, "Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia," 502–503.

Military authorities claimed that Jews, allowed to roam the island freely, maintained frequent contact with Partisans and actively spread communist propaganda. They asked the Governorate either to construct a proper concentration camp for the Jews or to transfer them elsewhere.<sup>595</sup> When it became clear that civil authorities could meet neither condition, the VI Corps petitioned Supersloda to intern the Jews of Korčula at Rab. However, Supersloda refused to assume responsibility for the Governorate's Jews who, it was argued, remained outside the army's jurisdiction. The army did not consider Dalmatian Jews to be under its protection — or in need of it — but rather saw them as a security threat.<sup>596</sup>

Circumstances changed in August, when military authorities assumed full powers in Dalmatia. The VI Corps immediately began preparing a concentration camp on Korčula “for the internment, as *internati civili*, of those deemed unruly and harmful to the pacification of the island.”<sup>597</sup> Only at this point, considering the new jurisdictional arrangement as well as the “precarious and tragic” fate of the Jews if Italian forces abandoned Korčula, did Supersloda's Civil Affairs Office decide to transfer the Jews to Rab.<sup>598</sup> It does not appear that the transfers were completed.<sup>599</sup> The documentation on the Jews of Korčula reinforces the observation that, at the middle level, staff officers and commands did not always sympathize with Jewish refugees — as late as August 1943, the VI Corps continued to view Jews in its territory as potential enemies that required surveillance. At a higher level, the army command was spurred into action partly by humanitarian concern and partly by the changing political situation caused by the fall of Mussolini and Allied landings in Italy. As argued elsewhere, once defeat seemed

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<sup>595</sup> “Isola di Curzola – Internati ebrei,” 12 February 1943, NARA T-821/405/0365. “Ebrei confinati politici,” 22 February 1943, NARA T-821/405/0363–64.

<sup>596</sup> “Ebrei del Governo di Dalmazia a Curzola,” 15 July 1943, NARA T-821/405/0358–59. “Ebrei esistenti nell'isola di Curzola,” 17 July 1943, NARA T-821/405/0356–57.

<sup>597</sup> “Ebrei esistenti nell'isola di Curzola,” 1 August 1943, NARA T-821/405/0355. On the assumption of civil powers by military authorities in Dalmatia, see Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 3:839–46.

<sup>598</sup> “Ebrei esistenti nell'isola di Curzola,” 1 August 1943, NARA T-821/405/0355. “Ebrei dell'Isola di Curzola,” 4 August 1943, NARA T-821/405/0346.

<sup>599</sup> Gitman ascribes the reduced population of Jews on Korčula by September 1943 to Jewish escape attempts. Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*, 142.

inevitable, humanitarian instincts merged with the political utility of using Jews as diplomatic “pawns” in negotiations with the Allies.<sup>600</sup>

Between 1941 and 1943, multiple motives informed the policies of Italian military commands and staffs in Yugoslavia towards Jewish populations and refugees. While acknowledging all these motives, several scholars — among them Holocaust survivors who credited the Italians for their escape — have argued that humanitarian interests trumped all others.<sup>601</sup> However, this examination of official documentation from the army, corps, and division levels highlights the primacy of politics in the decisions and attitudes of Italian military authorities. Although evidence of humanitarian or moral concern towards Yugoslavian Jews is not lacking, the influence of strategic, diplomatic, and imperial calculations surfaces more consistently and in more tangible form.

Local military authorities in Dalmatia and Croatia tended to see Jewish refugees as a drain on resources and a potential security threat, but they accepted Second Army’s rationale that — given the impossibility of interning the refugees in Italy — handing the Jews over to the Croats or Germans would be even more damaging to their pacification strategy. As this strategy was based in part on attracting the sizeable Serb minority in their zone of occupation and on differentiating Rome’s rule from that of Zagreb or Berlin, the Jews became a valuable political symbol for the Italian army. By refusing the extradition of Croatian Jews, the army demonstrated to the persecuted and turbulent Serb population its ability to protect minority groups, it bolstered its prestige by withstanding pressure from its stronger German ally, and it undermined Croatian sovereignty in order

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<sup>600</sup> Rodogno, “Italiani brava gente,” 219–20. Shelah, “Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews,” 213.

<sup>601</sup> Among the authors discussed here, Menachem Shelah and Esther Gitman survived the Holocaust in Yugoslavia by fleeing to Italian zones. See also Ivo Herzer, “Fascist Italy’s Forgotten Rescuers: How Mussolini’s Men Saved Some of the Balkan Jews,” *Washington Post*, 20 March 1994, C3. Rodogno raises the question of bias among “grateful” survivors. Rodogno, “Italiani brava gente,” 213–14. Léon Poliakov, who credited “Italian national character” for the rescue of Jews in occupied France, acknowledged his bias as a survivor who owed “a debt of gratitude” to the “Italian people.” Léon Poliakov, “The Jews under the Italian Occupation in France,” in Poliakov and Sabille, *Jews under Italian Occupation*, 21, 44. Arendt, Sabille, Carpi, De Felice, Zuccotti, and Steinberg also emphasize the role played by humanitarianism and Italian national character. Not surprisingly, Roatta and Zanussi both claimed in their memoirs that they felt “morally bound” to protect Jewish refugees. Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette*, 177. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d’Italia*, 1:275.



to strengthen Italian influence within its sphere of interest and potentially pave the way for further expansion in the region.

By summer 1943, Supersloda had adopted a relatively firm policy in response to German and Croatian requests for the extradition of Croatian Jews who, one report commented, “were not and will not be handed over for well-known reasons.”<sup>602</sup> However, between 1941 and 1943, it is clear that individual commands and staff officers held different opinions, priorities, and attitudes towards the Jewish populations in their jurisdictions. Therefore, their policies cannot be considered part of a coordinated and consistent “rescue operation.”<sup>603</sup> Military authorities in the annexed provinces largely supported the anti-Jewish and anti-refugee measures adopted by Fascist civil authorities. This included turning back new arrivals, a practice that was followed in Italian-occupied parts of Croatia as well. In Croatia, where a policy of protection was most evident after summer 1942, attitudes varied widely. Staff officers at Supersloda were most involved and most insistent on the policy, while corps and division commands showed less enthusiasm since they bore responsibility for organizing, supervising, and supplying the refugees. Other units did not even mention the presence of Jews in their sectors; for them, Jewish policy was irrelevant. Correspondence at all levels reveals the presence of anti-Semitism within the Italian officer corps.

That several thousand Yugoslavian Jews survived the war was less the result of a rescue effort devised by the Italian army than of the convergence of circumstances that favoured the survival strategies adopted by some Jews.<sup>604</sup> Long before Second Army developed any concrete policy towards Jewish refugees, many Jews decided that their best chance of survival lay in the Italian-occupied zones. Their ability to enter Italian

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<sup>602</sup> “Ebrei del Governo di Dalmazia a Curzola,” 15 July 1943, NARA T-821/405/0358.

<sup>603</sup> Shelah defines Italian policy as a “rescue operation.” Shelah, “Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews,” 205. Carpi refers to a “rescue effort.” Carpi, “Rescue of Jews in Italian-Occupied Croatia,” 465. Sabille refers to “rescue work.” Sabille, “Attitude to Persecuted Jews in Croatia,” 132.

<sup>604</sup> Similarly, Browning credits the unusually high survival rate of Jews from Starachowice, Poland, to the “fortuitous conjuncture of outside factors on the one hand and Jewish choices on the other.” Christopher R. Browning, “‘Alleviation’ and ‘Compliance’: The Survival Strategies of the Jewish Leadership in the Wierzbnik Ghetto and Starachowice Factory Slave Labor Camps,” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed. Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn, 2005), 27.

territory clandestinely and evade detection depended on their own wherewithal and assistance from Croatian officials, common Croats, or ordinary Italian soldiers, offered out of kindness, greed, or laziness. Their ability to remain in Italian territory thereafter hinged on local Italian pacification strategy and logistical circumstances, Italian reactions to Croatian and German pressure, the intervention of religious leaders, and the presence of national and international humanitarian relief organizations.<sup>605</sup>

Hannah Arendt once argued that Italian policy effectively amounted to a “sabotage of the Final Solution.”<sup>606</sup> The SS and German Foreign Ministry certainly saw it as such, complaining that “the Italians are creating endless difficulties concerning the handing over of the Croatian Jews.” Even lower-ranking German observers in the field criticized the army’s lenient treatment of Jewish refugees.<sup>607</sup> That the Italian army and government protected foreign Jews from the Nazis was somewhat unique. Throughout Europe, German anti-Semitic policies found a great deal of support from collaborators and allies.<sup>608</sup> But even in the minor Axis nations, Jewish policy had more to do with local interests than German wishes. Hitler’s allies demonstrated their sovereignty by protecting certain Jews while deporting others.<sup>609</sup> Italian generals were aware that lesser Axis partners like Hungary and Bulgaria did not adhere fully to Nazi anti-Jewish policy. Since Italian generals considered Italy to be an equal partner of Nazi Germany within the New European Order, this became part of their rationale not to hand over Jews.<sup>610</sup>

If Italian military authorities sought to undermine German objectives, it is more doubtful whether their approach to the Jewish question revealed anti-Fascist tendencies on their part. Italian staff officers familiarized themselves with Fascist racial

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<sup>605</sup> Gitman, *When Courage Prevailed*, 137.

<sup>606</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 176–77.

<sup>607</sup> Note from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Himmler, 8 June 1943, in De Felice, *Jews in Fascist Italy*, 731. “Sottufficiali tedeschi addetti al collegamento presso la 2<sup>a</sup> Armata ed in licenza ad Abbazia,” 11 February 1942, NARA T-821/413/0662–63.

<sup>608</sup> Shelah, “Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews,” 205. De Felice, *Jews in Fascist Italy*, 389. Cattaruzza and Langewiesche, introduction to *Territorial Revisionism*, 11.

<sup>609</sup> Deak, “Worst of Friends,” 20.

<sup>610</sup> “Ebrei del litorale adriatico,” 14 November 1942, NARA T-821/405/0829.

legislation.<sup>611</sup> While these laws defined Jews in biological terms and were hardly benign, they did not provide any indication that the extermination of Jews was an objective of Italian Fascism.<sup>612</sup> Mussolini's own commitment to anti-Semitism has long been debated among historians.<sup>613</sup> In the case of the Yugoslavian Jews, the *Duce* offered little precise direction. When confronted in Rome by German diplomatic pressure, he appeared willing to abandon the Yugoslavian Jews; but Roatta and Robotti had little difficulty convincing Mussolini of the military and political benefits of their internment policy. They did not need to hide their policies from the *Duce*. Militarily, politically, and ideologically, the Italian army and government had little reason to accommodate German requests. Supersloda's policies towards Jewish refugees in Croatia represented neither a conspiracy nor the manifestation of an innately humane Italian national character; rather, they were consistent with the army's military and political strategy in Yugoslavia.<sup>614</sup>

Between 1941 and 1943, the Italian army appeared to depart from Rome's official line in several key areas of policy in Yugoslavia. Some generals questioned Mussolini's decision to annex territory in Dalmatia and Slovenia. In the new provinces, their relations with Fascist civil authorities, appointed directly by the *Duce*, often were dismal. The same can be said of their attitudes towards the alliances with Nazi Germany and the Croatian Ustaše, both of which had been central to Mussolini's foreign policy leading up to the war. While working against their ideologically kindred Axis partners, Italian generals effectively favoured ideological enemies of the regime, including nationalist Serbs, pro-Allied Četniks, and foreign Jews. These policies in particular, and the army's autonomy in formulating them, have formed the basis of counterarguments against the thesis that Italian commanders "worked toward the Duce." Burgwyn argues that, more frequently,

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<sup>611</sup> A list of legislation compiled for Supersloda is available in NARA T-821/405/0083–85.

<sup>612</sup> Rodogno, "Italiani brava gente," 215.

<sup>613</sup> De Felice does not consider Mussolini to have been an anti-Semite. De Felice, *Jews in Fascist Italy*, 58–59. Bosworth describes Mussolini's anti-Semitism as incoherent and opportunistic rather than fanatical. R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (London: Arnold, 2002), 133, 147–48, 334–44. Others portray Mussolini as a full-fledged anti-Semite held in check only by his own pragmatism. Fabre, *Mussolini razzista*. Sarfatti, *Jews in Mussolini's Italy*.

<sup>614</sup> These conclusions reinforce those of Rodogno, "Italiani brava gente," 220, 235.

“Mussolini worked toward his generals.”<sup>615</sup> Nonetheless, examining the context and motivations behind the army’s approach to each of these issues reveals that Italian generals never considered their conduct to be a manifestation of anti-Fascist values, resistance, or disobedience. On the contrary, their policies were compatible with what they interpreted as Rome’s long-term aims and wishes.

The army’s opposition to Fascist civil authorities in the annexed provinces never was absolute. While Armellini blamed Bastianini’s process of Italianization for many of his problems in Dalmatia, generals like Pivano and Dalmazzo praised the governor’s harsh policies towards Slavs and Jews. In Slovenia, military authorities accelerated the pace of Italianization. Conflict between civil and military authorities in the provinces was fundamentally administrative in nature. Jurisdictional disputes were the inevitable result of a hastily conceived occupation apparatus and the rise of guerrilla resistance that required a military response. General Armellini’s dispute with Bastianini was not politically anti-Fascist in nature, despite evidence elsewhere of his aversion to the regime. Military strategies, jurisdictional jealousies, and incompatible personalities were at the heart of his issues with the governor.

This does not mean that the Italian army in occupied Yugoslavia was an apolitical entity, solely concerned with military affairs and washing its hands of political matters. Circumstances prompted Italian generals to think and act politically, especially outside the annexed territories where Rome’s interests faced external threats posed by partisan movements and, equally important, their own allies. Besides the ever present fear of German domination, fully shared in Rome, military authorities on the spot quickly concluded that the Independent State of Croatia would never function as a Fascist puppet. In order to consolidate Italy’s political influence in the Adriatic, Mussolini’s generals eschewed collaboration with German and Croatian authorities, even at the expense of the Axis coalition’s military effectiveness. From a position of strength based on their local numerical superiority, they tried to extend the territory under Italian dominion through military operations and by attracting Serb populations that had been persecuted by the Ustaše. In the final year of the occupation, from a position of weakness, Italian generals

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<sup>615</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 280, 310–11.

tried to hold on to their gains through cynical alliances with anti-communist groups, including the pro-Allied and anti-Croatian Četnik movement. They hoped to bolster their flagging prestige and trust among their new allies by refusing to hand over persecuted Jewish refugees to the Nazis and Ustaše.

Of course, the army's rationale and policies were never so clearly laid out or consistent. Behaviour and attitudes varied between division, corps, and army commands as each responded to local circumstances. The personalities of individual commanders differed too — while both Ambrosio and Roatta came from Piedmontese stock, the former was a traditionalist rooted in common sense whereas the latter was intelligent, “modern,” and “unscrupulous.”<sup>616</sup> For some, humanitarian considerations made a real contribution to their pro-Serb or, less frequently, pro-Jewish stance. Faced with complex situations, Italian generals often improvised. It is difficult to say precisely what sort of political settlement Second Army's senior officer corps envisioned for the Balkans after the war. Their main political objectives were for the short and medium terms, aiming to ease the military occupation of territory while providing Rome with the strongest possible bargaining position at the end of the war. Based on patterns in their correspondence and behaviour, Italian generals as a group came to favour some extent of direct annexation along Italy's northeastern frontier and the Adriatic coast, bordered by a series of semi-autonomous Italian protectorates in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Albania.<sup>617</sup> This vision was fully compatible with the equally hazy Fascist concept of an Imperial Community in Mediterranean Europe. In its pursuit — taking into consideration the limitations imposed by German domination and by the overall war effort — the generals of Second Army proved remarkably consistent, if not successful.

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<sup>616</sup> Zanussi provides rare insight into the personalities of several Italian senior officers. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, 1:85–86, 137–42. Ciano similarly described Roatta as “not likeable, but the most intelligent general that I know.” Ciano diary, 22 January 1942.

<sup>617</sup> Less than a month before the armistice with the Allied powers, a Supersloda memorandum favoured a postwar situation in which former Yugoslavia was fragmented into a number of smaller states, with neither a Great Croatia nor Great Serbia. “Coloquio tra le Eccellenze Robotti e Petrucci avvenuto a Ronchi,” 11 August 1943, NARA T-821/31/0268–71.

## 5 Military Propaganda for Empire in the Balkans

The complex political framework of occupation in the Balkans coloured the way in which the regime and army presented Italy's mission in the region. Propaganda for Italian troops had to reconcile imperialist concepts of *spazio vitale* with Italy's formal support for the Independent State of Croatia and the limitations posed by German hegemony in the region and within the Axis. Propaganda also had to maintain morale and fighting spirit among personnel on occupation duty, largely neglected by the Italian press and forgotten by the public, during a war in which unqualified Italian successes were rare and where expectations of a swift Axis victory eventually gave way to uncertainty. These challenges limited the cohesiveness, consistency, and effectiveness of Italian military propaganda during the Second World War.

Nonetheless, the themes employed in propaganda directed to the troops remained primarily ideological in nature. As in Ethiopia half a decade earlier, war and occupation in Yugoslavia were presented in imperial terms, as providing Italians once again with an opportunity to rekindle the greatness of ancient Rome. Those who resisted Italian domination were denigrated as enemies of civilization, as barbarians, and now as godless communists. Once again, propaganda exalted the use of violence on one hand while lauding the innate humanity of Italians on the other. This time, however, it was the military leadership and its own propaganda organs that promoted the regime's new war for empire. The logistical scale and complexity of global war compelled Rome to delegate propaganda activity to military authorities, partly reversing the trend towards centralization that had accompanied the Ethiopian campaign. Despite this renewed autonomy, military propagandists continued to toe the Fascist line in important aspects.

### The Army's New Role in Propaganda

By the time Italy entered the Second World War, the Fascist regime had centralized control over most aspects of propaganda through the Ministry of Popular Culture, now under Alessandro Pavolini. However, experience in Ethiopia had revealed the need for the regime to involve the armed forces more closely in the production and dissemination

of propaganda. Although officials at Minculpop were never willing to give up control over policy, they issued guidelines for inter-ministerial collaboration and established new liaisons with the branches of the military.<sup>1</sup> Agreements between Pavolini and Cavallero on the coordination of propaganda in wartime had the effect of transferring many powers to the army. Along with controlling the flow of military news to the Italian public, the *Comando Supremo* collaborated directly with the General Directorate for the Italian Press [DGSPI] to create and supply propaganda material to its soldiers in the field.<sup>2</sup> As a result, while Minculpop always remained the final arbiter, the army enjoyed a more active role in the field of propaganda during the Second World War than it had in Ethiopia.

Propaganda offices were attached to various levels of command to monitor and maintain the morale of Italian soldiers and of the populations in contact with them, to counter enemy propaganda, and to foment revolt among the enemy. The *Comando Supremo* and the SMRE each had a propaganda office [*Ufficio Propaganda*] in direct communication with Minculpop. These high commands issued directives relating to assistance for the troops — including policies on rations, welfare programmes, and military leave — and provided war bulletins and other propaganda material for subordinate units to disseminate. This was conducted by propaganda sections and subsections [*Sezioni/Sottosezioni P*] attached to army, corps, and division commands, and by individual propaganda officers [*Ufficiali P*] assigned to regiments.<sup>3</sup>

The propaganda officers of the Second Army originated from multiple branches of the armed forces and from a variety of backgrounds: a few were veterans of the First World War; many came straight out of university from professional fields such as accounting, law, and medicine; some had worked in the publishing industry or with Fascist agencies like the OND; many came with recommendations from the Fascist Party.<sup>4</sup> In 1942, the SMRE tried to centralize and professionalize the army's propaganda

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<sup>1</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda fra le due guerre*, 53–54.

<sup>2</sup> Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, 220–21.

<sup>3</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda fra le due guerre*, 54–55. Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, 30–31.

<sup>4</sup> A collection of personnel files for Second Army's propaganda sections are available in NARA T-821/413/0001–340.

services through a series of regulations. Propaganda officers now had to hail from combat arms, they needed to have participated in at least one military operation, and they were supposed to have civilian experience in communications. Most importantly, in order to address “political” deficiencies among section personnel, Fascist Party membership now became a prerequisite for any propaganda officer.<sup>5</sup>

The impetus for this transformation came from within the leadership of the armed forces. It appears to have been connected to Cavallero’s efforts to limit the potentially pacifistic role of chaplains in the moral education of Italian soldiers.<sup>6</sup> While the Fascistization of propaganda officers helped ensure that their work was suitably militaristic and in compliance with Fascist directives, it also caused some military personnel to mistrust them as a sort of political commissar spying for the regime.<sup>7</sup> However, with the noteworthy exception of the Marche Division — whose commander Ambrosio chastised for preventing propaganda officers from carrying out their work — Italian command staffs appear to have accepted “P” officers as colleagues.<sup>8</sup> Despite their at least nominal Fascistization, propaganda officers were expected to serve as “devoted functionaries” [*devoti fiduciari*] of military commanders.<sup>9</sup>

Propaganda sections faced a number of obstacles in occupied Yugoslavia. As had been the case in East Africa, logistical difficulties impeded the effective use of film propaganda. While troops stationed in cities like Ljubljana had access to various forms of entertainment and information, many units found themselves in zones without electricity,

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<sup>5</sup> “Ufficiali addetti al Servizio ‘P’,” 5 March 1942, NARA T-821/413/0167. “Schede personali per Ufficiali addetti al Servizio ‘P’,” 6 March 1942, NARA T-821/413/0101. “Ufficiali addetti al servizio ‘P’ – Requisito della iscrizione al P.N.F.,” 20 May 1942, NARA T-821/413/0241.

<sup>6</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, 43. Franzinelli, *Il riarmo dello spirito*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Referring to barrack life prior to the war, Emilio Loss recalled that conscript soldiers regarded propaganda officers, usually from the Fascist Militia, as spies searching for anti-Fascists. See his self-published memoir, Emilio Loss, *Memorie inutili di un ottuagenario: Nato senza camicia negli anni '20*, 31, accessed 7 August 2013, [http://reader.ilmiolibro.kataweb.it/v/473655/Memorie\\_inutili\\_di\\_un\\_ottuagenario](http://reader.ilmiolibro.kataweb.it/v/473655/Memorie_inutili_di_un_ottuagenario).

<sup>8</sup> “Riassunto degli argomenti tratti dall’Eccellenza Ambrosio nella riunione tenuta presso il Comando della 2<sup>a</sup> Armata il 30-XII-41,” 31 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>9</sup> “Assistenza alle truppe – Organi e Ufficiali ‘P’,” 30 October 1942, NARA T-821/413/0200.



which limited their access to cinemas as well as radios.<sup>10</sup> In 1941, the VI Corps set up mobile cinemas for its troops, but the vehicles were not properly outfitted for long-distance travel on poor roads, restricting their range to accessible areas around Split and Zara.<sup>11</sup> A shortage of film material was only partially overcome at the end of 1941 with additional shipments from the *Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche* [ENIC] and LUCE, but even then most films available to the propaganda sections were old American ones without a useful political purpose.<sup>12</sup> Units in Second Army continued to report deficiencies in the quantity and quality of autocinemas and radios throughout the occupation.<sup>13</sup> With film and radios in short supply — and with many inexperienced junior officers displaying “poor command effectiveness” — propaganda officers took it upon themselves to conduct “propaganda tours” [*giri di propaganda*] and to hold “conversations” with the troops, which amounted to little more than reading off war bulletins provided by high command or the *Agenzia Stefani*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Propaganda officers of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division left the moral preparation of soldiers in Ljubljana up to the Fascist and local organizations that existed in the city. “Relazione mensile sullo spirito delle truppe e della popolazione dei territori occupati,” 26 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1942, allegati. “Relazione mensile sullo spirito della truppa e della popolazione dei territori occupati,” 25 January 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1943, allegati.

<sup>11</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 maggio al 15 giugno 1941,” 28 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 giugno al 15 agosto 1941,” 6 September 1941, and “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 agosto al 15 settembre 1941,” 24 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>12</sup> “Rapporto situazione 1<sup>^</sup> quindicina di maggio,” 29 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, April–May 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 ottobre al 15 novembre 1941,” 8 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, “Relazione mensile sullo spirito della truppa e della popolazione civile dei territori occupati,” 20 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, March–April 1942, allegati; “Relazione mensile sullo spirito della truppa e dalla popolazione civile dei territori occupati,” 29 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, May–June 1942, allegati; “Relazione mensile sullo spirito delle truppe e della popolazione dei territori occupati,” 23 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942, allegati; as well as the V Corps report, “Andamento e sviluppo del Servizio ‘P’,” 3 November 1942, NARA T-821/413/0350. In Slovenia, portable cinemas generally shut down in the autumn, when weather conditions prevented the screening of films outdoors. “Relazione sullo spirito della truppa e della popolazione dei territori occupati,” 24 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September–October 1942, allegati.

<sup>14</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 giugno al 15 agosto 1941,” 6 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per

Given these limitations, written propaganda once again proved the most important means of reaching the troops.<sup>15</sup> Initially, most propaganda sections focused on sourcing publications from Italy rather than producing material of their own. The War Ministry, the SMRE, Minculpop, and the Fascist leisure organization, the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* [OND], sent newspapers, magazines, leaflets, postcards, and other printed material to Yugoslavia. The OND also established libraries for troops in some of the larger urban centres.<sup>16</sup> However, propaganda officers complained that material sent by central agencies did not reach all units equally.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the daily newspapers usually arrived late — especially for units stationed in Croatia — and there were too few satirical papers and magazines. The troops wanted more “appealing” types of literature as “a spiritual tonic and a means of distraction.” One of the more widely distributed illustrated magazines in VI Corps’s zone of occupation was the OND’s *Gente Nostra*.<sup>18</sup> Other periodicals directed towards soldiers that arrived from Rome included *Fronte: Giornale del Soldato* and *Forze Armate*, published by Minculpop and the War Ministry, respectively.<sup>19</sup>

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il periodo dal 15 marzo al 15 aprile 1942,” 27 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati. See also “Progetto di un corso d’istruzione per ufficiali ‘P’,” January 1942, NARA T-821/413/0337–39.

<sup>15</sup> This was also a reflection of Italian society in general. Even as radio and cinema grew in importance, the newspaper press remained for the vast majority of Italians the instrument of mass information that was least costly and most easily accessible, despite Italy’s relatively high rates of illiteracy. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, 224.

<sup>16</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 giugno al 15 agosto 1941,” 6 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 settembre al 15 ottobre 1941,” 31 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. Propaganda officers attached to units in occupied territory monitored material sent from agencies in Italy and tried to withdraw issues from circulation when they deemed their content to be unsuitable for the troops. For example, see “Rivista ‘Tempo’,” 10 August 1942, NARA T-821/413/0525.

<sup>17</sup> “Andamento e sviluppo del Servizio ‘P’,” 3 November 1942, NARA T-821/413/0350.

<sup>18</sup> “Relazione mensile sullo spirito della truppa e dalla popolazione civile dei territori occupati,” 29 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, May–June 1942, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 ottobre al 15 novembre 1941,” 8 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 novembre al 15 dicembre 1941,” 5 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>19</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, 288–89.

Complaints over the quality of newspapers available to soldiers in Yugoslavia prompted corps and army commands to become more involved in the production of written propaganda tailored to their troops. In theory, all military publications needed to be approved by the SMRE, in consultation with Minculpop, but in practice during the first two years of the war military commands on all fronts created their own material with varying degrees of censorship.<sup>20</sup> In Slovenia, the XI Corps continued to print its own field newspaper, *Picchiasodo*, which had been published on a monthly basis since 1940. In July 1942, it added a supplementary one-page daily that included bulletins as well as political and tactical instructions from corps commander Mario Robotti.<sup>21</sup>

In Dalmatia, the VI Corps initially distributed copies of the *San Marco* — a daily newspaper established by civil authorities in Split using an old Yugoslavian printing press — at a reduced rate to military units.<sup>22</sup> Such collaboration became more involved in December 1941, when the *San Marco* was replaced by *Il Popolo di Spalato*, whose editors proudly declared to their readers that “our programme is that of Fascism.”<sup>23</sup> Propaganda officers from the VI Corps arranged to edit and print a half-page section — later expanded to a full page — in every issue of *Il Popolo di Spalato*, entitled “Per voi, soldati.” Rather than news bulletins, “Per voi, soldati” included a varied array of satire, political propaganda, trivia, quotes by famous Italians, model letters home, and articles or poetry submitted by military personnel in hopes of recouping the fifty-lire prize offered each month for the two best pieces of writing. The VI Corps continued to subsidize sales

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<sup>20</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, 283–86.

<sup>21</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, 287. Sala, “Guerriglia e controguerriglia in Jugoslavia,” 99.

<sup>22</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 giugno al 15 agosto 1941,” 6 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. “Relazione riassuntiva,” 20 May 1941, and “Attività svolte dall’Ufficio Cultura Popolare dal 1 novembre 1941 al 31 ottobre 1942,” n.d. [November 1942], ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. “Dalmazia.” The Split edition of the *San Marco*, published between April and November 1941, was unique from the edition printed in Zara, taking a literary bent, rather than merely providing bulletins, as well as printing in Italian and Croatian. Nedjeljka Balić-Nižić, “Lingue e letterature in contatto nel giornale spalatino ‘San Marco’ (aprile-novembre 1941),” *Civiltà italiana* 3, no. 1 (2004): 389–401.

<sup>23</sup> “Ai lettori,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 1 December 1941, 4. Issues of the newspaper are included as attachments to the VI Corps war diaries in AUSSME, N1–11.

of the newspaper to its troops and provided copies to units stationed far from Split.<sup>24</sup> The special section remained in print after XVIII Corps took over control of the zone, with an estimated readership of 15,000 to 20,000 soldiers. The VI Corps launched its own daily, *La Sentinella*, out of Dubrovnik in September 1942.<sup>25</sup>

Not until June 1942 did the Second Army establish a field newspaper intended for all of its troops in the Balkans, entitled *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*. With the approval of the SMRE and Minculpop, Supersloda's propaganda office modelled its weekly offering after the famous trench newspaper of the First World War, *La Tradotta*, which following the disastrous defeat at Caporetto in 1917 had sought to improve relations between Italian military elites and the masses through persuasion.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the Second Army developed its paper at a time when war bulletins no longer sufficed to maintain troop morale, since an Axis victory no longer seemed imminent. Comprising four pages in 1942 and eight pages in 1943, *La Tradotta* included cartoons and literature, mostly submitted by military personnel.

Since the paper was intended to entertain as well as to educate, not all of the material was overtly political in nature; much of it was humoristic or artistic, focusing on themes of daily military life or nostalgia for home. A typical example of the style of humour employed by the newspaper was a series of cartoons depicting the chaos that ensued when an army typist made a mistake. In one case, *gomme* [tires] was inadvertently changed to *gonne* [skirts], resulting in an order to the effect that "every driver must inspect the skirts and repair any tears." The cartoonist drew a group of Italian transport

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<sup>24</sup> "Relazione mensile sul servizio 'P' per il periodo dal 15 novembre al 15 dicembre 1941," 5 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati. "Relazione mensile sul servizio 'P' per il periodo dal 15 aprile al 15 maggio 1942," 28 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati. On the prize offered for submissions, see "Due chiacchiere fra noi," *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 16 December 1941, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, 288. "Relazione sul servizio 'A' dal 15 Novembre al 15 Dicembre '42," 3 January 1943, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1068, DS XVIII Corps, January 1943, allegati.

<sup>26</sup> Giuseppe Castellano (SMRE) to Gherardo Casini (Minculpop), 4 July 1942, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 141, fasc. "Bollettino settimanale dei contropropaganda della Seconda Armata." Sala, "Guerriglia e controguerriglia in Jugoslavia," 93.

personnel lifting the skirts of all the local women they came across.<sup>27</sup> [Appendix D] Indeed, the blasphemous or indecent nature of some of the articles in *La Tradotta* raised the ire of the Italian army's top chaplain, Archbishop Angelo Bartolomasi.<sup>28</sup> The propaganda office printed 25,000 copies of *La Tradotta* each week, an impressive figure, especially considering wartime paper shortages in Italy. Corps and unit commands purchased them and distributed them to their men.<sup>29</sup>

## A Multifaceted War

In terms of the actual production of propaganda material, the Italian army and its units enjoyed more autonomy and shared greater responsibility in occupied Yugoslavia than they had in Ethiopia. To accompany the "orders of the day" of unit commanders and the literature from civilian and Fascist agencies, by mid-1942 Supersloda and its subordinate commands had established printing presses and editorial boards of their own.<sup>30</sup> The field newspapers they produced provide an indication of how the military leadership portrayed the war in Yugoslavia. However, it took Second Army more than a year to develop a centralized propaganda organ for all of its units in the form of *La Tradotta*. Thus, domestic Italian media remained important sources of military propaganda, especially in the early stages of the occupation. In April and May 1941, the Fascist regime carefully controlled propaganda justifying the largely unexpected war, through Minculpop's

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<sup>27</sup> "Dattilografi," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 1 November 1942, 4. Collections of *La Tradotta* are located at the Museo storico del Trentino, Trento, and the Biblioteca delle civiche raccolte storiche, Milan.

<sup>28</sup> Franzinelli, *Il riarmo dello spirito*, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, 286–87. By 1941, paper shortages forced most Italian newspapers to limit themselves to four pages. "Rapporto ai direttori dei principali giornali del 17 maggio 1941," 17 May 1941, in Tranfaglia, *Ministri e giornalisti*, 146.

<sup>30</sup> In addition to the field newspapers listed above, the V Corps came out with its own *Notiziario* in September 1942, comprising mostly local news relating to its units in northwest Croatia. The corps printed and distributed 5,000 copies of the paper twice a month. "Andamento e sviluppo del Servizio 'P'," 3 November 1942, NARA T-821/413/0349. Although Fascist legislation permitted only army and corps commands to publish their own propaganda, after 1941 the Marche Division issued a bulletin entitled *Il Tascapane*. Della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella seconda guerra mondiale*, 286–88.

“dispositions” to the domestic Italian press.<sup>31</sup> Through newspapers like the *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Popolo d’Italia*, the regime established its war aims and thereby provided the first muddled explanation to the Italian invading and occupying forces on the importance of their mission in Yugoslavia. Fascist propaganda presented the campaign as both a defensive and expansionistic imperial war.

Because it had not anticipated the timing of the war with Yugoslavia, the Fascist regime had little time to launch a preparatory propaganda campaign to justify Italy’s presence in the region.<sup>32</sup> As a result, not only the reporting of news but of broad themes and war aims developed in stages, responding to the changing political and military situation. As late as 25 March 1941, Italian newspapers spoke of “Italo-Yugoslavian friendship,” applauding Yugoslavia for remaining faithful to its pact of friendship with Italy by standing up to British pressure and agreeing to join the Tripartite.<sup>33</sup> Even after the coup that placed Peter II in power, Stefani reports voiced confidence that Yugoslavia would nevertheless honour its agreement with the Axis.<sup>34</sup> The Italian newspaper press only began to print preparatory propaganda for war against Yugoslavia at the beginning of April, emphasizing Serbian militarism and oppression of minorities while blaming British intrigue for the deteriorating situation.<sup>35</sup>

With the Axis invasion on 6 April came a flurry of reports on British and Serbian machinations in the country, which had — it was now claimed — maintained an anti-

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<sup>31</sup> Although the provincial press could sometimes avoid complete adherence to the Fascist line, by this time Minculpop had established tight control over major papers like the *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Popolo d’Italia*, who could receive fifteen telegrams a day from the Ministry. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, 193–96.

<sup>32</sup> Minculpop entered the Second World War without a coherent long-range propaganda strategy and was slow to develop one. The defeats in Greece and North Africa at the end of 1940 prompted Pavolini to adopt a “campaign of realistic evaluation” coupled with a “campaign of minimalization,” both of which still reacted piecemeal to events. W. Vincent Arnold, *The Illusion of Victory: Fascist Propaganda and the Second World War* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 11, 71, 92, 103–104.

<sup>33</sup> “L’amicizia italo-jugoslava,” *Corriere della Sera*, 25 March 1941, 1.

<sup>34</sup> “In Jugoslavia Pietro II assume il potere regio,” *Corriere della Sera*, 28 March 1941, 1. “Il colpo di stato jugoslavo,” *Corriere della Sera*, 29 March 1941, 1.

<sup>35</sup> “Il nuovo Governo jugoslavo minaccia l’unità del Paese,” *Corriere della Sera*, 1–2 April 1941, 5. “Il bellicismo serbo minaccia di portare il Paese verso il salto nel buio,” *Corriere della Sera*, 2 April 1941, 5. “La casta militare serba ha ripreso il sopravvento,” *Corriere della Sera*, 3–4 April 1941, 1. “Assidua vigilanza dell’Asse sulle manovre britanniche nei Balcani,” *Corriere della Sera*, 4–5 April 1941, 6.

Italian and pro-Anglo-French stance ever since the 1937 pact of friendship. The regime had to reconcile its aggression against Yugoslavia with previous talk of friendship with the country. The official explanation of the government was that, although the Axis had sought to include Yugoslavia as part of a reconstructed Europe by offering it the Greek port of Salonika, the coup of 27 March forced Italy to take pre-emptive action before Yugoslavia could become a British base of operations.<sup>36</sup> The regime hurriedly published new editions of older anti-Yugoslavian propaganda, emphasizing the defensive nature of the campaign. One such work by the infamous Fascist mouthpiece Virginio Gayda — initially published in 1933 but reprinted with a new preface in April 1941 — claimed that with British help the Serbs intended to dominate central Europe, concluding that “the new war with Yugoslavia that the Axis Powers were forced to confront on 6 April 1941 is truly a war of national and international defence against an aggressor given to the most lunatic imperialist plan.”<sup>37</sup>

Although it now portrayed the conflict as having been inevitable, the regime presented no substantial war aims upon its declaration of war. Primarily, this early propaganda connected the new Balkan conflict to the broader ongoing war against Britain, with the secondary objective of liberating Croatia from the Serbian yoke.<sup>38</sup> Certainly, the liberation of ethnic groups served the revisionist propaganda and ideologies of the Axis powers and could be portrayed as part of the “reconstruction of Europe” and establishment of a new order to replace that imposed by Versailles.<sup>39</sup> Alongside the

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<sup>36</sup> “Le forze dell’Asse in Marcia contro il tradimento serbo e la minaccia inglese,” “Schiacciate documentazione sulle frodi di Atene e di Belgrado,” “Il ‘memorandum’ illustrative,” and “L’accordo di Vienna del 25 marzo,” *Corriere della Sera*, 7 April 1941, 1–2, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Virginio Gayda, *La Jugoslavia contro l’Italia (documenti e rivelazioni)*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Edizioni del Giornale d’Italia, 1941), 9–12.

<sup>38</sup> “Un appello di Pavelic al popolo croato,” *Corriere della Sera*, 7 April 1941, 6. “Un appello al Duce di 66 Comitati nazionalisti croati,” *Corriere della Sera*, 9 April 1941, 6. “La Croazia si proclama Stato indipendente,” *Corriere della Sera*, 11–12 April 1941, 2.

<sup>39</sup> “La Croazia chiede a Vittorio Emanuele III di designare il Principe sabauda che cingerà la Corona di Zvonimiro,” *Corriere della Sera*, 17 May 1941, 1. “Sulle tragiche rovine di Versaglia sta sorgendo il mondo di domani,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 16 June 1941, 2. Holly Case has argued that revisionism — the drive to overturn the territorial settlement imposed after the First World War — among the members of the Axis took on characteristics of an ideology, informing various aspects of foreign, domestic, and social policies in those countries. Holly Case, “Revisionism in Regional Perspective,” in Cattaruzza, Dyroff, and Langewiesche, *Territorial Revisionism*, 73.

notion of a defensive war, then, the concept that the invasion fulfilled a liberating mission comprised the first justifications for the campaign in Yugoslavia. Themes of Italian irredentism and conquest only grew prominent towards the end of operations, when it became clear that Italy would occupy large tracts of territory in the region. This too was justified by referring to the “bad peace of 1919,” which had failed to grant Italy all the land promised to it along the Adriatic. More so than the liberation of Hungarian, Croat, and Montenegrin minorities, “for us Italians, naturally, the greatest and loudest [achievement] of all rings the name of Dalmatia reconquered!”<sup>40</sup> With victory and annexations, the concept of *spazio vitale* entered official discourse.<sup>41</sup> Like the Ethiopian campaign, this too had become a war for empire.

Fascist propaganda from the outset, while remarkably nimble, was multifaceted and fraught with contradictions. On one hand, the war was fought to defend Italy and its neighbours from Serbian and British aggression, and for the self-determination of minorities persecuted by the Yugoslavian state. On the other hand, the war was presented as an opportunity to claim unredeemed national territory and to establish Italian imperial domination over the Balkans. The Italian Second Army inherited these themes from the political leadership in Rome. During the course of the occupation, the message of the army’s propaganda became even more complex, reflecting the tangled politics and the worsening military situation in the Balkans. The army’s dismal relationship with its Croatian allies flew in the face of propaganda on its liberating role. An anti-Slavic element increasingly crept into Italian propaganda and the army fell back upon the imperialistic messages that had predominated years earlier in East Africa. Once again, Italian soldiers were told that they were modern legionaries, bearers of a superior civilization capable of both severity and generosity. Finally, with the Soviet Union’s entry into the war, and as Yugoslavian partisan resistance spread, Italian military propaganda became dominated by anti-communist sentiments and an obsession with guerrilla warfare that contributed to the brutalization of the soldiers of the Second Army.

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<sup>40</sup> “I Dalmati al Duce,” *Corriere della Sera*, 15–16 April 1941, 2. “Divisioni celeri in Dalmazia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 18 April 1941, 3. “Torna la Dalmazia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 19 April 1941, 3.

<sup>41</sup> “Un grande discorso di Hitler,” *Corriere della Sera*, 5 May 1941, 1.



All of these themes overlapped, intermingled with, and often contradicted one another in the army's propaganda throughout the period of occupation, informing the way officers and men perceived the local populations and how they behaved towards them.

### *The Liberating Mission and the Croatian Alliance*

One of the most problematic areas for Italian propaganda in Yugoslavia was its depiction of Croats and of the Independent State of Croatia. The troubled relationship between Italian and Croatian authorities and the rise of resistance movements in Croatian territory conflicted with early claims that the Croats were worthy allies beholden to Italy for their liberation. Indeed, in the first month of occupation, the Italian press claimed that Croats welcomed them as liberators from the tyrannical oppression of Belgrade. Still writing for the *Corriere della Sera*, Ciro Poggiali defended early Croatian "reprisals" against "Četniks" as having been justified by "twenty years of Serbian high-handedness" [*prepotenze*].<sup>42</sup> The same paper lauded the Ustaša terrorists of the 1930s as freedom fighters, whose gratitude for Italy's patronage was exemplified by the offer of the Croatian crown to a member of the House of Savoy.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, the Treaty of Rome signified Italo-Croatian harmony as well as Italian paternalism. Portraying the liberation of Croatia and the incorporation of the new state into the Tripartite as one of Italy's greatest achievements of the war, headlines read how "in the light of Rome a people have regained their freedom."<sup>44</sup>

Italian propagandists even tried to instil the notion that Italians and Croats shared a common historical and cultural identity. They emphasized the historical links between Italy and Croatia, favourably comparing the present Croatian situation to that of Italy during the Risorgimento; both nations had undergone centuries without political

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<sup>42</sup> "Četnici e Intelligence Service carnefici del popolo croato," *Corriere della Sera*, 19 April 1941, 3.

<sup>43</sup> "Ante Pavelic e la Nuova Croazia," *Corriere della Sera*, 25 April 1941, 3. "Sorge la Croazia indipendente," *Corriere della Sera*, 14 May 1941, 1. "La Croazia chiede a Vittorio Emanuele III di designare il Principe sabaudo che cingerà la Corona di Zvonimiro," *Corriere della Sera*, 17 May 1941, 1.

<sup>44</sup> "Nella luce di Roma un popolo è risorto a libera vita," *Corriere della Sera*, 19 May 1941, 1. "Mussolini riafferma nel primo annual della guerra liberatrice la splendente certezza della nostra vittoria," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 11 June 1941, 2. OO, XXX, 96. "La Croazia aderisce al Patto tripartito," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 16 June 1941, 1. "L'adesione della Croazia al Patto tripartito," *Corriere della Sera*, 16–17 June 1941, 1.

sovereignty.<sup>45</sup> A series of articles by Eugenio Coselschi recounted how irredentists of both nationalities collaborated against the Austrians in the 1850s and how the Croat independence movement of the nineteenth century drew inspiration from Italian unification, just as the Ustaša party had modeled itself after Italian Fascism.<sup>46</sup> Mussolini spoke of the natural “solidarity” between Croatia and Italy, based on shared national borders, shared values, ideals, and political institutions, as well as complementary interests; their collaboration and friendship, he prophesied, would provide an example of “Roman strength.”<sup>47</sup> Another article spoke of Croatia’s historical Latin character, claiming that Croats had for centuries been oriented “towards the West and especially towards Rome.”<sup>48</sup> This inclination to present Italians and their Croatian allies as bearers of a shared Western, even Latin, civilization remained Rome’s official policy for the rest of the war.<sup>49</sup>

Officially, the Italian army’s own propaganda for its troops also spoke of “camaraderie” with the Croatian armed forces and of gratitude for Italy’s role in the “rebirth of Croatia.”<sup>50</sup> Propaganda directed towards troops of the VI Corps, stationed in annexed Dalmatian and occupied Croatian territory, portrayed the Croatian populations as loyal allies who respected Italians as representatives of a great civilization that offered freedom and protection “against any sort of disorder.”

After so many months in Croatia, we have learned a few words of this difficult language, so different from our own; and we manage to make ourselves understood to the local people. They see us in a good light and willingly approach

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<sup>45</sup> “Un appello di Pavelic al popolo croato,” *Corriere della Sera*, 7 April 1941, 6.

<sup>46</sup> “Italia e Croazia nel Risorgimento,” *Corriere della Sera*, 14 April 1941, 2. “Italia e Croazia nel Risorgimento,” *Corriere della Sera*, 12 May 1941, 3. “La donna croata nell’organizzazione ustascia,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 4 August 1941, 2.

<sup>47</sup> OO, XXX, 82–83.

<sup>48</sup> “Per la nuova Croazia. ‘Andiamo dai Latini’,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 6 June 1941, 3.

<sup>49</sup> In 1942, Minculpop sanctioned the establishment of an *Agenzia Giornalistica Italo-Croata* in Venice to bolster opinion of the Croatian alliance in Italy and to spread propaganda on the greatness of “Imperial Italy” in Croatia. The agency emphasized Croatia’s role in the “new order,” Pavelić’s ideological kinship with Mussolini, and Croatia’s “western culture.” AIC memorandum no. 1, 12 June 1942, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. “Croazia,” sf. “Agenzia Italo Croata.”

<sup>50</sup> “Visita di Ministri Croati nel territorio del V Corpo d’Armata,” *Notiziario del V Corpo d’Armata*, 1 September 1942, 1. AUSSME, L-13, b. 237.

us, during breaks. A few old peasants tell us how they had been prisoners [of war] in Italy, and they tell us where and when. They all keep fond memories of our country. And they try to return however they can the kindness they received twenty years ago.

But the most touching thing is when the children run in flocks along the streets [...] They all raise their arms and repeat a thousand times: ‘ZIVIO DUCE’, with silvery voices and playful and happy eyes. [...] ‘ZIVIO DUCE’ means long live all of us, because the Duce too was a corporal like me, in the other war. It means: Long live Italy, who we represent here. [...] Here everyone likes us because we represent civilization and because we are kind even to the humble; and also because we like kids.

They know that we are allies and they do not consider us troops of occupation. None of us are bullies. We respect the harvest, because we are peasants too, and we pay for everything that we need. When a battalion leaves a place, everyone is sad and many cry.<sup>51</sup>

Such propaganda was unique in emphasizing the peasant identity that many Italian soldiers shared with Croat villagers. It also stood in contrast to VI Corps’s own reports on the morale of its men, which reveal that by December 1941 Italian soldiers held an “aversion” towards their Croatian allies and were generally “distrustful” of the occupied Croatian populations.<sup>52</sup> While Italian soldiers admired the German soldier for his valour, they considered the Croatian army to be “militarily inept, disorganized and composed in general of brutal and bloodthirsty soldiers,” and they believed the regime had made a mistake by binding itself to the “criminal and assassin” [*delinquent e regicida*] Ante Pavelić.<sup>53</sup>

Although Italian commanders largely shared the sentiments of their men regarding the Croats, political and military imperatives prevented them from condoning it. As a result, from time to time army propagandists reminded the troops of their liberating mission in Croatia. Intended for troops stationed almost entirely on Croatian territory, the bulletin of the V Corps recounted how Italian troops had freed Croatia from

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<sup>51</sup> “‘Živio Duce’ (Viva il Duce!),” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 9 December 1941, 2.

<sup>52</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 ottobre al 15 novembre 1941,” 8 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>53</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 settembre al 15 ottobre 1941,” 31 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 aprile al 15 maggio 1942,” 28 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati. Casanuova, *I°51*, 14, 33–34.

an eight-hundred-year “period of slavery” under Hungarian, Ottoman, Austrian, and finally Serbian rule. It tried to convince Italian soldiers that they shared a common Roman identity with Croats: “Between the darkness of prehistory and the shadows of the past [Croatia saw] a single bright light: the light of *Romanità*, that has always shone, since the earliest beginnings, upon the history of the Croat people.”<sup>54</sup> The use of the term *romanità* [Romanness] may simply have been an opportunistic use of rhetoric — it was a typical Fascist catchword — but it carried a subtle yet unmistakable message. It held up the populations of the Independent State of Croatia as civilized equals while couching the Italian presence in Croatia in imperialistic, and historically justified, terms.<sup>55</sup> It left no doubt of Rome’s dominant status in its relationship with Zagreb.

*La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio* promoted similarly contradictory messages regarding Italo-Croatian relations and the army’s purpose in Croatia. For example, one article provided the positive story of an Italian soldier’s travels to Metković, in the Independent State of Croatia, where he met a peasant woman named Milka who turned out to be of Venetian stock.

It was destiny — she tells me — that after Turkish, Austrian, and Serbian rule, the last of which was brutal without peer — Latin civilization would again come to our shores. So many degradations for us Croats in so many years of slavery! And why? Because we were Catholics and hard workers. Can such brutality be explained by the fact that we prayed in Latin like our fathers? [...] I feel that in this land of slaves, martyrs and heroes, the Italian cause has dug a deep furrow with the sharp plough of history marching to the step of the new legions. Now more than ever I see the sublime light of a universal mission shine upon my dusty uniform.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, as late as October 1942, Italian military propaganda continued to emphasize pride in the liberation of an oppressed and kindred Croat people, albeit within the framework of

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<sup>54</sup> “Per conoscere la Croazia,” *Notiziario del V Corpo d’Armata*, 1 September 1942, 3.

<sup>55</sup> The Fascist movement had adopted the concept of *romanità* from its inception and it became a central theme of the regime’s propaganda in the 1930s, especially after the declaration of empire in Ethiopia. It was meant to establish continuity between Fascist Italy and Imperial Rome; it provided a model for the new Fascist man and was central to the concept of an Italian “civilizing mission” in occupied territory. It also could refer to supposedly superior Roman virtues of order, discipline, and justice. Gentile, *La Grande Italia*, 169. Romke Visser, “Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanità,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 1 (1992): 6–8. Flavia Marcello, “Mussolini and the Idealisation of Empire: The Augustan Exhibition of Romanità,” *Modern Italy* 16, no. 3 (2011): 225–26.

<sup>56</sup> “Paesaggi di Croazia,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 4 October 1942, 3.

an imperial system dominated by Italy. However, as guerrilla resistance continued to spread, even the army's propaganda began to equate the adjective "Croatian" with treachery. Another story in *La Tradotta* told of a unit whose men returned from a *rastrellamento* with their jackets "full of Croatian rain, that is a treacherous [*traditrice*] rain that you do not see but that you feel in your bones."<sup>57</sup>

The pages of *La Tradotta* did not tend to differentiate between Slavic groups. Croats were often lumped together with Slavs in general, referred to derogatively as *crucchi*, a term derived from the Serbo-Croatian word for bread, *kruh*. In articles and cartoons, the term was most frequently used to refer to Communist Partisans, but it could also represent Slavic populations or territory more broadly.<sup>58</sup> Typically, "*crucca scum*" were described as untrustworthy.<sup>59</sup> One cartoonist drew a couple soldiers about to snatch a "*crucca*" hen; however, the chicken pleaded, "I swear! I have anti-communist sentiments!"<sup>60</sup> The fictitious letters in the series "Le lettere del fante Bonaventura" were addressed from "Zona Crucca," "Zona dei crucchi," "Crucchilandia," and "Cruccheria."<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, rather than writing specifically of Croatia or other regions occupied by the Second Army, articles in *La Tradotta* most frequently referred to occupied territory as "the Balkans" [*in Balcania, di Balcania*]. The army called upon its personnel to view themselves as "comrades-in-arms of the Balkans."<sup>62</sup> As guerrilla warfare increased, the term more often became preceded by negative modifiers, such as the "treacherous land of the Balkans."<sup>63</sup> The army's policy of treating all guerrilla bands as part of a "single

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<sup>57</sup> "Le lettere del fante Bonaventura," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 10 January 1943, 6.

<sup>58</sup> For a typical depiction of *crucchi* partisans, see "I velocissimi crucchi," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 13 December 1942, 2. Other articles referred to Slovene *crucchi* and interned *crucchi*. See "Autiere Rossi," and "I fanti non mollano," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 7 March 1943, 4, 6. After 1943, Italians adopted the term *crucchi* to refer to their German enemies and occupiers.

<sup>59</sup> "Sigarette italiane non ne fumate," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 13 June 1943, 8.

<sup>60</sup> "Galline crucche," 20 September 1942, *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 20 September 1942, 3.

<sup>61</sup> "Le lettere del fante Bonaventura," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 31 January 1943, 6; 21 February 1943, 5; 28 February 1943, 4; and, 4 July 1943, 4–5.

<sup>62</sup> "Natale in Balcania," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 20 December 1942, 2.

<sup>63</sup> "Il compagna sconosciuto," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 14 February 1943, 5.

front,” the need for army propagandists to appeal to soldiers in diverse parts of Yugoslavia, a desire to simplify the political and ethnic complexities of the region, and security-intelligence concerns likely contributed to this trend towards generalization.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, efforts to establish feelings of camaraderie and equality with the Croatian ally in Italian propaganda gave way to racist stereotypes as Italian forces grew frustrated with their inability to eliminate the Partisan threat.

### *Irredentism and the Imperial Civilizing Mission*

Italo-Croatian relations were also plagued by competing irredentist claims over the coastal territory of Dalmatia. Incompatibilities between Italian and Croatian interests were made apparent at the beginning of the occupation when a single headline in the *Corriere della Sera* tried vainly to combine both themes of liberation and irredentist expansionism: “The intimate communion between Italy and the revived kingdom. Moved exultation of the Italian people for the return of Dalmatian territory under the sign of Rome.”<sup>65</sup> This confusing message had its roots in the cautious attitude that Minculpop adopted towards the Balkan situation in May 1941. Convinced that propaganda had ramifications on foreign policy, and unwilling to raise expectations in Italy given the uncertainty whether Hitler would grant his ally any territorial bounty at all, Pavolini ensured that irredentist propaganda remained limited at this stage. At the end of April, he warned Italian journalists “not to anticipate anything on what could be the Balkan settlement as a rule. In particular in dealing with questions about Dalmatia, totally avoid any tone that can seem anti-Croatian or anti-Slavic.” Instead, he promoted his concept of an “Italian Imperial Community,” over which Italy would exert indirect influence.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Roatta’s 3C circular emphasized that counterinsurgency was “not a fight against local and independent bands, but against an adversary that aims to establish a ‘single front’ to replace that of the Yugoslavian military that the Army gloriously defeated in April 1941.” Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 159.

<sup>65</sup> “L’intima comunione tra l’Italia e il risorto regno. Commossa esultanza del popolo italiano per il ritorno delle terre dalmate sotto i segni di Roma,” *Corriere della Sera*, 20 May 1941, 1.

<sup>66</sup> “Rapporto del Ministro ai giornalisti,” 29 April 1941, in Tranfaglia, *Ministri e giornalisti*, 127. Until the Treaty of Rome was signed, Pavolini allowed newspapers to speak of Italian interests in Dalmatia, but not over specific places. “Rapporto ai giornalisti del 7 maggio 1941,” 7 May 1941, in Tranfaglia, *Ministri e giornalisti*, 135.

Themes of imperialist expansionism in this respect made their way into the army's propaganda.<sup>67</sup> Soldiers of the VI and XVIII Corps were told that the war against Britain and the Soviet Union was being fought to reorganize the world into living spaces [*spazi vitali*]. Europe would be divided between a Nordic living space, under German hegemony, and a Mediterranean one, under Italian tutelage. Such an arrangement was justified on historical, biological, and geographical grounds: centuries of experience revealed that Germanic ways of life could not persist in the Mediterranean, while Latin ways were unsuited to northern climes.<sup>68</sup> Like Germany, Italy was fighting a just war of expansion for national survival by ensuring the "fair distribution of the raw materials existing in the world."<sup>69</sup> In addition, Italian generals helped promote more traditional concepts of empire through speeches and decrees to their men. On the anniversary of the declaration of empire, Armellini tried to instil in his troops a belief in Italy's imperial mission. Despite the loss of East Africa, he pledged that "the Army, which was the champion [*propugnatore*], conqueror and defender of the empire, reaffirms with arms in hand the certainty that Italy is, [and] will be an empire."<sup>70</sup>

Italian imperialism in the Balkans therefore found justification in terms of Italy's cultural hegemony in Europe, its right as an economically dependent and disenfranchised "proletarian nation" to expand, and in the patriotic desire to secure national greatness.<sup>71</sup> Despite Pavolini's initial concerns, irredentism formed another pillar that justified the Italian presence in the region. The *Corriere della Sera* praised the soldiers of the Second Army for turning "the empty dream of generations of patriots" into reality.<sup>72</sup> Although

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<sup>67</sup> As Sala has argued, *La Tradotta* manifested themes of "fascist imperialism, which tried to carve out its own 'colonial space' in the very heart of Europe." Sala, "Guerriglia e controguerriglia in Jugoslavia," 99.

<sup>68</sup> "L'Asse ed i grandi spazi vitali," *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 2 April 1942, 2.

<sup>69</sup> "Fante d'Italia," *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 3 May 1942, 2. "Gli obiettivi del Tripartito e quelli dei loro avversari," *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 12 May 1942, 2.

<sup>70</sup> "Ordine del Giorno N. 12," *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 9 May 1942, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Fascist ideology borrowed the concept of Italy as a "proletarian nation" from the Italian Nationalist theoretician, Enrico Corradini. MacGregor Knox, *To the Threshold of Power, 1922/33: Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1:114.

<sup>72</sup> "Divisioni celeri in Dalmazia," *Corriere della Sera*, 18 April 1941, 3.

few of those Dalmatians who considered themselves irredentists shared Rome's vision of a centralized national Italian state, propaganda claimed that the local populations had welcomed Italian liberation with open arms, even rising in revolt against the Yugoslavian oppressors.<sup>73</sup> The inhabitants of Dalmatia supposedly all spoke an Italian dialect rooted in ancient Latin and had retained their sense of "Italian community" despite Yugoslavian oppression.<sup>74</sup> In the Adriatic, Italy's imperial mission looked for inspiration not only from Rome but from the more recent Venetian empire, conjuring the spirit of Enrico Dandolo, who founded the "Latin Empire" in Constantinople after sacking that city, and Pietro Orseolo, the doge who conquered Dalmatia in the eleventh century.<sup>75</sup>

Irredentist propaganda, by association, implied Italian racial or cultural superiority over Slavs. Anti-Slavism had been an important component of Italian ultranationalist ideology since before the First World War.<sup>76</sup> Despite the regime's official adoption of biological "Nordic" racism with the race laws of 1938, most Fascist ideologues continued to promote spiritual "Mediterraneanist" racism as a way to differentiate themselves from Nazi theorists and to appeal more broadly to Italian Catholics.<sup>77</sup> The army's propaganda reflected this tendency. One author scorned the notion of racial "purity," arguing that it was impossible to reverse centuries of racial mixing in Europe. Cultural and social organization was more important than bloodlines.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> "Le ribellioni dei dalmati al giogo dei serbi," *Corriere della Sera*, 28 April 1941, 2. Referring primarily to Venezia Giulia, Marina Cattaruzza has demonstrated that many irredentists had a "municipal-Habsburg" vision of the ideal state, rather than an Italian national one. Cattaruzza, *L'Italia e il confine orientale*, 374.

<sup>74</sup> "L'italiano indigeno della Dalmazia," *Corriere della Sera*, 26–27 April 1941, 3; "Momenti di vita in Dalmazia," *Corriere della Sera*, 29 April 1941, 3; and, "Visita a Veglia italiana l'isola maggiore dell'Adriatico," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 7 June 1941, 3.

<sup>75</sup> "Nuova Europa," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 16 June 1941, 1.

<sup>76</sup> Salvatore Garau, "Between 'Spirit' and 'Science': The Emergence of Italian Fascist Antisemitism through the 1920s and 1930s," *Holocaust Studies* 15 (2009): 42. See also Enzo Collotti, "Sul razzismo antislavo," in *Nel nome della razza: Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia, 1870–1945*, ed. Alberto Burgio (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999), 33–61.

<sup>77</sup> Garau, "Between 'Spirit and Science'," 53–54. On hostility between "Nordic" (biological) and "Mediterranean" (spiritual) varieties of racism among Fascist theorists, see Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>78</sup> "Le cinque parti del mondo," *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 31 December 1941, 2.



Racist characterizations in the regime and army's propaganda focused primarily on cultural themes that nonetheless emphasized the inferior otherness of the occupied populations. Authors used art and architecture to legitimize Italy's claims across the Adriatic as well as to denigrate the civilization of South Slavs. They publicized "the Roman solemnity" of the city of Split and "the Venetian graces" of nearby Trogir, which they deemed worthy of preservation and restoration.<sup>79</sup> "In Split," *La Sentinella* exclaimed, "that which is not Roman is Venetian, in happy continuity." The article dismissed "Slavic" examples of art and architecture as profanities. It portrayed Ivan Meštrović's statue of the tenth-century Bishop Gregory of Nin — who defended the use of Slavic language in Catholic liturgy — as a physical and symbolic eyesore compared to the Roman motifs of the Palace of Diocletian: "It took the Italian redemption [of Dalmatia] to remove — even if the monument was most valuable, a true work of art — that not only architectural, but even religious, indecency [*sconcio*]."<sup>80</sup> In terms of Italo-Croatian relations, such propaganda was all the more provocative because it was published for troops of the VI Corps stationed in Dubrovnik, which remained part of the Independent State of Croatia. Though not always a central component of Italian propaganda, such themes remained present into 1943, with *La Tradotta* still celebrating "the return of Rome and Venice to the old sea where Italic law [*diritto italico*] never was suffocated by arrogant Slavic audacity."<sup>81</sup>

Language, too, was a simple but effective tool to highlight differences between the two peoples. One article voiced particular disgust for the Slavic names given to "Italian" cities in Yugoslavia: "*Split! Siebnik! [sic] Dubrovnik!* These barbaric sounding names lived for twenty-two years, and no more."<sup>82</sup> Another author agreed that the Italian language was far more beautiful than the Serbo-Croatian tongue. Army censors, the author claimed, prevented him from printing any place names, "but if you take a few Ks

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<sup>79</sup> "Momenti di vita in Dalmazia," *Corriere della Sera*, 29 April 1941, 3. "Le opere romane di Spalato e Salona," *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 1 December 1941, 4.

<sup>80</sup> "Spalato e l'ombra di Diocleziano," *La Sentinella*, 24 December 1942, 3.

<sup>81</sup> "Buona Pasqua!," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 25 April 1943, 2.

<sup>82</sup> "Torna la Dalmazia," *Corriere della Sera*, 19 April 1941, 3. Italicized in original.

and mix them together, then add a final ‘ic’ you will have the name because in this cacophonous language all the towns resemble each other and pronouncing one of them is enough to put you in bed for a week with inflammation of the larynx.”<sup>83</sup> Such pronouncements, however humorous, served to establish a sense of alterity between Italians and their Balkan neighbours. Thus, irredentist-inspired racism undermined the regime’s early pro-Croatian propaganda and provided further justification for Italy’s presence in Dalmatia and its hinterland. The Second Army had to protect its coastal jewel of civilization from the “hard-hearted primitive people” [*popolo primitivo dal cuore inasprito*] that lived further inland.<sup>84</sup>

Italian propagandists applied somewhat different themes to justify the occupation and annexation of Slovenia. Compared to Dalmatia, the new province’s territorial and racial ties to Italy were less apparent; official motivations for annexation drew feebly upon the history of Roman colonization in Slovenia and the inclusion of some of its territory in the medieval Patriarchate of Aquileia.<sup>85</sup> However, at least initially, Italian propaganda relied less upon irredentist claims and more upon the ostensibly more modern and Fascist concept of an Italian imperial community to explain the incorporation of so many Slovenes into the realm. Just as ancient Romans had won over diverse cultures with their laws and civilization, it was claimed that, as an educated Western people with no history of nationhood, Slovenes naturally desired to enter “the order of imperial Rome.” The population purportedly appreciated “good Roman justice that renders unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, unto God the things that are God’s, and unto the Slovenes of these lands the things that are Slovenian, its language, its culture, its traditions and its generous autonomy.”<sup>86</sup> “Today,” exclaimed an article in the *Corriere della Sera*, “the tricolour flutters over the terraces [*spalti*] of the Slovenian city that has become a member

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<sup>83</sup> “Le lettere del fante Bonaventura,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 10 January 1943, 6.

<sup>84</sup> “Il paese dell’Erzegovina e la Ridotta ‘Mirelli’,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 6 May 1942, 2. The passage refers specifically to the Muslim population of Herzegovina. Gobetti has argued that Italians typically viewed Balkan Muslims through a “colonial imagination,” despite their actually high degree of assimilation, depicting them as opportunists and “filth” [*sudiciume*]. Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 182.

<sup>85</sup> Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” 222–23. Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> “Una domenica storica a Lubiana,” *Corriere della Sera*, 5 May 1941, 6.

of the imperial community of Rome, almost to consecrate that yearning that always leaned towards Latin and Catholic civilization.”<sup>87</sup> Such propaganda adhered to Minculpop directives to “treat Ljubljana as an exclusively Slovenian city” in order to appeal to the Slovene population.<sup>88</sup>

According to this propaganda, Roman imperialism permitted moderation towards those who proved themselves civilized. Similarly, newspapers credited “Fascism’s high sense of justice” for granting a degree of autonomy to the Province of Ljubljana.<sup>89</sup> At the outset of the occupation, the Italian press praised Slovenian culture for its elegant literature, high level of literacy, and excellent university.<sup>90</sup> These same characteristics later made generals like Robotti consider the urban population of Ljubljana and the Slovene intelligentsia to be untrustworthy and dangerous. However, for the time being, propaganda organs sought to demonstrate “the solubility (in scientific terms) of the Slovenian spirit with that of the Italians, and that certain ‘Italian air’ that transpires in every cultural manifestation.”<sup>91</sup>

The notion that Slovenes could be absorbed into Italian culture ran counter to trends in Fascist policy since the racist turn of 1938, when previously assimilable Slavs became viewed as “alien” and inferior.<sup>92</sup> However, it dovetailed with Fascist claims that their particular brand of imperialism, unlike the selfish and exploitative versions of their enemies, had a universal character that would benefit everyone.<sup>93</sup> For the troops of the Second Army, these early depictions of Slovenia had several ramifications. The propaganda seemed to promote moderate behaviour and even a level of fraternization

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<sup>87</sup> “La fortezza di Lubiana nella storia del nostro Risorgimento,” *Corriere della Sera*, 11–12 June 1941, 4.

<sup>88</sup> “Rapporto del Ministro ai giornalisti,” 2 May 1941, in Tranfaglia, *Ministri e giornalisti*, 129.

<sup>89</sup> “Sfilano a Lubiana i soldati della Seconda Armata,” *Corriere della Sera*, 9–10 May 1941, 1.

<sup>90</sup> “Rapida soccribanda attraverso la cultura slovena,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 8 June 1941, 3.

<sup>91</sup> “Passeggiata a Lubiana,” *Corriere della Sera*, 6–7 June 1941, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Maura Hametz, “Naming Italians in the Borderland, 1926–1943,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 15, no. 3 (2010): 425.

<sup>93</sup> An article addressed to soldiers in Dalmatia claimed that Fascist doctrine was “the best way to achieve the greatness of history, civilization and progress that God assigned to mortals.” “Italia mattiniera,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 9 May 1942, 2.

towards the occupied populations. It also contributed to a tendency — which persisted among those serving in Croatian territory — to view the Province of Ljubljana as a “promised land,” inhabited by friendly and civilized people.<sup>94</sup> Given these expectations, guerrilla resistance came as all the greater a shock to the Italian occupiers and may have contributed to the harsh Italian reaction to signs of rebellion in Slovenia.

Concepts of nationalist irredentism and universalist imperialism overlapped and intertwined in ways that sometimes bolstered and other times contradicted one another. Balkan Slavs could be treated as a monolithic whole or as variegated groups; they could be seen as civilized allies or barbaric enemies. The aspect that remained constant was the conviction in the cultural superiority of Italians over the races of occupied Yugoslavia. The common narrative between irredentist and imperialist propaganda involved that of Latin civilization in the Balkans assailed by Slavic barbarism. In this way, the myth of Rome and its “civilizing mission” was central to the army’s propaganda in Yugoslavia. The war, it was promised, would establish a new order in which “Rome returns as a beacon of civilization and justice among the peoples of the entire world.” Referring to the Fascist *ventennio*, the editors of *La Tradotta* explained this as the “logical inevitable development of the history of these past twenty years.”<sup>95</sup> [Appendix E] It was around the theme of *romanità* that the army most enthusiastically identified itself with the regime.

Reflecting the regime’s discourse on the fundamental unity of Italian history, a serial column in *Il Popolo di Spalato* declared that the history of Italy was “the same thing as the history of Rome.”<sup>96</sup> An article on “Great Italians” explained how the legions of Caesar and Augustus “brought civilization to the darkest corners of Europe.”<sup>97</sup> Army propagandists and commanding officers followed the regime’s lead by attempting to fit

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<sup>94</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 102.

<sup>95</sup> “Roma doma,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 25 October 1942, 1. The article, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the March on Rome, was accompanied by a drawing that depicts a Roman legionary dwarfing a Communist Partisan. The Partisan’s bullets impotently bounce off the Roman’s shield, which sports the coat of arms of the House of Savoy. *Roma doma* [“Rome rules”] may refer to a motto pronounced by Mussolini in a speech directed to Fascist youth in 1937. See OO, XXVIII, 243.

<sup>96</sup> Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 9. “Storia d’Italia,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 2 December 1941, 4.

<sup>97</sup> “Gli Italiani grandissimi,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 3 December 1941, 2.

concepts of *romanità*, Italic antiquity, and Christianity into a monolithic model of Italian civilization.<sup>98</sup> While Dalmazzo reminded his men that the lands they occupied “once saw the passage of Roman legionaries,” Armellini lauded the “heroism of the Italic stock [*stripe italica*]” in conducting its “civilizing work.”<sup>99</sup> The civilizing mission originated not only from Rome’s legacy as centre of the ancient empire, but also as the centre of Christianity.<sup>100</sup> Whether through empire or religion, it had been Italy’s historic destiny to bring “the light of its universal genius to others, in morality and in law, in the entire structure of life.”<sup>101</sup> An article on “the five parts of the world” explained:

It is Europe that has brought civilization to other parts of the world, but since it was Rome and Italy that civilized Europe, one can, without exaggeration, confirm that world civilization is Roman and Italian civilization. Every time that peoples of the world have tried to pull away from our model of civilization and come up with something new, they have failed.

As in Ethiopia, the sense of a civilizing mission could not be separated from a chauvinistic sense of superiority over others, especially over those who chose not to live “under the shadow of a just and strong government.”<sup>102</sup>

Although always coloured with paternalism, and often tainted with racism, the army’s sense of a civilizing mission was closely connected to calls for humanitarianism in order to conduct a hearts-and-minds policy in Yugoslavia. Propaganda for the troops at times could be sympathetic towards the occupied populations and would praise the kindness and generosity of Italian soldiers towards them. After describing the filth, negligence, and poor education of the locals in the village his unit garrisoned, one

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<sup>98</sup> Claudia Lazzaro, “Forging a Visible Fascist Nation: Strategies for Fusing Past and Present,” in *Donatello Among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy*, ed. Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 13–32.

<sup>99</sup> “Saluto dell’Eccellenza Comandante del VI C.A.,” 9 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, May–June 1942, allegati. “Ordine del giorno n. 3,” 4 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>100</sup> “Sotto la tenda,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 29 November 1942, 3. The author of the article is credited as Brother Egidio.

<sup>101</sup> “Italia mattiniera,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 9 May 1942, 2.

<sup>102</sup> “Le cinque parti del mondo,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 31 December 1941, 2. Mimmo Franzinelli has observed similar characteristics within the propaganda issued by Italian army chaplains on the eastern front. Franzinelli, *Il riarmo dello spirito*, 109.

contributor to *La Tradotta* told of how Italian soldiers took in an orphaned boy. After being cleaned up, fed, and clothed for winter by the Italians, the boy became a loyal follower, greeting the officers of the garrison with the Roman salute. The story, the author claimed, was “an infinitesimal part of the humane generosity that the Italian soldier offers up every day.” He therefore asked his comrades in the Second Army to donate “out of use” garments to win more children over as “neo-*Balilla*”: “This is the objective. Will it succeed? Yes, even here!”<sup>103</sup> The following week, the front page of *La Tradotta* included a drawing of a strong battle-hardened Italian soldier handing bread to a scrawny child, revealing how by the end of 1942 Italian military authorities officially promoted the image of the humane Italian soldier.<sup>104</sup> [Appendix F]

Thus, elements of the *italiani brava gente* myth — largely fostered by postwar governments as a means to establish an anti-fascist national identity and to mitigate the harshness of Allied peace terms — already enjoyed currency during the Second World War itself.<sup>105</sup> The prevalence of these themes in Italian propaganda towards the end of the occupation suggests that they came, in part, as a response to Italy’s failed war effort. The heightened possibility of defeat prompted the Italians to distance themselves from the policies and methods of their German allies. But references to the inherent goodness of the Italian soldier were compatible with Fascist notions of an imperial civilizing mission. The army exalted the humane traits of the Italian soldier as evidence of his superior civilization, rooted in Roman concepts of justice and Catholic morality. Humanity went hand-in-hand with superior Latin civilization.<sup>106</sup> As one caption read, doling out food to locals demonstrated the “Christian brotherhood of the Julian infantry in the Balkans!”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> “Anche ‘Bose’ è vestito,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 22 November 1942, 2. A similar story appeared later as “I soldati sono buoni,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 6 June 1943, 6. The *Opera Nazionale Balilla* was a Fascist youth organization.

<sup>104</sup> “Il fante italiano in Balcania,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 29 November 1942, 1.

<sup>105</sup> Gobetti has shown that the myth of *italiani brava gente* was diffuse during the war in Yugoslavia, referring to the army’s behaviour in comparison to that of their Croatian and German allies. Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 174.

<sup>106</sup> “Latinità,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 29 November 1942, 1.

<sup>107</sup> “Christiana fraternità del fante Giulio in Balcania!,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 21 March 1943, 2.

Such “generous charity,” it was hoped, would convince the local populations that Italian “soldiers are good.”<sup>108</sup>

Italian propaganda therefore sought to convince the troops that they brought civilization, charity, and protection to the people of the Balkans. This entailed a degree of sympathy for local civilians, especially children, who suffered from the hardship of guerrilla war. But, it also contributed to the dehumanization of Italy’s enemies. An article entitled “Hunger” described the distressing sight of starving children in the Balkans and blamed their plight on the policies of the Communist Partisans and the Allied powers.

They are the children in any Balkan station, on any Balkan railway: come from the village, hungry, at the sound of an Italian train. Partisans have passed through the village, they were here until yesterday, they stole everything, they destroyed homes, they condemned the inhabitants to tormenting hunger, they killed the weak, these children survived: a horrible picture of the desolation into which the policy of Anglo-Russo-American selfishness has thrust a land that had already accepted the peaceful protection of Rome. Betrayed by the lies of London and Moscow, by fantastic American promises, this unfortunate race has stiffened itself in a reaction as futile as it is tragic: innocent victims, these kids that crowd around the Italian train, these children whose faces carry signs of terror, symbols of an infamy without human precedent, pitiful remains of a people that has decreed its own extermination.

Humble and anonymous, the hand of the Italian soldier extends itself to these children, in an admirable gesture that transcends the strict boundaries of war, and that proves more infamous the cruelty of those who consciously desired the misfortune of the Balkan people.<sup>109</sup>

In 1943, with large swaths of territory in the hands of the Partisans, Italian propaganda portrayed the civilian populations as “innocent victims of Balkan communism [that] find salvation in the Italian soldier.”<sup>110</sup> So, the notion of a liberating mission in the Balkans continued up to the fall of Mussolini, except that by this point Italian propaganda claimed to be fighting to liberate the oppressed and terrorized populations from communist occupation.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> “I soldati sono buoni,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 6 June 1943, 6.

<sup>109</sup> “Fame,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 6 June 1943, 1.

<sup>110</sup> *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 28 March 1943, 1. See also “Il pane e le donne,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 6 June 1943, 2, and “Libertà comunista,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 27 June 1943, 1.

<sup>111</sup> “Libertà e ordine second il criterio dei partigiani!,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 21 March 1943, 2.

Positive propaganda based on themes of liberation and charity imposed limits on the nature of Italian repression in the Balkans. It demonstrated that Fascist concepts of *spazio vitale* did not require the extermination of other races; it helped prevent Italy's war in the Balkans from transforming into a *Vernichtungskrieg*. However, the emphasis on humanitarianism was itself limited by the expansionist, racist, and anti-communist messages that always accompanied and usually overwhelmed it. The contradictory interplay between these themes was made evident in an article for *La Tradotta* entitled "The Little Serb." The article told the story of an Italian unit that had just encountered and defeated — quite bloodily — a group of Partisans in a village. Inside the village, the Italian soldiers came across a scrawny boy in bare feet, poorly clad, and with a shaven head, typical of the way Balkan children were depicted in the army's propaganda. The author argued that the pitiful sight of the boy and his village was a glimpse of "the infernal vision of the Soviet paradise." In Italy, he commented, children like this would be sent to idyllic colonies by the sea, where the state would care for their moral and physical development, thereby strengthening the fabric of the nation. But, in the Balkans,

instead there is nothing but mountain banditry and incursions by raiders; here social chaos finds its most typical manifestation. The villages are dirty, the hovels are filthy, education is backwards or else absent. The incurable desire for the ghastly is the prevailing and absolute law that is sown among these sterile mountains and barren plateaus of agony and anguished moans.

While the author treated the Serb child sympathetically as an innocent victim — unfortunate enough to belong to a backwards and barbaric society — and while the Italian soldiers in the article demonstrated their innate generosity and civilized kindness by offering the boy some bread, such sympathy did not prevent the Italians from burning the boy's village and leaving him behind to fend for himself after "the dreadful disaster provoked by his father."<sup>112</sup> In this case, although mercy and charity towards defenceless children were portrayed as characteristics of the good Italian soldier, the author had no doubt that the boy's father was a Communist Partisan and that the village as a collective unit was rebellious and deserving of its fate.

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<sup>112</sup> "Il piccolo serbo," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 15 November 1942, 2.



The limits of Italian sympathy for the local populations were made further evident in the 6 June 1943 issue of *La Tradotta*. On the same page as articles that highlighted the hunger of the populations and Italian efforts to win them over by offering food was a notice about the “sound measure” of “suspending rations to populations that support the partisans.” The author added that “this measure has proven to have effect. The belly, when it rumbles, gets rid of cheerfulness [*toglie l'allegria*].”<sup>113</sup> The following month, and just a week before Mussolini’s fall from power, another notice proclaimed that “The *bono italiano* is a myth to explode, he who fears the violence of your just reaction will tell you himself.”<sup>114</sup> Italian commands, which had to balance concerns for the morale, discipline, and fighting power of their men, were never completely willing to adopt a “soft” approach in their counterinsurgency policies or in propaganda for their men. This was yet another factor behind the plurality of contradictions regarding Italy’s mission in Yugoslavia. Italian propagandists were aware of these contradictions, but they insisted that Italian soldiers were “sufficiently great and civilized and strong in arms to feed an innocent child, and to destroy without mercy and to the last man those who prove themselves enemies of Rome.”<sup>115</sup>

## The Enemy

By 1942, obsession with the guerrilla enemy outweighed any other single theme in the Italian army’s propaganda for its troops. As Teodoro Sala has demonstrated, Italian propaganda in Yugoslavia had to respond and adjust to the changing conditions and characteristics of guerrilla warfare.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, for the thousands of soldiers that reached the theatre as replacements or reinforcements after the summer of 1941, the state of warfare in the Balkans came as a tremendous shock, rendering obsolete much of the

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<sup>113</sup> “Sano provvedimento,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 6 June 1943, 2.

<sup>114</sup> *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 18 July 1943, 4.

<sup>115</sup> “Latinità,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 29 November 1942, 1.

<sup>116</sup> Sala, “Guerriglia e controguerriglia in Jugoslavia,” 92.

preparatory propaganda they had received in Italy.<sup>117</sup> After May 1941, news in Italy about the occupying forces in the Balkans was virtually non-existent.<sup>118</sup> With the outbreak of war against the Soviet Union in June, any form of news from the Balkans became increasingly less regular and usually presented an image of normalcy in the region.<sup>119</sup> Only later in 1943, when it could no longer be ignored, did newspapers on the home front begin to acknowledge the existence of Tito's Partisan movement and Italian counterinsurgency operations against it.<sup>120</sup>

### *The Guerrilla in Italian Propaganda*

Despite the lack of recognition in the domestic press and the fact that prior to 1942 troops stationed in Dalmatia and Croatia were not awarded the extra pay granted to soldiers in areas of operations, Italian commands tried to convince their men that they were in a true war zone.<sup>121</sup> This was intended to overcome morale and discipline problems — a common issue for frontline troops relegated to occupation duty — that plagued the Second Army. After the difficult winter of 1941–42, Ambrosio lamented the lack of fighting spirit among his men. On more than one occasion, entire units had surrendered without a fight after being ambushed. He blamed poor morale on fatigue but also on the

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<sup>117</sup> Casanuova later claimed that these factors, combined with realities on the ground, prompted soldiers of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division to reject Fascist propaganda. Casanuova, *I°/51*, 14, 33–34.

<sup>118</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 24.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, “Le visite di Bastianini alle provincie dalmate,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 1 July 1941, 3; “Fiume e Zara non sono più ‘zona d’operazioni,’” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 1 August 1941, 4; and, “Totale adesione al movimento Ustascia dell'ex partito di Macek,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 11 August 1941, 6. Newspaper coverage of the Balkans in 1942 and 1943 was limited to the commemoration of anniversaries, such as the establishment of Croatian independence, but even these were not always acknowledged. “Le feste a Zagabria per l’annuale di fondazione,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 10 April 1942, 3. “La Croazia celebra l’annuale dell’indipendenza,” *Corriere della Sera*, 10 April 1942, 4. “L’annuale della Croazia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 15 April 1942, 1. “Italia e Croazia,” *Corriere della Sera*, 18 May 1943, 4. “Italia e Croazia,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 20 May 1943, 1.

<sup>120</sup> “Controguerriglia in Balcania,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 18 May 1943, 1. “Aspetti della lotta partigiana,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 19 May 1943, 1.

<sup>121</sup> “Riassunto degli argomenti tratti dall'Eccellenza Ambrosio nella riunione tenuta presso il Comando della 2<sup>a</sup> Armata il 30-XII-41,” 31 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 novembre al 15 dicembre 1941,” 5 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

very nature of guerrilla warfare and asked his officers to instil in their men “the invincible will to annihilate the enemy.”<sup>122</sup> In his 3C circular, Roatta made a similar appeal that “operations against rebels are true and proper operations of war,” which “one must fight to the end and with fierceness.”<sup>123</sup>

Moreover, the army’s propaganda insisted that fighting Partisans in the Balkans was equivalent to combat on other fronts.<sup>124</sup> Even after the defeats at El Alamein and Stalingrad, Italian soldiers were told that “fighting here on the stony ground of the Balkans you keep the war far from your family, from your home, from your fields.”<sup>125</sup> In terms of the nature of operations and combat, too, army propaganda insisted that experience in the Balkans matched that of the North African or Russian fronts.

In fact we have, here, the Russia of winter and the Africa of summer; that would be to say mud and rocks, cold and dust in turns; and an enemy as cowardly as the English, as cruel as the Russians, as treacherous as the French, as quick as the Americans and as barbaric as the Australians.<sup>126</sup>

As on other fronts, Italian commanders awarded medals in the field for bravery, even if it was against “communist rebels,” and publicly praised their units.<sup>127</sup> After operations, Roatta lauded his divisions for overcoming “the fierce resistance of a seasoned and well-armed enemy, [and] the great difficulties of an impracticable terrain.”<sup>128</sup>

At the same time, however, Italian commanders and propagandists depicted the guerrilla enemy as illegitimate. One article commented that it was ridiculous for

<sup>122</sup> “Morale della truppa,” 6 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>123</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 160. After the war, Roatta’s aide insisted that the main objective of the 3C circular was to improve morale. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d’Italia*, 1:241.

<sup>124</sup> Sala, “Guerriglia e controguerriglia in Jugoslavia,” 97–98.

<sup>125</sup> *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 14 February 1943, 5.

<sup>126</sup> “Le lettere del fante Bonaventura,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 10 January 1943, 6.

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, the decrees of Armellini and Dalmazzo. “Ordine del Giorno N. 11,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 9 May 1942, 2. “Ordine del giorno del 9 maggio 1942,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 12 May 1942, 2. See also Roatta’s “Ordine del giorno N. 16,” 10 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>128</sup> “Elogio,” 2 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati.

“partisans” to refer to themselves as part of an “army” [*esercito*].<sup>129</sup> The “partisan bands” lacked the discipline to be considered true military formations.<sup>130</sup> As in Ethiopia, the army employed language that delegitimized their enemies. A single article in *La Tradotta* included most of the terms used to refer to insurgents in the Balkans: “communist brigands;” “partisan bands;” “velocissimi crucchi;” “rebels;” “partisan bandits;” and, “battalions of bandits.”<sup>131</sup>

In the minds of Italian commanders, the illegitimacy of the Partisans sprang largely from the nefarious tactics and techniques they employed. During his major operation in Slovenia in the summer of 1942, Mario Robotti affirmed to his men that their campaign against

communist banditry, which still infests what is now our land, [requires...] action that is ever more firm, decisive, inflexible!

Action that constitutes a need and a duty against an enemy that is underhanded and cowardly, but, at the same time, clever and fierce. An enemy that, as a rule, doesn't want, because it doesn't dare, to confront us openly, and, having set traps, tries to exploit them without mercy, with cold ferocity, not worrying about the sad consequences of their work that fatally fall upon the populations, too often, however, with true recklessness, more or less fully conniving with these criminal bands. An enemy that doesn't even care for the Slovenes themselves assassinating entire families, including women and children and honest priests.

The troops should know that their efforts and sacrifices, even if today they should have [...] less resonance compared to their comrades that fight on other fronts, are no less useful and advantageous towards the certain triumph of the nation.<sup>132</sup>

Robotti's comments exemplify the efforts of Italian commanders to portray the Balkan theatre as a genuine war front while at the same time delegitimizing enemy combatants that refused to engage in conventional warfare. They also reveal how sympathy for the civilian populations that became victims of the Partisans was limited by mistrust for the occupied populations as a whole.

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<sup>129</sup> “Notiziario telegrafico dalla Balcania,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 21 February 1943, 6.

<sup>130</sup> “Bande. Banditi,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 16 May 1943, 2.

<sup>131</sup> “Taccuino del combattente,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 7 March 1943, 6.

<sup>132</sup> *Supplemento quotidiano del 'Picchiasodo'*, 28 July 1942, 1. AUSSME, L-13, b. 237. Robotti applied similar themes in his message to the troops upon launching his offensive earlier that month. “Ordine del Giorno,” 15 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

The ability of guerrilla forces to exploit terrain to launch hit-and-run attacks and to camouflage themselves among the civilian population resulted in frustration that manifested itself not only in the field but in the army's propaganda as well. As one article vividly explained, the perfidious techniques of the Partisans made the *rastrellamento* a particularly nerve-wracking experience.

The unit sets out on a combing action, through the morning mist. They advance cautiously, ears perked to catch the most imperceptible sound that manages to pierce the thick layer of padding that stretches above and between us, eyes that hurt from the strong effort of trying to see. And hands lightly caressing the butts of their rifles. Because here the enemy is everywhere. Lying flat behind that boulder, hidden in that bush, huddled up in that ditch. Ahead, beside, behind. Is this war? Or is it more of a hunt, man against man, which needs to be played with cunning and caution so as not to succumb? Involuntarily, dream-like visions rise ahead of infantry that rush to the attack, magnificent in force and daring. Furious scuffles, the piercing bangs of shots, cries of victory, enemies in retreat... But here it is another thing. Here the trap and the ambush reign. A brief pattering of automatic fire, coming from who knows where, from that hut, from that thick of shrubbery, from the edge of the road. Then nothing more. Silence. And it leaves in your heart a bitter dissatisfaction of not being able to come to blows, of not being able to spit in the faces of these forest brigands, armed with fear and ferocity, who shoot by surprise and flee. Caution and cunning. Searching every spot, reconnoitering every ditch, taking in every stone. Traps are everywhere.<sup>133</sup>

Fear of the ambush dominated much of the literature in *La Tradotta*. A poem written by a cavalry lieutenant noted how, during night in the forest, "Death is always ready / To raise his bony hand / With the ghastly sneer of every partisan."<sup>134</sup> Propagandists consciously exploited soldiers' frustration with guerrilla warfare to inspire hatred for the enemy.

Hate, a terrible word: it is necessary that the soldier, the good Italian soldier learns to hate! [...] We Italians do not know the cowardly ways of betrayal and disgrace, we have always fought openly and fairly [*a viso aperto*] [...] against the cursed enemy. No longer: Italian soldiers, we have learned how to hate them, these murderers of women, this enemy that dares compare itself to Rome and its civilization, and stoops to machine gunning a child!<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> "Azione di rastrellamento," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 24 January 1943, 4. Similar themes are evident in "Disegni di un legionario," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 6 December 1942, 3.

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, "Bivacco," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 10 January 1943, 3.

<sup>135</sup> The article was accompanied by a drawing of the slain child. "Odiare," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 8 November 1942, 1. Partisans were frequently depicted as heartless child murderers. See also "Per chi combattono!," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 10 January 1943, 1; and, "L'ambasciatore dei crucchi a Londra," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 28 February 1943, 1.

The Italian military leadership officially sanctioned hatred as a positive value to be promoted among all Italian soldiers. According to directives from the *Comando Supremo*, it was the duty of all commanders and propaganda officers “to exalt aggressive spirit, love for combat and hatred against the enemy” in order to secure fighting efficiency and unit cohesion.<sup>136</sup>

In addition to inspiring hatred by highlighting the underhanded tactics and ruthlessness of guerrilla fighters in the Balkans, Italian commands exaggerated the tendency of Partisans to shoot any prisoners they took. This served to justify harsh reprisals and to discourage Italian soldiers from surrendering.<sup>137</sup> Prewar propaganda had already assumed that guerrillas in the Balkans — at this point referring to irregular Četnik bands in the service of the Yugoslavian government — would take no prisoners.<sup>138</sup> During the occupation, when Partisans took prisoners, Italian commanders spread word that all of them had been shot.<sup>139</sup> Some army chaplains, conditioned by their experience of guerrilla warfare, helped promulgate such messages. In August 1942, Ivo Bottacci, the top-ranking cleric attached to Second Army, distributed a circular informing clergy that a fellow chaplain had been killed in an ambush by a “horde of rebels” bearing “Bolshevik insignia.” Bottacci claimed that the chaplain “was wounded by gunfire and probably finished off at close quarters,” since “several stab wounds were noted on his body.”<sup>140</sup>

Italian officers and non-commissioned officers, claimed an article in *La Tradotta*, were shot by Partisans out of hand. Enlisted men were forced to assist in the executions

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<sup>136</sup> “Assistenza morale alle truppe,” 19 January 1942, NARA T-821/413/1134.

<sup>137</sup> For the same purpose, German commanders in Serbia fabricated claims that *Wehrmacht* personnel had been mutilated by Partisans. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 122. During Operation Trio, propaganda officers noted that “the hatred against the rebels is accentuated by the tortures noted on our dead.” “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 aprile al 15 maggio 1942,” 28 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>138</sup> Gayda, *La Jugoslavia contro l’Italia*, 123.

<sup>139</sup> Pietro Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati: Le spietate rappresaglie italiane contro i partigiani in Croazia dal diario di un cappellano* (Milan: Longanesi, 1973), 114.

<sup>140</sup> Bottacci was a particularly politicized chaplain who remained loyal to Mussolini after 1943. The attitudes and motivations of Italian army chaplains during the Second World War varied individually from militantly Fascist to pacifistic. Franzinelli, *Il riarmo dello spirito*, 98–100, 127–44.

and then had to perform heavy labour if they were not themselves shot.<sup>141</sup> In 1943, Second Army's commander Mario Robotti personally spread propaganda of Partisan atrocities against Italian prisoners, eulogizing the case of Captain Umberto Nazazzi. Captured by the Partisans and interrogated in a village, Nazazzi proclaimed his hatred for Bolshevism and his faith in the triumph of Fascism before being executed.<sup>142</sup> Even if soldiers did not buy into the regime's justifications for their presence in the Balkans, the conviction of the enemy's cruelty helped them accept executions and harsh reprisals as legitimate. Referring to such measures, Casanuova recalled that "all this was horrible, but it came down to personal defence, in that merciless and fitful [*frazionata*] war that they had sent us to fight against our will."<sup>143</sup>

Thus, alongside imagery of bringing aid and succor to the destitute, Italian propaganda told stories of tremendous violence and brutality towards insurgents. Resembling the fetishization of military violence in Ethiopia by Fascist authors, such tales were almost pornographic in nature, depicting episodes of success against an enemy that in reality all too frequently slipped away.<sup>144</sup> Articles described the pleasure of thwarting rebel ambushes, gunning down fleeing brigands, chasing Partisans into the mountains to starve, and torching their hideouts with flamethrowers.<sup>145</sup> A cartoon in the field newspaper of the V Corps depicted an Italian soldier literally sweeping away a horde of uniformed Communist Partisans with a large broom. Perhaps with Freudian connotations — which certainly had currency in the 1940s — the caption read, "like a

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<sup>141</sup> "Uomini al muro," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 26 April 1943, 2. This echoed the information provided by a VI Corps circular the previous year. "Uccisione di nostri ufficiali e sottufficiali," 17 February 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 769, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), February-March 1942, allegati.

<sup>142</sup> "Il mio cuore non trema," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 16 May 1943, 1.

<sup>143</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 122-23.

<sup>144</sup> During the Italo-Ethiopian War, Vittorio Mussolini famously described the pleasure and beauty of aerial bombing. Forgacs, *Italy's Margins*, 117-18. On the connection between themes of retribution, hatred, thrill, fantasy, and the glorification of violence in twentieth-century European warfare, see Bernhard Rieger, "From 'Duels in the Clouds' to 'Exterminating Attacks': Legitimizing Aerial Warfare in Britain and Germany, 1914-45," in *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective*, ed. Stuart Carroll (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 247-64.

<sup>145</sup> See, for example, the opening lines of "Il piccolo serbo" and "Madre comunista," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 15 November 1942, 2. See also, "Vittorioso scontro," *Notiziario del V Corpo d'Armata*, 1 September 1942, 4.

repressed dream... the ‘broom’ service” [*Come il sogno sublima... il servizio di ramazza*].<sup>146</sup> The army’s propaganda thus encouraged an obsession among Italian soldiers for killing the hated partisan, whether in combat or by firing squad. An article on a victorious night action conducted by men of the *Granatieri di Sardegna* Division in revenge for the ambush of three “massacred” Italian officers left no doubt that captured partisans ought to be shot: “The survivors that surrender understand, more than our limited Slavic vocabulary, that much more eloquent [language] of our rifles.”<sup>147</sup>

In 1943, *La Tradotta*’s series of “Letters from Private Bonaventura” continued the obsession with exterminating Partisans. In January, the fictitious Bonaventura spoke of flamethrowers “roasting the forests with attached — pardon the language — rebel partisans.”<sup>148</sup> This was followed in February with imagery of “*crucchi* rebels [...] roasting in Hell.”<sup>149</sup> Bonaventura wrote that he had “developed such a craving to put an end to these scoundrels of cowardly rotters of assassins of — with all due respect — bloody [*porci*] rebels, that I am so hot-headed with heroism and war-like fury that it gave me a rather formidable cold.”<sup>150</sup> Coming at the end of the first stage of the joint Operation *Weiss*, Bonaventura’s remarks were consistent with other propaganda, which exalted that “the *cruccho* bandit is covered with blood, but this time it is his blood!”<sup>151</sup>

Propaganda treating the Balkans as a war zone while aiming to inspire hatred of the Partisans and the desire to annihilate them had an indirect impact on the way the occupied populations were presented to the troops. Despite claims that the Italian soldier could find a balance between compassion for local populations and loathing for rebels, the very nature of guerrilla warfare made such distinctions impossible to maintain. The

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<sup>146</sup> “Come il sogno sublima...,” *Notiziario del V Corpo d’Armata*, 1 September 1942, 4. *Servizio di ramazza* — literally, “broom service” — refers to fatigue or cleaning duty, which in combat zones was not necessarily frowned upon by soldiers, because it could get them out of more difficult tasks. The verb *sublimare* — “to sublimate” — if understood in psychoanalytical terms, refers to the direction of primitive, especially sexual, impulses into socially acceptable activities.

<sup>147</sup> “Alamari nei boschi,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 29 November 1942, 2.

<sup>148</sup> “Le lettere del fante Bonaventura,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 31 January 1943, 6.

<sup>149</sup> “Le lettere del fante Bonaventura,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 14 February 1943, 6.

<sup>150</sup> “Le lettere del fante Bonaventura,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 21 February 1943, 5.

<sup>151</sup> *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 21 February 1943, 1, 2.



characteristics that made the Partisan so despicable in Italian eyes — their ability to avoid combat or capture by hiding among the rural population, their reliance on locals for supplies and information — also brought into question the loyalties of the civilian population. Although the Italians always maintained that they were liberating the people of the Balkans, first from Yugoslavian tyranny and later from communist terror, military leaders at the same time emphasized that the local populations could not be trusted.

In fact, from the early stages of the occupation, Italian generals sought to limit contacts between their troops and the civilian populations, largely to maintain military discipline and the health of their men. Ambrosio expected “correct behaviour, serious and reserved,” from the personnel of Second Army towards the local populations.<sup>152</sup> To prevent more intimate forms of fraternization, propaganda sections published leaflets alerting their men to the widespread presence of venereal disease in their zone of occupation and they established military brothels [*case di tolleranza*] in order to monitor and control sexual relations between Italian troops and local women.<sup>153</sup> Increased Partisan activity in the winter of 1941–42 prompted Italian commanders to issue additional decrees against fraternization, now in order to avoid ambushes or subterfuge. Ambrosio warned that those who today claimed to be friends could tomorrow become Italy’s enemies.<sup>154</sup>

Roatta later codified such sentiments in his 3C circular. For reasons of military discipline, cohesion, and secrecy in a combat zone, Roatta told his men “not to trust anyone and — until irrefutably proven otherwise — especially those who seem exuberantly favourable and try to win our friendship.”<sup>155</sup> In adherence with the principles of Roatta’s circular, Armellini established a segregated village for soldiers in Split and he encouraged his men to take an aggressive stance against civilians acting suspiciously,

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<sup>152</sup> “Rapporto situazione 1<sup>a</sup> quindicina di maggio,” 29 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, April–May 1941, allegati.

<sup>153</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 maggio al 15 giugno 1941,” 28 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 giugno al 15 agosto 1941,” 6 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. “Questioni sessuali,” 13 August 1942, NARA T-821/413/0523.

<sup>154</sup> “Morale della truppa,” 6 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>155</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 159.

publicly praising one soldier for his prompt action and initiative.<sup>156</sup> Like Roatta, he warned his men to “use the utmost prudence and caution in relations with civilians [...] who rely too much on our congenital good nature.”<sup>157</sup> Calls for discipline and a certain detachment from the local population dovetailed with the Fascist image of the ideal imperial conqueror, modelled on the ancient Roman legionary with his “firmness” and “warrior spirit.”<sup>158</sup>

Of course, it was impossible to completely avoid instances of intimate fraternization, especially in the opening months of the occupation. Official Italian reports hinted at the existence of such relations. For example, in a report intended to emphasize the anti-Italian bearing of Ustaše in Drniš, the Sassari Division related how Croatian authorities had levied fines upon five local girls for their dalliances with Italian soldiers. Out of a “misguided sense of chivalry,” the soldiers who “frequented” the girls reimbursed them from their own funds. An Italian battalion commander also intervened to stop the Ustaše from shaving the girls’ heads.<sup>159</sup> A VI Corps circular complained of the frequency with which Italian officers could be found circulating with women after curfew in Dalmatian cities.<sup>160</sup> However, Italian commanders generally considered levels of fraternization to be minimal. By the end of 1941, the VI Corps reported that relations with local populations were “limited to the bare necessities of life. The troops, given their long stay in the area, by now know the populations well and they know that they need to

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<sup>156</sup> As Armellini explained, the establishment of the “soldier’s village” was in direct response to “the little sympathy and the mistrust of the majority of the population in our regards” and was intended to keep Italian troops “far from the local population, in truth very dangerous.” “Villaggio del Soldato,” 15 May 1942, NARA T-821/413/0580. “Ordine del giorno N. 10,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 8 May 1942, 2.

<sup>157</sup> “Rapporti coi civili,” 14 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>158</sup> “Storia d’Italia,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 2 December 1941, 4.

<sup>159</sup> “Notiziario giornalieri,” 19 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati. Earlier that month, the commander of the Sassari Division had reiterated the “prohibition of having relations with civilians.” See “Propaganda comunista,” 6 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>160</sup> “Foglio d’ordine n. 27,” 25 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

act with caution and reserve towards them.”<sup>161</sup> By May 1942, following anti-partisan operations, relations reportedly were “always limited and imbued with distrust.”<sup>162</sup>

Propaganda through 1942 told soldiers to always be suspicious and prepared for combat. In one cartoon, a rifle lectured a soldier for not taking good care of it: “But, my friend, you should understand that I am your most loyal companion: I who, in the dark nights, keep you company in the long hours of patrol; I who saved your life in the ambush the other day, when I had to cut a caper [*fare una capriola*] on that partisan who wanted to send you to another world.”<sup>163</sup> A December 1942 article touched on the untrustworthy nature of the local populations. On the march, it explained, Italian soldiers “encounter shepherds, peasants, ugly terrified mugs [*brutti ceffi spauriti*], that, when questioned, reply: ‘*Ne razumi, ne razumi*’, that is: ‘I don’t understand’ (but they know and understand many things).”<sup>164</sup> Similarly, another writer bemoaned the inability to trust the populations of the Balkans:

They say ‘*Bono Tagliansco*’ and then ‘*tac*’ at the first street corner they shoot you from behind and that’s that and you never manage to find out who is the assassin; but I never trust anyone [...] they are all treacherous and even when they smile and bow to you inside they harbour the poison distilled in Moscow, and they are all like Boris Karloff [*Bori Scarloff* — sic] when he walks sinisterly at night. They are cowards, they are.<sup>165</sup>

As these passages demonstrate, the very presence of guerrilla resistance throughout Second Army’s zone of occupation inspired propaganda that treated Partisans and populations alike with disdain.

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<sup>161</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 novembre al 15 dicembre 1941,” 5 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>162</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 aprile al 15 maggio 1942,” 28 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati. The situation was no different in Slovenia. “Relazione mensile sullo spirito delle truppe e della popolazione dei territori occupati,” 26 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>163</sup> “Il fucile ha ragione!?” *Notiziario del V Corpo d’Armata*, 1 September 1942, 2.

<sup>164</sup> “Disegni di un legionario,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 6 December 1942, 3.

<sup>165</sup> “Le lettere del fante Bonaventura,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 3 January 1943, 6.

### *Accounting for Resistance*

Army propagandists had to explain to their men why the Italian liberating and civilizing mission faced such determined resistance in occupied Yugoslavia. Largely, they resorted to ideological and racist interpretations of the origins of Partisan movements in the Balkans. To varying degrees, the army employed anti-communist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Slavic themes to account for guerrilla warfare and to further bolster the notion that the troops of Second Army were participants in a broader struggle in defence of humanity.

The invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, just two months after the collapse of Yugoslavia, introduced a new impetus to Italian propaganda at home and on all fronts. It allowed the regime to reuse rhetoric and imagery from earlier campaigns against its most consistent history enemy: communism.<sup>166</sup> Anti-Bolshevism now flanked anti-plutocratic themes as the pillars of the regime's propaganda, with the common denominator — according to Pavolini — being world Jewry.<sup>167</sup> The war could now be presented as an anti-Bolshevik crusade in defence of Western civilization.<sup>168</sup> By 1942, the common enemy had become the “Judeo-Masonic-Communist clique,” where Western democracy played the role of the “Trojan horse of Bolshevism.” The Germans and Italians, on the other hand, were anointed “new crusaders” against “Bolshevism.”<sup>169</sup>

Army commanders in Yugoslavia sought to take advantage of these new motifs in their own propaganda. Immediately after the Germans launched Operation *Barbarossa*, VI Corps commander Renzo Dalmazzo asked his officers to say a few words to their men to counter communist and defeatist propaganda, as “a way to contribute to the struggle against Bolshevism that our allies and our troops fight on the eastern front.”<sup>170</sup> Unit

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<sup>166</sup> Marla Stone, “The Changing Face of the Enemy in Fascist Italy,” *Constellations* 15, no. 3 (2008): 332, 342.

<sup>167</sup> “Rapporto dell'Ecc. Pavolini ai giornalisti,” 25 June 1941, in Tranfaglia, *Ministri e giornalisti*, 153. Arnold, *Illusion of Victory*, 139.

<sup>168</sup> See, for example, “La crociata antibolscevica seguita dal consenso di tutto il mondo civile,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 25 June 1941, 4; and, “La rivolta dell'Europa,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 10 July 1941, 1.

<sup>169</sup> “Primavera,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 9 April 1942, 2. “Il cavallo di Troia del bolscevismo,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 19 May 1942, 2.

<sup>170</sup> “Direttive,” 3 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati.

commanders, in “conversations” with their men, emphasized the transformation of the war to a popular struggle against Bolshevism. Also in Yugoslavia, they claimed, Italian soldiers stood “for the triumph of such insuppressible ideals as the nation, family, religion, justice.” Propaganda sections reported that “this feeling is enshrined in the minds of even the less educated and has made the war more popular on the whole and especially that against communism.”<sup>171</sup>

Anti-communism became a focus of propaganda for both troops and civilian populations in Dalmatia, fusing with anti-democratic and anti-Semitic propaganda.<sup>172</sup> An article written in *Il Popolo di Spalato* by a second lieutenant presented the broader war effort as a “holy war” of salvation and justified expansion:

In fact, we have never been afraid to say that we fight, not only for the salvation of Roman-Imperial Catholic civilization and for the destruction of the demomasonic-liberal world and its Bolshevik brother, younger by birth but more dangerous in its intentions, [but] also to conquer our place under the sun, to give the wealth of the world, now held by a few, that logical and humane distribution that is the expression of economic justice and that will provide the entire world with a more harmonious growth and [will provide] men with that wellbeing that until now they have searched for in vain.<sup>173</sup>

Concepts of a just and holy war against communism and materialism merged with the religious aspect of Italy’s civilizing mission. Italian soldiers not only emulated Roman legionaries; they were also “soldiers of Christ, like past crusaders.”<sup>174</sup> As Marla Stone argues, the need to emphasize traditional Christian values and conservative fears of communism signalled the failure of Fascism’s project to transform Italians.<sup>175</sup> Regardless, what is significant here is that military propagandists consistently followed the regime’s line in employing anti-communist rhetoric. Moreover, like the German army’s

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<sup>171</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 agosto al 15 settembre 1941,” 24 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>172</sup> “Attività svolte dall’Ufficio Cultura Popolare dal 1 novembre 1941 al 31 ottobre 1942,” n.d. [November 1942], ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. “Dalmazia.”

<sup>173</sup> “Guerra santa,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 23 April 1942, 2.

<sup>174</sup> “Crocefisso,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 11 October 1942, 3.

<sup>175</sup> Stone, “Changing Face of the Enemy,” 334, 344, 347.

propaganda in the east, these defensive or “positive” themes coexisted with and complemented racialized imagery of the subhuman enemy.<sup>176</sup>

Along with generic messages on the ideological importance of the broader war, the pages of *La Tradotta* sought to connect the anti-partisan struggle in Yugoslavia directly to the anti-Bolshevik crusade being waged on the eastern front. Despite the complex and heterogeneous nature of resistance in the Balkans, Italian military propaganda tended to label all insurgents as communists. Sometimes, authors referred to Balkan Partisans as “Bolsheviks.”<sup>177</sup> The Fascist regime had used such labels in the past to denote any leftist opposition, but here the connections to Soviet Communism were more specific.<sup>178</sup> Italian troops were told that their enemies were directed by Moscow. A drawing, entitled “For whom they fight,” depicted an Italian soldier with rifle and bayonet protecting a mother and two children from a dagger-wielding Partisan flanked by Stalin.<sup>179</sup> [Appendix G] The message could not have been clearer: while Partisans fought for Stalin and communism, Italians fought in defence of the family and civilization.

Connecting counterinsurgency in Yugoslavia to the operations against the Soviet Union served three main purposes. First, it supported the army’s contention that service in the Balkans was equivalent to that on other fronts. Second, it provided an opportunity to portray the occupation of the Balkans as part of a defensive campaign to protect positive values, despite the fact that the Axis had invaded both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Third, building upon two decades of anti-communist propaganda disseminated by the Fascist regime, it further delegitimized the guerrilla enemy and justified harsh countermeasures.<sup>180</sup> It permitted the army and regime to portray Yugoslavian Partisans as

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<sup>176</sup> Bartov, *German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, 94. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 202–206.

<sup>177</sup> See, for example, “Gloria alla cavalleria,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 25 October 1942, 2.

<sup>178</sup> Stone, “Changing Face of the Enemy,” 332.

<sup>179</sup> “Per chi combattono!,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 10 January 1943, 1.

<sup>180</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 34.

historic enemies while presenting Italians as victims, establishing a dangerous framework of discourse and metaphors common to modern genocides and mass violence.<sup>181</sup>

A full-page article in *La Tradotta*, complete with photographic evidence of the ideological sentiments of the Partisans, employed all three interpretations.

He who says ‘partisan’ in the Balkans, let us be clear, means ‘communist.’ [...] Here, in the Balkans, we don't just fight against an underhanded enemy that waits in hiding to claim victims for its ranks: here we fight an idea, devoid of human thought, that would like to bathe the world in a lake of blood and desolation. You don't need to go to Russia to see desecrated churches and the destruction of religious ornaments.  
 Just come to the Balkans. [...] But this perfidy will not prevail.  
 Entrusted to the strong hands of the Italian soldier, to the power of his arms, to the might of his civilization, the defence will be steadfast, invincible.  
 Communism will be stopped, it must be stopped.  
 For the peace of mind of our hard-working families, for the sweetness that comes from our homes and our churches.  
 Remember this soldier of the Balkans.  
 We must fight the enemy by force of arms and prepare for the quiet work of tomorrow's peace, when the scourge of this war, this crusade, has passed.<sup>182</sup>

In this way, the fight against insurgency in Yugoslavia became part of a defensive war against Oriental communism. Military propaganda described the Balkans as a buffer zone, separating Europe from the east, in which the Second Army fought its own battle against “Balkan communism” and “Asiatic barbarity.”<sup>183</sup>

Italian propagandists frequently stressed the foreign ungodliness of communism and the Partisan enemy.

Every day we gather proof of the sinister influence that Russia exerts from afar over the Slavic peoples, in the anti-European attempt to cast them into the arms of communism. [...] The rubble of the ruined church [in a Slovenian town] gives

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<sup>181</sup> Bartov argues that the discourse on victimhood and enemies was at the heart of twentieth-century genocides. Omer Bartov, “Defining Enemies, Making Victims: Germans, Jews, and the Holocaust,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (1998): 771–816.

<sup>182</sup> “Il comunismo dei partigiani,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 8 November 1942, 2.

<sup>183</sup> “Quello c'è dietro il paravento,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 7 February 1943, 2. *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 28 March 1943, 1. “Commissari politici al... verde,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 9 May 1943, 7.

evidence against whom the battalions of bandits truly fight: against freedom of mind, against all that is most sacred in earthly life, against God.<sup>184</sup>

In particular, the existence of female Partisans symbolized how communist ideology countered Christian and Fascist concepts of motherhood and the family.<sup>185</sup> Italian propaganda did not portray these women as innocents; rather, they were seen as especially fanatical and brutal. While some writers claimed that “the Komesarica is a whore invested with the office of political commissar” that “plays the part of the bitch in the Bolshevik kennel,” others accused female Partisans of committing the worst forms of torture upon Italian prisoners of war.<sup>186</sup> The “inhuman insensitivity, coldness,” cruelty, and brutality displayed by female Partisans contrasted with Italian notions of “the fairer sex,” and could only be explained by their infection with “Asiatic philosophies.”<sup>187</sup> Special hatred, therefore, was reserved for female Partisans, who became the subject of much rumour throughout the ranks.<sup>188</sup> One author dreamed of plucking the belly and nose hair of a “beautiful *Krucca*, [...] or ‘Komesarica’,” one by one.<sup>189</sup> Although Italian policy generally spared women from execution, units occasionally recorded shooting female Partisans caught *in flagrante*.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> “Quelli della libertà,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 7 March 1943, 6.

<sup>185</sup> Although the regime contradicted itself by publicly mobilizing Italian women in mass party organizations, Mussolini’s population politics emphasized women’s roles as mothers and homemakers. See De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*.

<sup>186</sup> “Notiziario telegrafico dalla Balcania,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 21 February 1943, 6. *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 28 February 1943, 5. “Comunismo dei partigiani!,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 21 March 1943, 2.

<sup>187</sup> “Le donne partigiane,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 27 June 1943, 2.

<sup>188</sup> See, for example, Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, 60; and, Casanuova, *I°/51*, 60. German observers likewise found the thought of women fighting as partisans repulsive. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 209.

<sup>189</sup> “Viaggio fra gli zingari,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 21 February 1943, 6.

<sup>190</sup> See, for example, Cacciatori delle Alpi Division Command war diary, 18 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942, allegati; and, “Bollettino giorno 18 novembre,” 18 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.



As has been shown, Minculpop directives emphasized the purportedly Jewish essence of communism.<sup>191</sup> In Russia and Ukraine, anti-Semitism was an important theme in the Italian army's propaganda.<sup>192</sup> Likewise, in Dalmatia, VI Corps's propaganda section included a series of overtly anti-Semitic articles in its supplement to *Il Popolo di Spalato*. The half-page section occasionally included quotations from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>193</sup> An article written by Giovanni Preziosi — the regime's most fanatical anti-Semitic rhetorician — cited the *Protocols*, Adolf Hitler, and his own journal, *La Vita Italiana*, in an attempt to blame the war on a Jewish plot for world domination.<sup>194</sup> Another presented Jews as particularly clever, racially conscious, and coordinated foes.

They are and remain Jews first and foremost and they feel deeply Jewish, that is, not only of a different religion from ours (and that would be nothing bad, since religion is a private matter that concerns only one's conscience), but also a different race superior to all others, a privileged race for which anything is permitted, even playing dirty tricks [*far canagliate*].<sup>195</sup>

Propaganda like this presented the war as a struggle for “Aryan” survival, in which Rome represented the “pure and creative forces against worldwide subversion.”<sup>196</sup>

On the other hand, while anti-Semitic propaganda was present in Yugoslavia, it tended to be generic in nature and did not become a central aspect of the army's propaganda in the Balkans. The articles in *Il Popolo di Spalato* covered all the typical themes of traditional and racial anti-Semitism, but did not deal specifically with Balkan Jews; there was no direct effort to link guerrilla resistance to Judeo-Bolshevism. In fact, despite occasional references to Jews, *La Tradotta* largely refrained from addressing

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<sup>191</sup> On the links between Jews and communists in the Soviet Union see, for example, “Pieno fallimento a Jasi del tentativo ebraico-bolscevico,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 5 July 1941, 5; “Incontro con il bolscevico,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 11 July 1941, 3; and, “Gli ebrei e l'URSS,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 25 August 1941, 2.

<sup>192</sup> Schlemmer, *Invasori, non vittime*, 71.

<sup>193</sup> See *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 2 April, 2, as well as 2 and 6 May 1942, 2.

<sup>194</sup> “Il giudaismo ha voluto questa guerra,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 12 May 1942, 2.

<sup>195</sup> “I fatti di Vallefonda,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 12 December 1941, 2.

<sup>196</sup> “La civiltà occidentale e l'intelligenza ebraica,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 1 May 1942, 2. “Il giudaismo contro Roma,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 30 April 1942, 2.

them at all.<sup>197</sup> This was perhaps because of Second Army's own ambiguous policy towards Jewish refugees — the similarly ambivalent Četnik alliance was also notably absent from Italian propaganda. It also suggests that the ideological inclinations of individual propaganda officers could influence the selection of material for field newspapers like *La Tradotta* or supplements like “Per voi, soldati.” Reflecting the variation in racial thinking espoused by Fascist ideologues, propaganda officers in VI Corps were more inclined to present anti-Semitic propaganda to their men than were their colleagues attached to Second Army command.

More so than anti-Semitism, anti-Slavism emerged as a primary theme in propaganda depicting Yugoslavian Partisans. In this way, the guerrilla enemy took on racial as well as ideological attributes. The war against the Soviet Union brought with it the notion of links between Bolshevism and the “Slavic” race.<sup>198</sup> In Yugoslavia, too, ideology and race became inseparable, as the tendency to equate Communist Partisans with *crucchi* — a term which, as has been discussed, had mainly ethnic or linguistic origins — attests. In the context of guerrilla warfare, the equation that partisans equaled communists easily extended itself to become Slav equaled partisan equaled communist. A cartoon, entitled “Ribelli crucchi,” combined ideological and racial motifs. The artist left no doubt that the “rebels” were communists: their hideout was adorned with imagery of Stalin; the Partisan commander wore the red star on his cap; even the bedpan sported the hammer and sickle. But the cartoonist also defined these communists as *crucchi* and the way they were depicted — poorly dressed, unshaven, and stinking — was typical of how Italian propagandists presented rural populations of the Balkans in general.<sup>199</sup> Another cartoon, entitled “Quando la ‘colonnella’ è ‘dobra’” [When the ‘colonel’ is ‘good’ (looking)], portrayed *crucchi* — this time, Slavic peasants being recruited into the ranks of the Partisans — in a similarly grotesque fashion. In the cartoon's raunchy caption, one of the recruits offered his services to the female Partisan leader: “Comrade Colonel, I'd

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<sup>197</sup> One of the few instances of anti-Semitic propaganda in *La Tradotta* focused on Jews in Russia and the strength of world Jewry. “Cos'è questo nazionalismo panslavo?,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 2 August 1942, cited in Sala, “Guerriglia e controguerriglia in Jugoslavia,” 95.

<sup>198</sup> “Perchè Stalin ha mandato Avanti truppe asiatiche e non slave,” *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 8 July 1941, 1.

<sup>199</sup> “Ribelli crucchi,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 15 November 1942, 2.

like to enter your Corps [the word *corpo* also means “body” in Italian]... The Colonel: No can do kid; you’re not big enough.”<sup>200</sup> [Appendix H]

Already before the occupation, Fascist propagandists had presented the terrorist methods of guerrilla fighters as endemic to the region. Initially, their vitriol fell upon the Serbs in particular. Virginio Gayda declared that “bloody violence at the service of politics is of ancient custom in Serbia.”<sup>201</sup> During the Axis invasion, Curzio Malaparte warned that Italians could not expect an honourable conventional war in Yugoslavia — “this country of ‘sons of a gun’” — but instead must be prepared for “the traditional war of the old Serbs: massacre, plague [*peste*], burning, hunger.”<sup>202</sup> By 1942, the spread of guerrilla resistance prompted the army to reapply such concepts with a broader brush, speaking of South Slavs and the Balkans as a whole. According to one author, Partisans belonged to “a race of scoundrels.”<sup>203</sup> Their violent techniques supposedly came naturally to the savage peoples of the Balkans:

For partisans putting a prisoner against the wall and shooting him is nothing. Shoot him [*fucilazio*], they say, shoot him [*fucilazio*]. Just like we would say: ‘Let’s go to the cinema.’ Human flesh has as much value as tree bark. [...] The execution [*fucilazio*] is for partisans a ritual associated with the primordial savage massacres customary to these barbarous and primitive people. The partisan, killing, enjoys feeling the old bloody instincts rise again.<sup>204</sup>

Nothing was particularly unique or surprising about Italian views of Balkan peoples as rebellious, violent, and savage. Europeans had adopted the term “balkanization” at the beginning of the twentieth century to denote political fragmentation and “a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian.”<sup>205</sup> The “cowardly” techniques employed by Partisans “in this sad and murderous Balkan war” were given racial connotations by contrasting the “brigandage of

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<sup>200</sup> “Quando la ‘colonnella’ è ‘dobra’,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 29 November 1942, 4.

<sup>201</sup> Gayda, *La Jugoslavia contro l’Italia*, 67.

<sup>202</sup> “Attraverso la Jugoslavia con l’ultimo ‘Oriente Espresso’,” *Corriere della Sera*, 7 April 1941, 3.

<sup>203</sup> “Il guardafilo ferito,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 20 September 1942, 3.

<sup>204</sup> “Uomini al muro,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 26 April 1943, 2.

<sup>205</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

the Slavic partisan against the heroic chivalry of the Latin soldier.”<sup>206</sup> In this light, Balkan savagery explained guerrilla resistance and justified a harsh Italian response: “Hate, a Balkan word: this is the first unit of measurement of ‘partisan civilization.’ [...] We [Italians] believe in fear, we believe in hate, yes: the fear and hate of the wild animal towards the man that is forced to strike it so as not to be devoured.”<sup>207</sup>

It is clear that understanding resistance in this way had a negative effect as well on how civilians were presented, further contradicting propaganda that called for sympathy and charity towards the occupied populations. As evidence of Italy’s superior civilization, a chaplain described the Balkans as “beautiful, but sprinkled with blood, with our blood; [...] lands so beautiful and yet the lair of assassins. Lands far from the pure soul of Rome and therefore so different from ours.”<sup>208</sup> Similarly, a non-commissioned officer referred to the Balkans as a “land that we cannot love,” inhabited by “people that have nothing in common with us, filthy drunks, scoundrels, traitors that neither feel physical pain nor share the refinement of our race.”<sup>209</sup>

Thus, while soliciting compassion for hungry children, Italian propaganda presented adult Slavic populations as devoid of human sentiment. The theme of the unfeeling Balkan Slav merged with that of the soulless Bolshevik in a story about a “communist mother” and her young daughter, encountered by Italian troops conducting house-by-house searches during a *rastrellamento*. Instead of showing natural motherly concern and comforting her crying child, the woman flung a grenade at the Italians. The grenade rattled around and only succeeded in killing the girl. “One soldier,” the author commented, “has moist eyes. That big strapping lad cannot understand the terrible deed. He only understood one thing: a *crucca* woman (she is no longer a mother) killed her little girl.”<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> “Feritoia,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 4 October 1942, 2.

<sup>207</sup> “Riconoscimento,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 30 May 1943, 2.

<sup>208</sup> “Sembra una fiaba,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 8 May 1942, 2.

<sup>209</sup> “Al partigiano comunista addosso sempre!,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 23 May 1943, 5.

<sup>210</sup> “Madre comunista,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 15 November 1942, 2.

The response of Italian propaganda to guerrilla warfare in Yugoslavia was in many respects similar to its response to armed resistance in Ethiopia. Effectively, Italian propaganda and directives like the 3C circular equated the struggle in the Balkans with colonial warfare in which conventional concepts of honour did not apply.<sup>211</sup> Italian military authorities sought to delegitimize enemy combatants by emphasizing their brutality and immorality, which they explained in ideological and racial terms. Hatred for Slavic communism was intended to provide a unifying force for Italian soldiers and to buttress their waning fighting spirit and cohesion. The insurgency itself came to dominate Italian propaganda in the Balkans, and this tended to taint depictions of the region and its inhabitants as a whole.

There were genuine efforts to moderate the behavior of occupying troops towards local populations: Italian propaganda presented *spazio vitale* as an inclusive and liberating concept; it elevated the Christian morality of the Italian soldier; and, it tried to draw a line between enemy combatants and innocent civilians. But in the face of one of the more effective resistance movements in occupied Europe, this line became irrevocably blurred, both implicitly and explicitly, in the army's propaganda. Ultimately, commanders like Roatta wanted to repudiate "the negative qualities summed up in the phrase 'bono italiano'," that is, the carefree, gregarious, and gullible Italian soldier.<sup>212</sup> While concepts of chivalry had their uses, the leadership of the Italian Second Army most of all wanted to fashion soldiers that were capable of crushing resistance with brutal and uncompromising force.

The degree to which Italian troops conformed to the mould set out by their commanders and by Fascist and army propaganda organs is debatable. Given his ongoing dispute with military authorities in Dalmatia, it is not surprising that Bastianini complained that "our armed forces — except the militia — are deplorable: no energy, no spirit, just a general,

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<sup>211</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 184.

<sup>212</sup> Legnani, "Il 'ginger' del generale Roatta," 159. As Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi points out, Roatta built upon Ambrosio's desire to instil the mentality of the conqueror in the troops of Second Army. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 31–33.

widespread antifascism.”<sup>213</sup> The ever-pessimistic Bastianini exaggerated — evidence of conscious antifascism on the part of Italian soldiers or officers was rare and desertions remained few in number, suggesting that the army did not undergo a complete moral collapse — but there is no doubt that the troops suffered from a growing sense of disillusion in 1942 and 1943.<sup>214</sup> Soldiers in Yugoslavia were well aware of the Fascist regime’s faltering war effort. Following the Axis defeat at El Alamein, Second Army reported that “the morale of the troops in general and that of the officers in particular is very much in decline.”<sup>215</sup> Failures in North Africa and Russia and the frustrations of guerrilla warfare aside, shortages of food and other materials — from soap to tobacco to coffee — proved a constant drain on morale. Soldiers were able to find little in the local markets and in September 1942 the army was forced to shut down its cooperative shops in order to ease the burden on the “national economy.”<sup>216</sup> News of similar shortages on the home front did not comfort the men, instead contributing to their demoralization and

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<sup>213</sup> Ciano diary, 15 March 1942.

<sup>214</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 187. For an alternate but unquantified perspective on desertion rates in Second Army, see Giacomo Scotti, *'Bono taliano': Militari italiani in Jugoslavia dal 1941 al 1943: Da occupatori a 'disertori'*, rev. ed. (Rome: Odradek, 2012), 105–108. High levels of exhaustion contributed to low morale, but desertions in XI Corps nonetheless were rare. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 71, 101, 107. Desertion rates can generally be regarded as good indicators of morale. Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 34.

<sup>215</sup> “Contropropaganda sul morale delle truppe e degli Ufficiali,” 10 November 1942, NARA T-821/413/0463. Such frank appraisals were not always forthcoming. Italian high commands lamented that propaganda sections on all fronts tended to omit unpleasant news and to take an overly optimistic tone in their official reports. Reports on morale must therefore be used with caution. “Relazioni dul servizio ‘P’,” 28 January 1941, NARA T-821/413/0370. “Relazione mensile sul Servizio ‘P’,” 22 October 1942, NARA T-821/413/0365. Based on censored correspondence of soldiers, Manca concludes that morale in Second Army was on a decline after 1943. Giorgia Manca, “Lettere dal fronte: I soldati italiani nella Jugoslavia occupata (aprile 1941–luglio 1943),” *Passato e presente* 24, no. 68 (2006): 126.

<sup>216</sup> “Andamento e sviluppo del Servizio ‘P’,” 3 November 1942, NARA T-821/413/0343. The SMRE rejected Second Army’s request to increase rations of tobacco and soap for its men. “Relazione sul servizio ‘P’ del mese di dicembre,” 17 February 1942, NARA T-821/413/0416. Already by summer 1941, the War Ministry declared that forces of occupation, including Second Army, would no longer receive real coffee. “Foglio d’ordine,” 13 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati.

defeatism.<sup>217</sup> It was difficult to convince soldiers of the inevitability of victory and of their own superiority when they lacked basic necessities themselves.<sup>218</sup>

Pessimism regarding Italy's chances in a war against so many well-equipped enemies added its weight to a number of underlying obstacles facing the effective indoctrination of Italian soldiers during the Second World War. Although Italian propaganda sections encouraged officers to converse with their men, the quality of the junior officer corps had not improved since the Ethiopian campaign. By March 1942, reservists made up 90 percent of subalterns and 66 percent of captains in the Italian army.<sup>219</sup> Despite efforts in the field to have company commanders and subalterns "live the life of their units" and engage with their men in familiar conversation, the Italian army placed little emphasis on the officer's role in providing "spiritual-political guidance" to the troops, especially compared to its German ally.<sup>220</sup> The ideal Italian officer was a paternalistic figure that did not fraternize with his troops — what Davide Rodogno has referred to as a nineteenth-century type of officer.<sup>221</sup>

The army relied on written propaganda which, as this chapter has shown, adhered rather strictly to the official Fascist line, as vague and convoluted as it often was. But the five years since the conquest of Ethiopia had seen little improvement in literacy rates among Italians, as much as one-third of whom remained illiterate or semi-literate.<sup>222</sup> In military units, this shortcoming could partly be negated through communal reading. In addition, Italian propagandists tried to reach a broader audience by including "popular"

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<sup>217</sup> "Segnalazione della Censura postale," 17 June 1942, NARA T-821/413/0560.

<sup>218</sup> Police surveillance reports indicate that Italians on the home front responded pessimistically to military defeats, to Italy's ever-expanding list of enemies, and to signs of Italy's relative poverty compared to the Western allies. In this way, Fascist propaganda regarding Italy's position as a proletarian nation could be read against the grain. Bosworth, "War, Totalitarianism and 'Deep Belief'," 493–94.

<sup>219</sup> Minniti, "Gli ufficiali di carriera," 77.

<sup>220</sup> "Spirito delle truppe," 8 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), June–July 1942, allegati. Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece*, 201.

<sup>221</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 151–52.

<sup>222</sup> Based on the 1951 census, which listed 12.9 percent of Italy's population as illiterate and revealed that another 17.9 percent had not completed elementary school, Knox estimates that between one-third and two-fifths of the wartime population was illiterate or semiliterate. Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 23.

language or even dialect and by soliciting the participation of military personnel in the production of propaganda.<sup>223</sup> Italian propaganda officers were aware of the obstacles that faced them and they took steps to overcome those obstacles, but adjustments to content could only make limited headway in the face of structural challenges.

Although its impact is difficult to measure, another factor that impeded the indoctrinatory efforts of the regime and army was the peasant origin of many Italian conscripts. It is possible that soldiers from poor rural backgrounds sympathized and identified with Croat or Slovene peasants; as has been shown, such notions were not completely absent even from Italian propaganda.<sup>224</sup> More important perhaps than the socio-economic status of the peasant soldier was his firm rooting in Catholic tradition. Mimmo Franzinelli has argued that, given the regime's inability to establish unifying objectives for a war based on vague imperial myths, many Italian soldiers turned to religion as a way to make sense of the war and the sacrifices it demanded. In this respect, army chaplains took on a key role in the maintenance of morale and cohesion in Italian combat units. There existed a broad ideological consensus between the Fascist regime and the leadership of the *Ordinariato Militare*, the military clergy. However, while their ranks included a vocal ultra-Fascist minority that portrayed the war in Mussolinian terms, most chaplains relied on more traditional patriotic or spiritual themes in their preaching and, unlike the army's propaganda officers, they rarely inspired hatred for the enemy.<sup>225</sup> According to the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division's "P" unit, chaplains were well-received by the troops, especially during religious holidays such as Easter.<sup>226</sup> Italian propagandists tried to link ideological and religious messages wherever possible — most notably by presenting the war as an anti-Bolshevik crusade and civilizing mission — but they also

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<sup>223</sup> Sala, "Guerriglia e controguerriglia in Jugoslavia," 97. The inclusion of dialect in army papers like *La Tradotta* technically flaunted Minculpop's efforts to stamp out dialect culture. The regime issued directives on the suppression of dialect in 1932 and again in 1941, but the policy largely failed. Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 202.

<sup>224</sup> Rodogno assumes that peasant soldiers saw themselves as little different from the rural populations of the Balkans, but Gobetti counters that this is difficult to prove. Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 163. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 182.

<sup>225</sup> Franzinelli, *Il riarmo dello spirito*, 43–44.

<sup>226</sup> "Relazione mensile sullo spirito della truppa e della popolazione dei territori occupati," 19 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, March–April 1942, allegati.



printed non-political religious material, such as a “prayer for the infantry” and the story of a machine-gunner who credited his survival to the presence of a crucifix near his post.<sup>227</sup> These examples attest to the strength of spiritual faith within the Italian army, not necessarily in harmony with the military leadership’s image of the ideal soldier.

Despite the underlying obstacles posed by the conditions of war, an archaic military culture, peasant society, and religion, there is evidence that the army’s propaganda had some resonance among soldiers that served in the Balkans. Postwar memoirs, often written in defence against charges of war crimes and in the context of Italo-Yugoslavian political disputes, reflected many of the themes of Italian propaganda, especially in relation to the Partisan enemy.<sup>228</sup> Mario Roatta’s apologetic account of the war emphasized the barbaric techniques of the Communist Partisans in order to justify his conduct in Yugoslavia.<sup>229</sup> Roatta’s aid, Giacomo Zanussi, lambasted the Fascist regime for the harm it brought to the army and for its inflated ambition, but likewise portrayed Second Army’s mission in defensive terms. He attributed the strength and character of the Partisans to the problem that “in a Balkan state [...] the use of firearms is as common as tea is among the Anglo-Saxons.”<sup>230</sup> The memoirs of Mario Casanuova, a military doctor, argued that Italian soldiers neither desired nor understood the war in the Balkans: with the exception of some radical officers the troops did not buy into Fascist propaganda.<sup>231</sup> Yet, his own experience seemed to confirm the irredentist claims of the regime as well as the backward nature of the non-Italian population. Casanuova found that the architecture and dialect of the cities of Split and Dubrovnik truly did remind him of Venice, while the traditionally garbed Muslims of Herzegovina appeared completely foreign, eastern, and exotic.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> “La preghiera del fante,” *Il Popolo di Spalato*, 9 April 1942, 2. “Crocefisso,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 11 October 1942, 3. “Gesù tra i fanti,” *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 20 December 1942, 1.

<sup>228</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 114–15, 124–25.

<sup>229</sup> Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette*, 170–79.

<sup>230</sup> Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d’Italia*, 1:98.

<sup>231</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 79.

<sup>232</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 14, 19, 35.

The censored correspondence of soldiers writing home confirms that Italian troops in the Balkans generally lacked enthusiasm for their war, but that their views of the enemy largely reflected Fascist propaganda. As Giorgia Manca has shown, while soldiers rarely referred in their letters to the annexation, Fascistization, or Italianization of the occupied territories, they portrayed the conflict in Yugoslavia as a defensive struggle against a savage enemy. Anti-communism was the only recurring political theme prevalent in the writing of Italian soldiers.<sup>233</sup> The VI Corps's own censors reported that "the operations undertaken against Russia arouse particular interest because we are talking about a war felt by the masses [*trattasi di guerra sentita dalla massa*]."<sup>234</sup>

Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi has argued that anti-communism was the most successful theme of the army's propaganda because it gave logic to the Balkan campaign and reflected a genuine "phobia" among Italy's military leadership; the officers truly bought into it.<sup>235</sup> The internal reports and correspondence of military authorities in Croatia and Slovenia confirm this depiction. Dalmazzo was horrified by the chaos that reigned in Drvar after his units conquered it from the Partisans. He credited this not to wartime circumstances, but to the ideological nature of the communist occupation. Dalmazzo sensationally described to Ambrosio the workings of the so-called "people's court" [*tribunale del popolo*], the elimination of priests, and the communists' disregard for functioning public services or industry.<sup>236</sup> In Slovenia, Robotti explained the main tasks of the XI Corps to his subordinates by quoting Mussolini, who in a meeting had spoke of

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<sup>233</sup> Most personal correspondence from the war has been lost or is kept in family archives. The collection of censored correspondence held as fond L-6 at the AUSSME has not yet been opened to the public. Manca based her study on correspondence preserved by Fascist postal censors in the province of Alessandria. Manca, "Lettere dal fronte." On the provincial censorship apparatus in Italy during the Second World War, see Aurelio Lepre, *L'occhio del Duce: Gli italiani e la censura di guerra 1940-43* (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 3-6, 224.

<sup>234</sup> "Rapporto situazione per la quindicina dal 16 al 30 giugno 1941," 3 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>235</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 18, 34.

<sup>236</sup> "Situazione di Drvar," 29 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati.

the need to purge the province of the “communist bubo” [*bubbone comunista*].<sup>237</sup> This was one of the few instances in which an Italian general directly defined his mission in terms of “working towards the *Duce*.”

In addition to anti-communism, the chauvinistic racism so prevalent in Ethiopia pervaded Italian troops in the Balkans as well. In the face of resistance, the traditional cultural racism that dominated military propaganda could have a brutalizing effect on officers and men. As an army chaplain, Pietro Brignoli complained of the constant need to curtail the racist sentiments of the officers and men. One particularly bullish officer, he recalled, had opined that the whole territory of Croatia should be gassed [*ipritare*] “for the good of humanity.”<sup>238</sup> Whether for racist or political reasons, by the end of 1941 Italian military intelligence [SIM] reported that the soldiers of Second Army considered the populations of the Balkans in general to be hostile.<sup>239</sup> As Manca concludes, the brutalization of the guerrilla enemy was not directly related to Fascist ideology, but it nevertheless contributed to the violent instincts of Italian soldiers in the Balkans.<sup>240</sup>

Regardless of the effectiveness of the army’s propaganda, the degree to which the military leadership assimilated the key messages of the Fascist regime in justifying its occupation of the Balkans is striking. It is true that military propaganda tended to exalt the army as an institution more than it did the regime. Overt praise of Mussolini and Italian Fascism, or even the use of the adjective “fascist,” was less pronounced in the pages of *La Tradotta* than they were, for example, in the War Ministry’s magazine, *Fronte*.<sup>241</sup> Italian generals did not adopt overtly Fascist rhetoric when addressing

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<sup>237</sup> The phrase appeared repeatedly in Robotti’s secret directives and operational orders, which had no propaganda value. “Rastrellamento della zona a ovest del sol o di Kocevje e del sud Koceviano,” 24 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati. “Direttive per l’attività invernale,” 17 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>238</sup> Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, 109.

<sup>239</sup> “Relazione censura postale,” 16 December 1941, AUSSME, I-3, b. 31, fasc. “Censura dal 21/6/1944 al 27/12/1945.”

<sup>240</sup> Manca, “Lettere dal fronte,” 131.

<sup>241</sup> The 6 October 1942 issue of *Fronte* is available in NARA T-821/413/0483–92. A full-page article comparing the two world wars emphasized Italy’s improved position under a Fascist regime. Another three

Blackshirt units either.<sup>242</sup> However, even if the tone of its propaganda did not affirm the army's complete Fascistization, the main themes that it employed reveal the extent to which army and regime shared "an affinity between mentalities," based on traditional nationalism, self-sacrifice, and the centrality of the state.<sup>243</sup>

This fundamental compatibility is evident in a June 1942 circular on troop morale distributed by the Sassari Division's interim commander, Ettore Giannuzzi. The general urged his units to inculcate in their men a "state of mind that is the profession of Italic faith" by fostering "moral values that characterize our warlike youth: absolute devotion to the Nation [*Patria*], pride in our history, love of battle, the habit of danger, bravery and the duty to truth." While the absence of direct references to Fascism in his list is noteworthy, the values that Giannuzzi highlighted corresponded perfectly with those of the ideal Fascist "new man." Giannuzzi blended together the Futurist exaltation of youth, violence, and danger with myths of a deep-rooted Italic antiquity and an understanding of the nation as the focal point of a political religion in much the same way that Fascist ideology did. Likewise, his aim was to transform the Italian conscript into an imperial conqueror. According to Giannuzzi, these values were especially important in occupied territory, because they demonstrated to the populations the "civilizing mission" of the troops. He therefore encouraged unit commanders to have their men "sing the hymns of the Nation and Regime [this was a direct reference to Fascism] in the most enthusiastic way possible," for the spiritual benefit of both the troops and the occupied populations.<sup>244</sup>

Cannistraro has noted that Fascist propaganda as a whole was largely the reformulation of nationalist thought; this seems particularly true of its portrayal of the

pages were devoted to the enthusiasm of GIL members on the home front, while a two-page article lauded the volunteerism of the Fascist militia.

<sup>242</sup> See, for example, the praise of Armellini and Monticelli for the XLIV CC.NN. Battalion. "Ordine del giorno n. 5," 27 March 1942, and "Ordine del giorno," 28 March 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 769, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, February-March 1942, allegati.

<sup>243</sup> Minniti, "Gli ufficiali di carriera," 89-90. Rodogno applies Minniti's study of Italian career officers to the Balkan theatre. Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 147.

<sup>244</sup> "Spirito delle truppe," 7 June 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), June-July 1942, allegati.

war in the Balkans.<sup>245</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that, even with an expanded and more autonomous role in the production and dissemination of propaganda, the army largely complied with the main themes espoused by Minculpop in Yugoslavia. Claims to a liberating and civilizing mission, the concept of *romanità*, appeals to irredentist and imperial aspirations, exhortations to hate the communist or Slavic enemy, all could be found in field newspapers as well as in domestic dailies. If, as Burgwyn has argued, “of all the Italian empire-builders in Yugoslavia, the military was the least enthusiastic,” this was not evident in the army’s own propaganda, which clearly presented the Italian soldier as an imperial conqueror.<sup>246</sup>

The contradictory nature of some themes — for example, pro-Croatian versus anti-Slavic propaganda or notions of liberation versus imperial conquest — no doubt limited their effectiveness, but such inconsistencies reflected Mussolini’s vague war aims and the changing conditions of war more than a fundamental ideological rift between army and regime. The Fascist concepts of *spazio vitale* and Imperial Community permitted the existence of apparently contradictory interpretations of Italy’s war in the Balkans. Although violence and control were the essence of Italian Fascism — and, indeed, were at the heart of the army’s propaganda — material on the liberation of minorities and the charity of the Italian soldier was also consistent with concepts of *romanità* that justified the expansionist goals of the regime. Italian Fascism sought to establish a third Rome whose universal cultural leadership was rooted in its Imperial and Catholic legacy.<sup>247</sup> The army’s emphasis on humanity and *civiltà*, then, was not merely the knee-jerk reaction of Italian generals seeking to maintain self-esteem in a losing war, as Jonathan Steinberg has suggested.<sup>248</sup> It complied with Fascist perceptions of empire and it reflected the army’s attempts to include elements of a hearts-and-minds policy in its counterinsurgency strategy, however deficient those attempts proved to be. This did

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<sup>245</sup> Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, 7.

<sup>246</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire in the Adriatic*, 255–56.

<sup>247</sup> Kallis, “To Expand or not to Expand?,” 244, 246. Prior to the Second World War, Fascists had claimed that the “new Italian man” shared the “aptitude for universalism” of their ancient Roman ancestors. Pes, “Becoming Imperialist,” 610.

<sup>248</sup> Steinberg, *All or Nothing*, 173.

not necessarily make Italian propaganda benign. Although there was an increased emphasis on humanitarian values in the latter stages of the occupation, this always came alongside negative propaganda on the Balkan, Slavic, or communist enemy, and usually with the corollary intention of establishing a sense of superiority over the Partisans and occupied populations.

Military propaganda continued to insist upon Italy's cultural and racial superiority over Balkan Slavs up to the end of the Fascist occupation. In the middle of July 1943 — one week after the Allied landings in Sicily and one week before Mussolini's dismissal and arrest — the army went so far as to proclaim victory over the Communist Partisans.

The partisans give up.

These enemies that have surrounded themselves with the most appalling reputation of assassins fighting against soldiers that only came to bring them order and peace, these abominable enemies give up. [...] They give up: they prefer the just punishment of our arms to the continuous terror of life in the woods.

The army claimed that the Partisans surrendered because they now recognized the superiority of Italian civilization over communist ideals: "The rebel people of the Balkans [*gente ribelle della Balcania*] have always found in Italian arms the invincible strength of a superior civilization, which has humbled and tamed them."<sup>249</sup> Thus, the army reiterated its contempt and hatred for Partisans, as well as the racial dimensions of the struggle against insurgency. That propaganda of this sort persisted for so long was largely due to the fact that it exploited preconceptions of "the Balkans" whose accuracy appeared to be proven by conditions in the field. Confused by the political, ethnic, religious, and social complexity of the region and embroiled in guerrilla warfare, many Italian officers and soldiers accepted that Yugoslavia simply was a "dysfunctional family" [*famija rovinata*] or a "boiling cauldron."<sup>250</sup>

The Second Army's propaganda in occupied Yugoslavia echoed the conflicting ideological, political, and military factors guiding Italian policy in the region. Ideological factors included traditional anti-Slavic irredentism as well as Fascist imperialism based on the myth of recreating the ancient Roman Empire. Politically, however, these

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<sup>249</sup> "Resa," *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 18 July 1943, 1.

<sup>250</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 92.

expansionistic aims were at loggerheads with ever-growing German hegemony in the region and the formation of an Independent State of Croatia as a nominal Axis partner and, therefore, as an ally of Italy. And, militarily, the Italians found themselves embroiled in a difficult counterinsurgency campaign against a largely Communist-led Partisan movement; this brought the theme of anti-communism into the mix. The Italian army's perception of the occupied populations thus oscillated between seeing them as cultured people that needed liberation, barbarians that needed civilization, innocents that needed protection, and hardened communists that needed to be killed.

## 6 Counterinsurgency in Yugoslavia

By 1942, guerrilla warfare dominated the Italian imagination in occupied Yugoslavia. Second Army's propaganda increasingly focused on themes related to the Communist-led insurgency, and military circumstances imposed ever greater limitations on Fascism's programme of empire-building in the Adriatic. The persistent security threat throughout Italy's annexed and occupied territories ensured that the Italian military remained a key player in the region until Italy's capitulation in September 1943. The army usurped many of the powers of Italian and Croatian civil authorities and effectively dictated counterinsurgency policy in the areas where its troops were present. Although it differed in some respects, the army's strategy against insurgents in Yugoslavia shared fundamental features with its colonial practices in Ethiopia. While Italian generals continued to pay lip service to notions of attracting local populations through political and social incentives, and while they sought to exploit Italy's reputation of relative humanity compared to their German and Croatian allies, their military methods against guerrilla formations and suspect civilian populations relied on displays of overwhelming strength and terror.

Although precise statistics are impossible to calculate due to the complex array of circumstances in wartime Yugoslavia, there is no doubt that the Italian armed forces made a significant contribution to the tragically high death rate among Yugoslavs under Axis occupation. Out of a prewar population of sixteen million, slightly more than one million Yugoslavs died or disappeared as a result of war and occupation between 1941 and 1945. In occupied Europe, only the Soviet territories and Poland suffered greater human losses. The Italian army was directly or indirectly involved in the overlapping genocides and the counterinsurgency operations and reprisals that accounted for the vast majority of these casualties.<sup>1</sup> Although the victims of Ustaša mass violence and German counterinsurgency likely were much greater in number than those of the Italians, the

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<sup>1</sup> The best discussion of population losses in wartime Yugoslavia is Tomasevich, "Alleged and True Population Losses," chap. 17 in *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*. The official Yugoslavian government estimate of 1.7 million war dead is untenable, but the more likely figure of 1 million is still significant.



Italian Second Army employed the same methods as the Germans while turning a blind eye to Četnik mass violence against Croats and Muslims.

## Guerrilla Resistance

The national uprising in occupied Yugoslavia has been described as “an insurgency as violent and obdurate as any in World War II.”<sup>2</sup> The size, composition, behaviour, and tactics of guerrilla forces varied by region and time period, but no part of Second Army’s zone of occupation was left unscathed by insurgency. Armed resistance developed in different ways and took different forms in Slovenia, Dalmatia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as in areas outside Second Army’s direct purview, including Montenegro and Serbia. Nonetheless, it is possible to discern four general phases of resistance throughout Italian-held Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1943. An initial phase of relative calm following the shocking disintegration of the Yugoslavian state in April 1941 lasted into the summer. A second phase from July through the end of 1941 saw spontaneous popular insurrections against the Ustaše and Germans in Croatia and Serbia, and against the Italians in Montenegro, with a gradual escalation of attacks against troops of Second Army. By the third phase in 1942, the main focus of insurrection — now under greater coordination by competing Communist and Četnik leadership cadres — had shifted into Italian-occupied Croatia. The fourth phase in 1943 saw the ascendancy of Communist Partisan forces throughout Supersloda’s jurisdiction, as Italian forces vacated much of the countryside. Although the development of resistance was not linear and suffered numerous setbacks thanks to Axis countermeasures and errors committed by the guerrillas themselves, in general terms Italian commanders confronted an insurgency that steadily grew in numbers, efficiency, and influence.

During the first months of the occupation, direct attacks on the troops of Second Army were rare. This was a period of confusion and uncertainty for local populations, coming in the aftermath of the partition of Yugoslavia and the establishment of new systems of administration throughout the region. The potential leaders of resistance

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<sup>2</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 1.

adopted a wait-and-see attitude. While the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact remained in effect, the Comintern ordered European Communist parties, including Tito's Communist Party of Yugoslavia [KPJ], not to fight the Axis.<sup>3</sup> Nationalist Serb officers, including Mihailović, made their way to the rump state of Serbia, where they aimed to lie low and organize Četnik formations in coordination with the Yugoslavian government-in-exile.<sup>4</sup> Most of the former soldiers of the Yugoslavian armed forces who had not been captured during the Axis invasion in April went home or fled to the mountains, their weapons largely unaccounted for.<sup>5</sup> Italian patrols combed the occupied zones in search of arms, ammunition, and former soldiers, but without success. House-to-house searches yielded meagre results and commanders noted that "no materiel was turned in spontaneously by the population."<sup>6</sup> As in Ethiopia, the inability of the Italian army to disarm the occupied populations gave cause for concern.

Several factors converged in July 1941 to spark major revolts in Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro, ushering in the second, more active, phase of resistance throughout Yugoslavia. The entry of the Soviet Union into the war at the end of June was critical. It inspired confidence that Germany would ultimately be defeated and it brought the small but well-organized KPJ into play. Tito, predicting that the Nazi-Soviet alliance could not last, already had laid the groundwork for a campaign of sabotage and guerrilla resistance. Whereas the Communists played an important role inciting the revolts in Serbia and Montenegro, the uprising in Croatia — centred in Bosnia and Herzegovina — was largely the spontaneous work of independent Orthodox Serb bands in response to Ustaša mass

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<sup>3</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 69.

<sup>4</sup> Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 12–17.

<sup>5</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 76, 89.

<sup>6</sup> "Compiti," 13 May 1941, and "Notiziario giornaliero," 14 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941, allegati. Between 11 and 19 May 1941, the 1st Battalion of the 152nd Infantry Regiment reported finding 49 rifles in the field, whereas searches of property unearthed only 6 rifles, all in the same locale. The 42nd CC.RR. Section was no more successful in its own searches of civilian property, although local gendarmes turned over 19 rifles that had been brought in voluntarily by the public. "Rastrellamenti e ricognizioni," 20 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941, allegati. On Italian procedures for weapons searches, see the attachment to "Promemoria per i comandanti di reparto in ricognizione," 20 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), April–May 1941, allegati.

violence that threatened their existence. The KPJ used its superior organizational skills and underground experience to take charge of all three uprisings, but the Communists themselves — who counted only 8,000 members in spring 1941 — did not provide these revolts with their mass character, nor were they fully in control of events. Patriotism, traditions of resistance, and grievances against the occupying authorities were the most significant factors feeding rebellion.<sup>7</sup> For these reasons, ethnic Serbs made up the majority of the Communist Partisan movement in 1941, despite its largely Croat leadership. By the end of the year, with the defeat of revolt in Serbia and Montenegro, Serbs from the Independent State of Croatia comprised 95 percent of all Partisans in Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup>

Communists also obtained leadership over resistance movements in the annexed Italian territories of Dalmatia, Carnaro, and Slovenia, garrisoned by Second Army. Although local populations recoiled against the sudden imposition of foreign institutions and functionaries by their new overlords, resistance in the annexed territories developed at a more gradual pace than in Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro. In Dalmatia, the most active resistance took place in urban centres where the KPJ mobilized Croat workers and students against Italian authorities. Between July and September, their activity included public strikes and demonstrations, spreading propaganda through leaflets and graffiti, and conducting sabotage against railroads and telephone lines. A change in tactics resulted in a series of terrorist-style attacks on Italian trucks, police, and military personnel in Split and Šibenik using bombs or hand grenades. A number of civilians also were killed or maimed in these attacks, culminating on 9 November when insurgents threw three grenades at the 51st Infantry Regiment's musical band, wounding at least 17 civilians and 24 soldiers.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 31–38. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 69–70. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 90–94. Hoare, “The Communists and the Serb Rebellion,” chap. 1 in *Genocide and Resistance*.

<sup>8</sup> The prevalence of Croats among the Communist leadership in Yugoslavia was the result of interwar strategy that focused on political activity in Croatia. Hoare, “Whose is the Partisan Movement,” 26–27.

<sup>9</sup> Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 35–36. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:662–91. For Italian reports on sabotage and the spread of propaganda, see “Notiziario n. 60,” 1 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati; “Notiziario giornaliero,” 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati; and, “Vigilanza rotabili,” 11 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati. For reports on urban

The Province of Carnaro remained relatively calm through July, but by the end of the summer a number of small guerrilla detachments had formed in the eastern countryside, along the border with Croatia. Although the Partisans of Carnaro continued to increase in numbers, by March 1942 they numbered no more than 600.<sup>10</sup> Following the Italian and German occupation of Slovenia, a coalition of Communists, Christian Socialists, and other leftist political and cultural groups immediately formed the Slovene Liberation Front, which subordinated itself to Tito's Yugoslavian Partisan movement. Its guerrilla wing was small, numbering 1,500 by the end of the year, but it was well-organized and efficient. Despite concerns from the anti-communist Catholic middle class, the Liberation Front enjoyed a broad base of nationalistic support because the Axis partition of the country had effectively threatened the national survival of Slovenes. By October 1941, Robotti deemed the country "decidedly hostile" while Ambrosio reported that the Slovene Partisan movement had assumed the characteristics of a classic guerrilla insurgency: ambushing isolated Italian patrols; sabotaging railroads; spreading propaganda; and, assassinating Slovene collaborators and gendarmes. The territorial gains of the Liberation Front were limited by the harsh early winter of 1941–42, but the movement compensated by stepping up its campaign of high-profile assassinations in the city of Ljubljana itself.<sup>11</sup>

The Italian Second Army thus faced small-scale guerrilla warfare and urban resistance in the annexed provinces that, while not posing a serious threat to Italian rule,

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guerrilla activity, see "Notiziario n. 169," 20 October 1941; "Notiziario n. 170," 21 October 1941; "Notiziario n. 177," 28 October 1941; and, Dalmazzo to Ambrosio, 29 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati; as well as "Notiziario n. 188," 8 November 1941, and "Notiziario n. 190," 10 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati. See also "Relazione informativa," 14 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, October 1941, allegati, and "Notiziario informativo n. 45," 10 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, November–December 1941, allegati. Casualty statistics for the 9 November attack vary between sources. The VI Corps also reported the presence of small but well-armed Communist bands operating on several of the Dalmatian islands. "Notiziario n. 95," 6 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati.

<sup>10</sup> Pisarri, "Occupazione italiana nel Carnaro," 391–95.

<sup>11</sup> Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 36–37. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 17, 25. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 96–98. "Situazione militare in Slovenia," 15 October 1941, DSCS, 5/II:70–73.

gave real cause for concern by late summer and autumn 1941. At the same time, the largely political decision to extend the army's zone of occupation into the Independent State of Croatia brought more Italian troops into contact with Partisan detachments and independent Serb bands in that region as well. Through July and August, Italian commands passively observed the emerging civil war in Croatia from the sidelines, unwilling to shed Italian blood to assist their Ustaša allies and content that most Serb bands opted not to engage Italian troops. As we have seen, Italian generals believed that the reoccupation of territory up to the demarcation line in September and October would end the revolt bloodlessly. However, many armed bands remained in the field after the return of Italian troops, and they continued their guerrilla activity against Croatian targets, assassinating local officials, raiding livestock, and kidnapping villagers.<sup>12</sup> Of the Serb fighters who did return to their homes, few trusted the Italians enough to turn in their firearms.<sup>13</sup> These were ominous signs for the tranquility of Second Army's occupation of Croatia.

By the middle of November, the overstretched VI Corps in Dalmatia, Lika, Bosnia, and Herzegovina felt itself under serious pressure from numerous guerrilla groups. The Cacciatori delle Alpi Division described its sector between Split and Šibenik as "infected by communists," although their numbers were small. In Lika and western Bosnia, the Sassari Division reported the presence of two thus-far friendly "Četnik" bands, three hostile Communist bands ranging from 150 to 1,000 men each, two formations of "Četniks with Communist leanings" [*četnici ad orientamento comunista*] of 200 and 2,000 men, and one group of rogue "Ustaša-rebels" that allegedly cooperated with the Communists. Further south, the Bergamo Division faced 150 "Četniks" in alliance with the Communists. In Herzegovina, the Marche Division was under pressure

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<sup>12</sup> "Notiziario n. 179," 30 October 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. The Sassari Division reported the assassination of the Croatian village head of Ljubač, near Knin. "Notiziario giornaliero," 22 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August-September 1941, allegati. On continued raiding by armed bands, see "Notiziario n. 194," 14 November 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

<sup>13</sup> Italian reports reveal that few civilians voluntarily turned over arms to Italian authorities. Croats feared reprisals from Serbs and communists, while Serbs feared renewed conflict with Croats in the event of another Italian withdrawal. "Notiziario giornaliero," 8 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August-September 1941, allegati. "Situazione nella zona demilitarizzata dalla pubblicazione del Bando del 7 settembre 1941 ad oggi," 7 October 1941, DSCS, 5/II:44-46.

from several hundred Communist Partisans that had been pushed out of Montenegro by Pirzio Biroli's forces. Meanwhile, the corps reported the concentration of as many as 15,000 "Četniks" and 1,500 Communists north of the demarcation line acting in conjunction to threaten Sarajevo.<sup>14</sup>

The "Četniks" referred to in Italian documents at this point had little or no connection to Mihailović's Četnik movement in Serbia proper. The term originated from the small guerrilla detachments that had fought in Serbia's struggle for independence against the Ottomans in the nineteenth century and in the Serb uprising against Bulgarian and Austro-Hungarian occupation in 1917. After the First World War, the term referred to an ultranationalist and conservative veterans' association based out of Belgrade. Following the Axis occupation of Yugoslavia, the Četniks took the form of an "officer's movement" made up largely of Serb colonels and junior officers who had not gone into exile or been captured at the end of the campaign. Draža Mihailović gradually emerged as the leading Četnik officer in Serbia. The initial successes of the Partisan uprising in Serbia prompted the Četniks temporarily to abandon their "wait-and-see strategy" and join sides with Tito in September. But fear of provoking harsh German reprisals and concerns over Communist political gains led Mihailović to turn against Tito at the end of October, attacking the Partisan headquarters at Užice. The Germans refused to support the Četniks and the attack failed, prompting Mihailović and his officers to go into hiding. Despite this, the Yugoslavian émigré government proclaimed Mihailović the commander of its Home Army on 7 December 1941.<sup>15</sup> Serb bands in Bosnia identified themselves early on as Četniks because the word was synonymous with freedom fighters, but an organized and coordinated Četnik movement did not develop there until 1942, largely out of conservative concern for the Communist presence in the revolt. Conflict between Communist and Četnik leaders was slower to develop in Bosnia than in Serbia because both groups agreed on the need for active resistance against the Ustaše. The arrival of the Italians gave some Serb guerrillas the opportunity to return to their homes but, as the

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<sup>14</sup> "Notiziario n. 197," 17 November 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

<sup>15</sup> Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 12-41, 92.

intelligence reports of the VI Corps reveal, many bands in autumn 1941 adopted ambiguous attitudes between collaboration and resistance.<sup>16</sup>

Attacks on Italian trains and troops in Croatia increased through November and December. One of Second Army's first significant military setbacks in Croatia came at the end of November, when an infantry company near the Montenegrin border was attacked and wiped out by "rebels."<sup>17</sup> Guerrilla activity was most predominant in the interior, near the demarcation line, where the Italian army had to abandon territory at the end of the year. But insurgents scored successes even in sectors where the Italians were strong. They interrupted roads near important coastal centres such as Dubrovnik. At the end of December, a garrison of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division lost 54 men in an ambush that took place just 2 km from its base. The division lost another 84 men, mostly prisoners, in a similar attack a month and a half later.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to Axis expectations, the onset of winter in Croatia seemed to embolden guerrilla forces, compelling them to leave their mountain hideouts and operate in the lower valleys.<sup>19</sup> Heavy snow and extreme cold in the middle of January "paralysed" the VI Corps. Small mobile groups of Partisans exploited the situation by cutting off access and supply to Italian garrisons in Croatian towns, thereby threatening them with destruction.<sup>20</sup> On 21 and 22 January, the Sassari Division suffered its first serious losses of the occupation. After 21 soldiers from its garrison at Bosanski Petrovac were taken captive while collecting firewood, the division sent two companies of infantry to free them. This rescue party quickly found itself

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<sup>16</sup> Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 42, 49–50. Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 33–34, 93–96.

<sup>17</sup> "Notiziario n. 208," 28 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati. On the threat to rail traffic, see "Notiziario n. 188," 8 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati; and, "Scorta treni," 10 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

<sup>18</sup> "Notiziario n. 244," 3 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati. "Notiziario n. 233," 23 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. "Avvenimenti di Zavala," 29 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, November–December 1941, allegati. "Attacco dei ribelli nel settore di Stolac," 16 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, January–February 1942, allegati.

<sup>19</sup> Re to Casertano, 16 January 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 163.

<sup>20</sup> "Notiziario n. 253," 12 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati. "Notiziario giornaliero," 21 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

engaged by a “Communist band,” which outmanoeuvred the Italians in the snow-covered terrain and forced them to retreat, leaving another ninety men and two artillery pieces behind.<sup>21</sup> The Sassari Division’s besieged garrisons at Drvar, Oštrelj, and Srb barely escaped destruction from Partisan attacks or hunger. It took three weeks of heavy fighting against insurgents, sleet, wind, and snow before Srb was relieved by an Italian column on 26 March. By then, the Blackshirt garrison had been reduced to an enclave of seven buildings.<sup>22</sup> During the winter of 1941–42, Dalmazzo noted that the Partisans steadily improved their tactics. They acted behind effective screens, waiting for the Italian vanguards to pass before opening fire from the side and rear. They took advantage of the rocky terrain to remain hidden, adopting a spread-out deployment, and they were excellent shots.<sup>23</sup>

By the beginning of 1942, Italian commanders were aware that the insurgency in Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slovenia had entered a new phase. In 1941, the most serious uprisings — and, in turn, the most serious anti-partisan operations — occurred outside or on the fringes of the zone occupied by Second Army. Tito’s main objective in 1941 was to seize Belgrade, the traditional seat of power in Yugoslavia. However, the Germans crushed the uprising in Serbia at the end of the year; their harsh but calculated reprisals persuaded the Serbian population of the wisdom of Mihailović’s lie-low approach to resistance. German and Četnik control in Serbia forced Tito to relocate his command westward to Bosnia after December. As a result, the Independent State of Croatia — and especially Bosnia, where the Partisans found rugged terrain, fewer German troops, and

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<sup>21</sup> Dalmazzo to Bastianini, 23 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, December 1941–January 1942, allegati. See also the summary of this engagement in the “Premessa” to the Sassari Division Command war diary, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942.

<sup>22</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 17, 20–24, and 28 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942. “Notiziario giornaliero,” 17 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942, allegati. On the resistance and eventual relief of the Srb garrison, see the Sassari Division Command war diary, 4–26 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942. “Relazione sull’azione eseguita il giorno 8 marzo 1942.XX per sbloccare il presidio di Srb,” 21 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942, allegati. “Sbloccamento Presidio Srb,” 30 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), February–March 1942, allegati.

<sup>23</sup> “Notiziario n. 265,” 24 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.



greater popular support due to anti-Ustaša sentiment — became the focus of partisan warfare in 1942. This placed greater pressure on Italian zones, whose territory generally was more mountainous than that occupied by the Germans. Tito's new base at Foča was on the Italian side of the demarcation line.<sup>24</sup>

During 1942, the Communist Partisan and Četnik movements were in open conflict with one another as each side sought to lay the foundations for the postwar political order in Yugoslavia. Whereas Tito preached full-blown socialist revolution in a pan-Slavic federalist state, Mihailović and the Četnik leadership worked towards a conservative nationalistic Great Serbia comprising most of Yugoslavia. However, the boundaries between the two sides were not hard and fast, especially in Bosnia. Rather than picturing blocs of Partisan and Četnik units in alliance or conflict with one another, it is more accurate to envision two leadership cadres — Partisan and Četnik, each with their own internal squabbles — competing for the loyalty of a “floating” mass of largely rural Serb fighters. Individual bands and guerrillas could change loyalties several times during the course of the war, not only out of opportunism but because of genuine confusion over which group best represented their interests.<sup>25</sup>

At any particular moment between 1942 and 1943, there likely were far more Četniks than Partisans in the field. At the height of their power at the beginning of 1943, the Četniks could call upon 150,000 followers compared to 50,000 Communist Partisans throughout Yugoslavia.<sup>26</sup> However, Mihailović wielded little control over the many small locally oriented bands that nominally adhered to his movement. Many Četnik recruits, who had enlisted to protect their families, refused to operate outside their home districts. Outside of Serbia and Montenegro, where Mihailović based his headquarters during the war, Četnik leaders and local warlords often proved unwilling to sacrifice their autonomy and obey higher commands. Early on, Tito could not dictate policy to the various Partisan groups spread throughout Yugoslavia either. But he could call upon an elite core of

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<sup>24</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 119, 242. Milazzo, *The Četnik Movement*, 58. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 148–49, 246. Re to Casertano, 16 January 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 163.

<sup>25</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 264–66, 351. Milazzo, *The Četnik Movement*, 139.

<sup>26</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 330.

mobile units capable of acting far from home, which could be bolstered by local recruits, including former Četniks. Moreover, whereas the Četniks only ever claimed to be a Serb movement, the Partisans potentially catered to a larger population base. The federal structure of the Partisan movement, with “general staffs” and committees for each Yugoslavian province, allowed for a degree of coordination and standardization while permitting local Partisan leaders to appeal to populations on regional lines. Thus, between 1941 and 1943, the Partisans drew upon mass support from Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia, Croats in Italian Dalmatia, and Slovenes in the Province of Ljubljana, focusing more on patriotic themes than on Communist ideals. Finally, while the Četniks remained a rural military movement, the Partisans made headway in urban centres and concerned themselves with civil administration. They established Partisan “states” in liberated areas to maintain order and organize education, welfare, labour, recruitment, and taxation, often employing local notables. While Partisan leaders were guilty of committing a number of “left errors” against “class enemies,” Ustaša collaborators, and Četnik sympathizers — which likely cost them a firm presence in Herzegovina after mid-1942 — in general they displayed greater ideological tolerance and more determination to avoid arbitrary violence or plunder than did their enemies.<sup>27</sup>

The strategies of the Partisans and Četniks also differed dramatically. The Četnik leadership was less concerned with active resistance against the Axis than with working towards a Great Serbian state in anticipation of liberation by the Western Allies. Combined with a desire to avoid Axis reprisals, this frequently led to “tactical collaboration” with the Germans and Italians in order to focus on combating the more politically threatening Ustaše, Communists, and Muslims of Yugoslavian origin. Conversely, after June 1941 the KPJ was consistently anti-Axis and anti-Italian, partly because Moscow wanted it to divert Axis resources from the invasion of the Soviet Union

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<sup>27</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 173–76. Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 81–90, 189–90, 208–13, 268–70, 291–93, 301–308, 351–52. Hoare, “Whose is the Partisan Movement,” 25, 30–31. Milazzo, *The Četnik Movement*, 18. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 148, 152. Simon Trew, *Britain, Mihailović and the Četniks, 1941–42* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997), 192–95. Gaj Trifkovic, “A Case of Failed Counter-Insurgency: Anti-Partisan Operations in Yugoslavia 1943,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24, no. 2 (2011): 315. For a more negative account of Partisan corruption and arbitrary justice, see Rochlitz, *Accident of Fate*, 139–45, 167–70. In Slovenia, Partisans redistributed captured livestock in order to gain popular support. “Situazione politica, economica e militare,” 7 June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:150–53.

and partly in order to assume the mantle of liberator against foreign occupation.<sup>28</sup>

Through 1941, Italian commands had noted that, while “Četnik” bands abstained from attacking Italian troops, the much smaller Communist forces were consistently more “extremist and intransigent,” even after being driven into the mountains.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of 1941, Partisan leaders in western Bosnia announced their intention to execute captured Italian officers.<sup>30</sup> There is some debate over the level and frequency of atrocities committed by the Partisans against Italian prisoners. After the war, Italian participants tended to justify their behaviour in the Balkans in light of “communist” massacres of civilians and Italian soldiers.<sup>31</sup> The execution of an entire Italian infantry battalion during the epic battle of the Neretva in early 1943 is well documented.<sup>32</sup> However, the conduct of Partisans towards Italian prisoners between 1941 and 1943 as a general rule is not clear. Like most insurgent groups, the Yugoslavian Partisans were unable or unwilling to meet standards on the treatment of prisoners of war as established in the 1907 Hague Convention.<sup>33</sup> Giacomo Scotti and Eric Gobetti have argued that Partisans in Montenegro and Croatia usually set Italian prisoners free, although officers and Fascist militia almost always were shot.<sup>34</sup> In his study of partisan warfare in Slovenia, Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi confirmed only a single documented incident of torture

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<sup>28</sup> Milazzo, *The Četnik Movement*, 90–95. Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 93–95.

<sup>29</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 6 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, August–September 1941, allegati. “Notiziario n. 108,” 19 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati. “Notiziario n. 170,” 21 October 1941, and “Notiziario n. 171,” 22 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. “Notiziario giornaliero,” 8 and 25 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati. “Notiziario giornaliero,” 21 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

<sup>30</sup> “Notiziario n. 248,” 7 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>31</sup> Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette*, 171–79. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d’Italia*, 1:243. Casanuova, *I/51°*, 89–92.

<sup>32</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 207n787. Mario Dassovich, *Fronte jugoslavo 1943: La fase finale delle operazioni dell’esercito italiano sull’opposta sponda adriatica durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Udine: Del Bianco, 2000), 52. Milovan Djilas, *Wartime*, trans. Michael B. Petrovich (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 220.

<sup>33</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 160, 191–92. Scotti, *Bono taliano*, 70, 91–92.

and execution of prisoners by Slovene Partisans.<sup>35</sup> Italian interrogations of liberated prisoners suggest that the behaviour of individual Partisan bands varied widely, depending on circumstances. In Croatia, some formations held on to their prisoners — including officers and Blackshirts — for several months, using them for manual labour and hoping that Italian authorities would agree to an exchange. Soldiers deemed too badly wounded to move often would be shot.<sup>36</sup>

Through 1942, Partisan bands in Italian-occupied zones proved adept at irregular warfare. In Dalmatia, Italian authorities reported “the continuous exodus of hundreds and hundreds of young men from the great [urban] centres and from villages,” concluding that Partisan formations were “aided completely [*totalitariamente*] by the populations.”<sup>37</sup> Still more serious was the resurgence that spring of the Slovene Liberation Front, which threatened to “paralyse life” in the province by cutting communications lines. As in Croatia the previous winter, the Partisans hemmed Italian forces into their garrisons, dominating the countryside.<sup>38</sup> By June, Italian authorities estimated that some 5,000 Slovene “rebels” had managed to gain control over ninety percent of the province.<sup>39</sup> The rebellion shut down virtually all commercial and industrial activity in Slovenia. Italian firms sent to exploit Slovenia’s timber resources were unable to perform their work.<sup>40</sup> Yet, Roatta lamented that, while the enemy seemed to be everywhere “in strength,” Slovene Partisans stuck to true “guerrilla” tactics and refused to concentrate in large formations that could be located and destroyed.<sup>41</sup> An officer of the Cacciatori delle Alpi

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<sup>35</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 115–18.

<sup>36</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 211,” 30 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, May–June 1942, allegati.

<sup>37</sup> “Situazione politica territori annessi alla Dalmazia,” 1 June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:125–26.

<sup>38</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 98–99. “Ex-Yugoslavia: situazione della ribellione,” 22 June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:143. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 63.

<sup>39</sup> “Situazione politica, economica e militare,” 7 June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:150–53.

<sup>40</sup> “Relazione mensile,” 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati. Slovene Partisans captured four Italian representatives of the Emona Institute and executed them as “Italian fascist usurpers of Slovene land.” Eugenio Gualdi to Amedeo Giannini, 12 May 1942, NARA T-821/402/0021–26. “Emona,” 17 May 1942, DSCS, 7/II:67–68.

<sup>41</sup> “Operazioni in Slovenia,” 8 June 1942, NARA T-821/62/0360.

Division, who had already faced Communist Partisans in Croatia, considered their Slovene counterparts “particularly intelligent and organized,” given the shrewdness that was required to “flush them out of their lairs.”<sup>42</sup> When confronted by major anti-partisan operations, they split up into smaller groups of forty or fifty men to avoid capture.<sup>43</sup> The Slovene Partisans were well-endowed with machineguns and explosives, and they employed a sophisticated communications system. At the end of the year, the XI Corps discovered that nearly all its radio transmissions were being intercepted by the Liberation Front.<sup>44</sup>

In Croatia, the Partisans could be equally wily. An Italian chaplain complained that they “continually make idiots of us [*ci minchionano*] with their audacity and their (certainly excellent) organization, thus demoralizing our soldier who finds himself forced to fight an elusive enemy.”<sup>45</sup> But the Partisans held and administered vast tracts of territory in Croatia, and they increasingly fought in the open as large units.<sup>46</sup> Even while Tito’s main host remained in eastern Bosnia, Italian forces in the west encountered sizeable Partisan bands willing to engage regular troops in combat. During May, the Sassari Division estimated that 3,000 “communists” operated between Petrovac and Ključ. A thousand of these managed to surround a CC.NN. battalion, wiping out a fifty-man platoon in the process. Later that month, Partisans successfully attacked two

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<sup>42</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 108, 162. Casanuova nonetheless preferred deployment to Slovenia over service in Croatia, because of the cooler climate and the shorter marching distances between garrisons.

<sup>43</sup> “Azioni dei ribelli,” 24 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, May–June 1942, allegati. See also the XI Corps intelligence report attached to “Rastrellamento,” 9 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September–October 1942, allegati.

<sup>44</sup> “Rastrellamento zona: Grosuplje-Skofljica-Turjak-Zdenska Vas,” 14 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942, allegati. “Intercettazioni r.t. da parte dei ribelli sloveni,” 20 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>45</sup> Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, 94.

<sup>46</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 4.

columns of the division, inflicting 104 casualties and capturing two howitzers and a machinegun.<sup>47</sup>

Partisan activity in the Sassari Division's sector only increased after Operation Trio forced Tito to make his famous "long march" to northwestern Bosnia and Croatia, where he eventually established another large Partisan "state" around Bihać in November.<sup>48</sup> At the end of October, Partisans launched a night attack on the Sassari Division's most advanced post at Bosansko Grahovo, defended by 700 Italian troops and 400 Serb irregulars. The Italians estimated that they faced between 3,000 and 5,000 Partisans, supported by well-directed artillery and mortar fire that reflected the improved technical and tactical capabilities of Tito's reorganized "Proletarian Brigades." Fielding 6 brigades in June 1942, by November the Partisan movement counted 31 one of them: 4 in Slovenia; 3 in Dalmatia; 11 in Croatia; 6 in western Bosnia; 1 in eastern Bosnia; 1 in Herzegovina; 2 in Serbia; and, 3 in Montenegro.<sup>49</sup> The garrison at Bosansko Grahovo held out until a relief column arrived, but the division's commander was concerned that, with no further reinforcement in sight, his units would not be able to withstand further pressure. Indeed, Partisan units quickly occupied the hills surrounding the divisional headquarters at Knin and forced the Italians to evacuate Bosansko Grahovo and other exposed garrisons.<sup>50</sup> The plight of the Sassari Division was not unique. Further north, on

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<sup>47</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 6–7 and 17–18 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May–June 1942. See also "Relazione sul fatto d'armi di Golubic – 18 Maggio 1942," 19 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May–June 1942, allegati.

<sup>48</sup> On the general increase in Partisan activity — including propaganda and sabotage — in western Bosnia, see the "Premessa" to the Sassari Division Command war diary, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, November–December 1942. On the "long march" to Bihać, see Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 233, 314–23.

<sup>49</sup> "Relazione sulle operazioni dei giorni 27 e 28 ottobre 1942 nel territorio della 'Sassari,'" 29 October 1942, "Relazione sui combattimenti sostenuti dal Presidio dal 26 al 28 ottobre 1942," 29 October 1942, and "Relazione attacco a Bos Grahovo del 27–28 ottobre 1942 – Dati e considerazioni," 6 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, November–December 1942, allegati. 152nd Infantry Regiment war diary, 27–28 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 152nd Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), September–October 1942. On Partisan brigades, see Dassovich, *Fronte jugoslavo 1941–42*, 92; Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 310–11; and, Hoare, "Whose is the Partisan Movement," 28–29.

<sup>50</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 9–17 and 23–30 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, November–December 1942. The difficulties posed by the Partisans in the sector occupied by the Sassari Division are illustrated in "Situazione della 'Sassari' dopo lo sgombero di Bos.

the border between Croatia and Slovenia, a reinforced column from the V Corps barely escaped destruction at the hands of an estimated 5,000 or 6,000 Partisans. Only a series of costly charges by Italian cavalry kept the column's escape route open. Italian casualties amounted to 189 men, 188 horses, 8 trucks, 7 motorcycles, 4 heavy machineguns, 2 artillery pieces, and a light tank.<sup>51</sup>

The Communist Partisans were not completely successful in 1942. Tito's forces suffered heavy losses in Operation Trio, which also forced them to abandon eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina to Četnik control. The Germans reinforced Croatia and dealt Partisan forces in the west a heavy, if superficial, blow with their Kozara offensive that summer. Overall, though, the Partisans had made gains. They entered 1943 operating to an effective military standard and making use of an excellent communications network.<sup>52</sup> During Operation *Weiss*, the Axis offensive against the Bihać Republic, the Sassari Division partook in a pitched artillery duel with Partisan units while Tito's Chief Operational Group shattered the Murge Division on its way to the Neretva River. Here, the Partisans also permanently broke Četnik influence and power, enabling them to regain a foothold in eastern Yugoslavia.<sup>53</sup> In Dalmatia and Slovenia too, larger Partisan formations began to concentrate, making more frequent attacks against Italian units and garrisons while continuing to spread propaganda and commit acts of sabotage and "terrorism." These attacks increased as news spread of Italian defeats on other fronts.<sup>54</sup> Thus, in the final phase of the insurgency against Second Army, Italian generals could not be confident in their technical and tactical superiority over their enemies. On the eve

Grahovo," 17 November 1942, and "Notiziario giornaliero informativo," 18 November 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, November-December 1942, allegati.

<sup>51</sup> "Relazione sul combattimento di Perjasica dei giorni 16 e 17 ottobre 1942," 20 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

<sup>52</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 272-73. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 173-81, 202-203.

<sup>53</sup> "Novità ore 18 giorno 7 febbraio," 8 February 1943, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, fasc. "Uff. St. Jug. Gennaio-febbraio 1943." Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 329-37. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 206-207. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 215-17.

<sup>54</sup> "Situazione politico-militare (relazione)," 31 July 1943, NARA T-821/31/0248-60. "Situazione politico-militare (relazione)," 31 August 1943, NARA T-821/31/0291-323.

of the armistice with the Allies, Italian maps painted a grim picture. Outside of Herzegovina and the northern Dalmatian coastline, almost the entire zone entrusted to the Italians was covered in red blobs denoting Partisan “detachments” [*odredi*], “brigades” and “divisions.”<sup>55</sup>

## Repression and Reprisals

As in Ethiopia, the generals of the Italian Second Army were not immediately confronted with strong guerrilla movements in occupied Slovenia, Dalmatia, and Croatia. Anti-Italian insurgency in these sectors developed gradually. Following a lull in May and June 1941, Second Army witnessed the growth of small-scale insurgency in the annexed provinces; but the Italians were not the main targets of the popular Serb uprising in Croatia in the summer, and they only faced significant attacks after autumn. By spring 1942, the Italian army confronted large-scale insurrection in Croatia and Slovenia. By 1943, it sometimes faced well-armed and well-organized Partisan formations capable of sustaining semi-conventional combat against entrenched Italian units. Italian policy responded in part to these circumstances, but it did so disproportionately. Violence escalated as resistance increased in 1941 and 1942, but policy tended to anticipate resistance — the reaction usually proved more violent than the initial action that justified it. While generally not reaching the same extremes as German mass executions in Serbia or Italian shootings in Ethiopia, Italian commanders in Yugoslavia likewise responded to guerrilla activity by targeting ordinary civilians to dissuade them from joining or supporting the insurgency.

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<sup>55</sup> “Dislocazione ribelli al 31 agosto 1943,” 31 August 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati. The map is misfiled. The transition of the Partisan movement to a regular army was not complete until 1944–45. Klaus Schmider, foreword to “Yugoslavia,” part 3 in *War in a Twilight World: Partisan and Anti-Partisan Warfare in Eastern Europe, 1939–1945*, ed. Ben Shepherd and Juliette Pattinson (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 186.



### *From Restraint to Terror*

Unlike in Ethiopia, Mussolini did not immediately impart instructions to his generals regarding the treatment of insurgents. As in other areas of policy, Italian military authorities in Yugoslavia enjoyed considerable autonomy over their handling of repression, although the need to cooperate with civil authorities in Dalmatia, Slovenia, and Croatia at times restricted their ability to dictate strategy. In 1941, Rome had good reason to counsel restraint in its occupied territories. Experience in Ethiopia had highlighted the counterproductive impact of excessive and arbitrary reprisals. Moreover, in Europe, many neutral and defeated powers after 1939 looked to Mussolini as a moderating influence within the Axis.<sup>56</sup> The regime's relatively "liberal" system of rule established in Slovenia in May 1941 was intended partly to distinguish Fascist administration as more enlightened than Nazi methods of domination, thereby presenting Italy's Imperial Community as a more palatable and inclusive alternative New Order.<sup>57</sup> At the end of summer 1941 — with German brutality having reached new heights in Poland, the Soviet Union, and Serbia — the Italian ambassador in Berlin, Dino Alfieri, suggested that Italy could differentiate itself favourably from its German ally not only politically and ideologically but militarily as well. Alfieri criticized the harsh methods of repression and counterinsurgency adopted by German authorities, arguing that their arbitrary "regime of terror" succeeded only in alienating the occupied populations and fomenting resistance. Paraphrasing Machiavelli, Alfieri concluded that, while the Germans preferred to be feared rather than loved, they risked becoming hated.<sup>58</sup>

In Yugoslavia it was not Mussolini but rather the commander of Second Army, Vittorio Ambrosio, who issued a blanket statement during the first days of the occupation

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<sup>56</sup> Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 127–29.

<sup>57</sup> "Slovenia, riflessi nell'opinione pubblica dell'occupazione italiana," 29 April 1941, DSCS, 3/II:394. Ciano diary, 26 and 29 April 1941. Philip Morgan, *Fascism in Europe, 1919–1945* (London: Routledge, 2003), 171. Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 69–70.

<sup>58</sup> Alfieri to Ciano, 29 September and 3 October 1941, DDI 9, VII, 602 and 619. The reference to Machiavelli is from *The Prince*, Chapter 17: "a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred."

ordering all “*francs-tireurs*” [*franchi tiratori*] to be immediately shot by firing squad.<sup>59</sup> This policy and language soon afterwards were enshrined in the armistice with Yugoslavia, which stated that “participants in hostile actions against the Axis Powers will be treated as *francs-tireurs*.”<sup>60</sup> Suspects of other forms of resistance, communists, and “anti-Italian propagandists” were to be arrested; in May, Dalmazzo’s VI Corps established a concentration camp on the island of Ugljan [Ugliano] for these political prisoners.<sup>61</sup> With the launch of Operation Barbarossa and the “struggle against Bolshevism,” Dalmazzo ordered even greater vigilance against communists, offering rewards for soldiers that made arrests. Some of his subordinates responded with such zeal that Dalmazzo later had to issue warnings against individual groups of soldiers committing unauthorized reprisals.<sup>62</sup> Still prior to the outbreak of major revolt, Dalmazzo’s directives for the protection of communications lines in Dalmatia and Lika ordered that anyone found in possession of firearms or caught committing sabotage “will of course be shot.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, even during the first relatively quiet months of the occupation, Italian military authorities based their repression policy on the arrest of potential political opponents and on the summary execution of combatants they deemed illegitimate. These directives were not likely to be abused or extended to involve mass reprisals while active resistance to Italian occupation remained limited. Nonetheless, they provided the legal framework for the later escalation of violence as insurgency mounted.

This certainly was the case in German-occupied Serbia, where army-level directives as early as May defined enemy combatants as “bandits” and stipulated that one

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<sup>59</sup> “Franchi tiratori,” 15 April 1941, appended to “Linea di vigilanza militare provvisoria,” 26 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati.

<sup>60</sup> “Testo convenzione armistizio stipulato con la Jugoslavia,” 19 April 1941, DSCS, 3/II:369–70. The terms of the armistice with France included a similar clause. John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 406.

<sup>61</sup> “Direttive,” 15 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), April–May 1941, allegati.

<sup>62</sup> “Direttive,” 3 July 1941, and “Contegno delle truppe,” 6 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>63</sup> “Vigilanza sulle linee ferroviarie e sulle zone a cavallo delle comunicazioni rotabili, telefoniche, telegrafiche ecc.,” 20 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

hundred Serbs should be shot for every German casualty during the occupation. Ben Shepherd notes that this radical order was not initially carried out, but that it provided an “ominous straw in the wind.”<sup>64</sup> By October, with German forces in Serbia now facing a genuine uprising, these guidelines were reissued and this time followed or even surpassed by German division commanders. Italian commentators viewed this reliance on “terror” as somewhat excessive and disproportionate, but they also praised German measures as “energetic.” By the end of the year, having executed nearly 22,000 reprisal victims, German authorities themselves acknowledged that their approach was counterproductive; they began to exercise greater restraint.<sup>65</sup> The death and destruction meted out by Italian forces in Yugoslavia never matched the ruthlessness displayed by the *Wehrmacht* in Serbia during 1941. This was partly due to different military cultures and approaches to counterinsurgency, but local conditions were equally important. As we have seen, the Italians did not face the same sort of general uprising aimed against them in their occupied territories, certainly not in 1941. As the directives of Ambrosio and Dalmazzo indicate, Italian commanders generally agreed with the Germans on the need to respond quickly and harshly to signs of resistance.

Italian military commands also found themselves in agreement on this point with Fascist civil authorities in the Governorate of Dalmatia, whose measures in response to increasing but limited episodes of sabotage progressively targeted the general population. In July, provincial prefects subjected all civilians to a curfew. Populations resented such measures because they imposed restrictions on daily life; at one point, the curfew in Split began as early as 5pm. Curfews were also a source of fear and worry, because Italian sentries could and did fire on civilians that circulated after hours.<sup>66</sup> Second Army ordered

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<sup>64</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 87–88.

<sup>65</sup> “Relazione informativa,” 25 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September 1941, allegati. Shepherd, “Settling Accounts in Blood: The 342d Infantry Division in Serbia,” chap. 6 in *Terror in the Balkans*.

<sup>66</sup> “Copri fuoco,” 20 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati. “Notiziario informativo n. 40,” 5 November 1941; “Notiziario informativo n. 46,” 11 November 1941; and, “Notiziario n. 60,” 26 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati. “Notiziario n. 192,” 12 November 1941, and “Notiziario n. 194,” 14 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati. “Notiziario n. 216,” 6 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

its own curfew after reoccupying Croatian territory in September; initially set from 10pm to 5am, the curfew hours later were adjusted to 8pm until 6am.<sup>67</sup> In addition to imposing a curfew, from early August the Prefect of Split held civilian populations accountable for acts of sabotage committed in their communities, threatening them with expropriation and deportation or confinement in severe cases where the culprits could not be found.<sup>68</sup> Finally, in October, Mussolini declared Slovenia and Dalmatia to be territories “in state of war.” A “special tribunal” was established in Dalmatia, under Bastianini’s supervision but made up of senior military officers, with the power to impart death sentences for crimes ranging from participation in armed insurrection and sabotage to the possession of firearms. Participation in strikes or demonstrations and spreading propaganda were punishable with prison terms.<sup>69</sup>

During the height of urban guerrilla activity in November, Dalmatian authorities began arresting and interning civilians en masse. In the two weeks that followed the attack on the 51st Regiment’s military band, Italian police arrested 920 people in Split. They laid charges against 250, interned or deported 487, and held another 150 as hostages. Locals complained that Italian officials abused their powers while making arrests by mistreating the elderly and confiscating property.<sup>70</sup> Generals Armellini and Spigo in 1942, and Roatta after the war, criticized “Fascist authorities” for governing the annexed territories in a harsh and arbitrary manner.<sup>71</sup> But, in 1941, these measures largely met with praise and cooperation from the military authorities on the spot. While the

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<sup>67</sup> “Bando in data 10 ottobre 1941,” 12 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>68</sup> Zerbino decree, 5 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati.

<sup>69</sup> “Bando del Duce, 3 ottobre 1941-XIX: Disposizioni penali per i territori annessi al Regno d’Italia,” *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d’Italia*, 7 October 1941, n. 237. “Regio decreto 3 ottobre 1941-XIX, n. 1129: Estensione ai territori annessi al Regno d’Italia del R. decreto 4 aprile 1941-XIX, n. 194,” *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 20 October 1941, n. 248. “Bando del Duce, 24 October 1941 XIX: Disposizioni penali per i territori annessi al Regno d’Italia,” *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 28 October 1941, n. 255. See also Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:670–77. Digitized copies of the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* are available at <http://augusto.agid.gov.it/>.

<sup>70</sup> “Notiziario n. 203,” 23 November 1941, and “Notiziario n. 204,” 24 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

<sup>71</sup> “Sintesi degli argomenti trattati nella riunione del pomeriggio 12 ottobre a Spalato,” 14 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati. Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette*, 167–68.

command of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division regretted “disorderly and unjustified” episodes of hot violence in the wake of terrorist attacks, it too recommended the internment of suspicious groups and authorized mass arrests and house-to-house searches. The division forwarded suspected resisters to the special tribunal where they faced execution, often on the same day as their trial.<sup>72</sup> The division’s intelligence staff believed that the executions convinced most Dalmatians to collaborate with Italian authorities — the “cold hostility” of the local populations could only be held in check by “a strong and totalitarian regime” based on “demonstrations of force and fear of punishment.”<sup>73</sup> Likewise, Dalmazzo credited the “rigorous measures” [*provvedimenti di rigore*] taken by Bastianini and his prefects for improving the situation in Dalmatia by December.<sup>74</sup> Second Army’s commander, Ambrosio, praised Bastianini’s regime for its resolute handling of resistance — including its speedy application of the death penalty — and he called for similar harshness from High Commissioner Grazioli in Slovenia. In fact, Grazioli had issued a series of repressive decrees in September, extending the death penalty to cover various acts of subversion and establishing *confino* for “dangerous” individuals.<sup>75</sup> Thus, despite the personal and jurisdictional conflicts that mired their

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<sup>72</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 45,” 10 November 1941; Pivano to Dalmazzo, 20 November 1941; “Notiziario informativo n. 57,” 23 November 1941; and, “Servizio di vigilanza ad oriente di Spalato,” 26 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati. See also “Notiziario n. 177,” 28 October 1941, and “Notiziario n. 179,” 30 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. Following the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division’s departure from the zone, the Perugia Division and *Carabinieri* of the VI Corps carried out similar actions. “Notiziario n. 253,” 12 January 1942; “Notiziario n. 261,” 20 January 1942; and, “Notiziario n. 263,” 22 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>73</sup> “Relazione informativa,” 16 October 1941, and “Notiziario informativo n. 34,” 29 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati. “Notiziario informativo n. 40,” 5 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

<sup>74</sup> “Notiziario n. 211,” 1 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. “Notiziario n. 244,” 3 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>75</sup> “Situazione militare in Slovenia,” 15 October 1941, DSCS, 5/II:70–73. Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” 244–45. On the application of the death penalty and life imprisonment by military courts in Slovenia, see, for example, “Rapporto di udienza del giorno 15–16 Dicembre 1941,” 16 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, fasc. “Diario storico del Cdo 2a Armata, aprile–settembre 1941,” sf. “U.S. Jug.”

relationship in other affairs, Italian military and civil authorities shared a fundamentally similar approach to repression in the annexed provinces.<sup>76</sup>

In occupied Croatia, where Fascist civil authorities exerted very limited influence, Second Army's use of threat and violence likewise escalated during the first year of occupation. The army's restraint and inaction in the first months of the occupation reflected the confusing political situation posed by the newly formed Independent State of Croatia. Italian commanders lacked the legal authority or political will to clamp down on anti-Ustaša revolt in July and August 1941. While he ordered the Sassari Division to protect the communications hub of Knin and its environs, Dalmazzo instructed Italian garrisons not to sally forth without authorization from the command of the VI Corps.<sup>77</sup> The Sassari Division was particularly sympathetic towards anti-Ustaša Serb fighters, but by the middle of August its units had collaborated with armed Croat peasants and gendarmes to hunt down and execute "communists" in Zones I and II.<sup>78</sup> This began a gradual, if inconsistent, process of escalating repression as Italian commanders increasingly defined revolt in ideological terms.

Initially, Italian generals thought that they would be able to distinguish between non-communist and Communist insurgents, isolating the latter. Upon reoccupying Zone II in September, Dalmazzo's instructions were largely defensive but he expected his division commanders to be more aggressive in stifling "communist revolt."<sup>79</sup> On 7 September, Ambrosio issued a decree that authorized Italian military courts to issue death sentences or heavy prison terms for subversive acts that threatened public order. It was hoped that this threat of force would suffice to frighten the Communist Partisans into

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<sup>76</sup> A similar trend is evident in the Province of Carnaro, where military and civil policies towards repression generally meshed. Pisarri, "Occupazione italiana nel Carnaro," 395–98.

<sup>77</sup> "Direttive," 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), August–September 1941, allegati.

<sup>78</sup> "Notiziario giornaliero," 19 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August–September 1941, allegati.

<sup>79</sup> "Giurisdizione territoriale ed ordinamento delle forze in Dalmazia," 7 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, September 1941, allegati.

submission and dissuade nationalist Serb bands or local civilians from joining them.<sup>80</sup> Second Army's first large-scale offensive operations in September seemed to vindicate this approach. As the Sassari Division approached Drvar — the short-lived capital of the so-called "Drvar Republic" — most of the Serb rebel forces abandoned their Communist allies and leaders. Monticelli was content to occupy his objectives without bloodshed, allowing the opposing forces to melt away. Given his hatred of the Croats, he was not very concerned that most of the disbanded Serbs had failed to turn in their firearms, or that many fled into Croatian territory to continue the fight against the Ustaše.<sup>81</sup> Italian troops encountered some resistance by a Communist rearguard in Drvar itself, but Dalmazzo concluded that the majority of the town's population had not participated in the fight. He ordered the execution of two men caught bearing, but hoped to win over the rest of the population with leniency.<sup>82</sup>

That Italian leniency in summer and autumn 1941 stemmed largely from political calculations is made apparent by Second Army's half-hearted efforts to disarm the occupied populations, something that had been a cornerstone of Italian pacification policy in Ethiopia. Ambrosio's 7 September decree defined the possession of firearms, ammunition, or explosives as grounds for execution by firing squad. However, Italian commands complained that Ustaša interference rendered total disarmament impossible. They claimed that Croatian authorities had distributed firearms among local Croats prior to transferring civil powers to Italian military authorities. Combined with a fear that the Ustaše ultimately would return — exploited by Partisan propaganda and nourished by Ambrosio's decree, which left Croatian civil officials at their posts — Serbs were

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<sup>80</sup> "Proclama e bando," 2 September 1941, and "Notiziario n. 133," 14 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. For a copy of the original decree in Italian and Croatian, see AUSSME, N1-11, b. 381, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>81</sup> "Relazione sulle operazioni contro i ribelli comunisti dal 7 al 25 settembre 1941," 31 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August-September 1941, allegati. On the Drvar Republic, see Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 126-39.

<sup>82</sup> "Situazione di Drvar," 29 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati.

reluctant to turn in their weapons.<sup>83</sup> The command of the VI Corps was convinced that, “if the tricolour flag forever waves over these lands, the arms would be turned in.”<sup>84</sup> Until then, the policy of disarmament jeopardized Second Army’s political and military strategy of attracting Serbs. The Sassari Division reported that Serb public opinion turned against the Italians after its troops executed a number of Serbs for possession of firearms.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps as compensation, some Italian units made a point of shooting prominent Croats caught with weapons.<sup>86</sup> Others avoided the full application of Ambrosio’s decree, permitting lesser sentences for firearms infractions. Since these punishments were not codified, Ambrosio insisted that officers either apply the death penalty or exonerate and release detainees. His simultaneous instructions to act “without weakness, but also without useless excesses,” carrying out executions only when ownership and intent could be proven, suggests that at this point Ambrosio still favoured leniency.<sup>87</sup> Italian commanders took a complacent approach towards disarmament, wary of alienating the Serb population. Having postponed the deadline for civilians in Zone II to turn in their firearms, the Italians did not even attempt to extend the policy of disarmament to Zone III.<sup>88</sup>

Following the occupation of Zone III in October 1941, Italian commands voiced growing concerns that their relatively soft approach to counterinsurgency was not

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<sup>83</sup> “Proclama e bando,” 2 September 1941; Dalmazzo to Ambrosio, 4 September 1941; “Notiziario n. 133,” 14 September 1941; and, “Notiziario n. 146,” 27 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. “Notiziario n. 150,” 2 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>84</sup> “Notiziario n. 156,” 7 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>85</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 20 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, August–September 1941, allegati.

<sup>86</sup> “Notiziario n. 146,” 27 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. “Notiziario n. 177,” 28 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>87</sup> “Tribunali militari straordinari di cui all’art. 4 del Bando del commando 2<sup>a</sup> Armata data 7 settembre,” 16 September 1941, and “Istruzioni riservate per l’applicazione del Bando in data 7 settembre 1941,” 10 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. See also Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:611–14.

<sup>88</sup> “Consegna armi, munizioni ed esplosivi,” 22 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. Leonardi memorandum, 4 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati.



working. The Partisans that fled Drvar — estimated to number around 1,000 men with two howitzers — remained active in the surrounding countryside.<sup>89</sup> Monticelli admitted that the Sassari Division's practice of sending small daily patrols to rural villages in order to maintain an Italian presence in the countryside did little to undermine the Communist Partisan movement. Partisans merely disguised themselves as peasants and the terrorized populace did not denounce them to the Italian patrols.<sup>90</sup> A Christmas amnesty issued jointly by Second Army and the Croatian government met a lackluster response. Dalmazzo concluded that “the practical effects of the act of clemency [...] were almost null.”<sup>91</sup>

The Italian army's attitudes towards repression in Croatia began to harden around the same time as they did in Slovenia and Dalmatia: autumn 1941. This was primarily the result of the Italian command's growing equation of resistance and guerrilla warfare with communism. The continued activity of Communist groups around Drvar prompted Monticelli — so compassionate towards Serb rebels that fought the Ustaše — to issue a directive for the conduct of his troops in the “anti-communist struggle” [*lotta anticomunista*]. Given the “communist” penchant for surprise hit-and-run attacks, Monticelli ordered his units to improve security and surveillance along communications lines and to

act without scruples in communist repression; prompt and radical response. Give no respite to the communist party and its members. And since the communist

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<sup>89</sup> See “Notiziario n. 150,” 1 October 1941; “Notiziario n. 151,” 2 October 1941; “Notiziario n. 166,” 17 October 1941; and, “Notiziario n. 170,” 21 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. “Notiziario n. 197,” 17 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati. “Lotta anticomunista – Contegno dei reparti,” 9 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati.

<sup>90</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 15 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati.

<sup>91</sup> “Accordi della Commissione italo-croata al 18.11.1941,” 6 December 1941, and “Bando per la pacificazione per la 2<sup>a</sup> zona,” 24 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. Meeting between Ciano and Pavelić, 15 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 26. “Proclama per la pacificazione della 2 zona,” 19 January 1942, and “Notiziario n. 272,” 31 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

bands are commanded by able and resolute leaders, we need equal ability and decisiveness.<sup>92</sup>

The growing strictness of Monticelli's attitude towards security in general was prompted not by the continued existence of large nationalist Serb bands, but by the activity of smaller Communist formations.

These attitudes were reflected higher up the chain of command as well. While Ambrosio's 7 September decree did not legally sanction summary executions — even if military courts were expected to act swiftly — further directives in October permitted the summary execution of anyone caught in the act of armed resistance.<sup>93</sup> By the end of October, Ambrosio's growing concern for the increased boldness of “communist groups” prompted him to issue a detailed set of instructions for “actions against rebels.” Adopting language from the Brigands' War, Ambrosio emphasized the need to capture and kill rebels when “brigand hunting” [*caccia ai briganti*]. Capturing territorial objectives without a corresponding body count was no longer sufficient. Thus, he reiterated that “captured rebels are immediately to be shot,” ideally at the same time as the troops burned down the homes of Partisans and their supporters. Ambrosio added that “if rebels have a base in a certain town it must be eliminated; evacuate the population and burn the town.”<sup>94</sup>

Ambrosio thereby inaugurated a system of collective reprisals that peaked in size and intensity in 1942 and did not cease until Italy's exit from the war in 1943. Often neglected in contrast to Roatta's later “3C” circular, Ambrosio's orders provided the legal basis for the harshest measures employed by Italian troops in the Balkans: the execution of insurgents and their presumed supporters and the destruction of property, including the burning of entire villages. Issued before Italian units came under serious pressure from Partisans in Croatia, this was a crucial step in the escalation of violence committed by the

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<sup>92</sup> “Lotta anticomunista – Contegno dei reparti,” 9 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati.

<sup>93</sup> “Operazioni di polizia militare,” 14 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>94</sup> “Azioni contro ribelli,” 23 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division and DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), October–November 1941, allegati. See also, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

Second Army. That it was aimed primarily against “communist groups” — despite the much larger presence of non-communist Serb formations in occupied Croatia — reveals how this escalation in part stemmed from, and was coupled with, the growing ideological character of the war in the Balkans.

Tales of Communist brutality helped justify the harsh approach desired by high command. The capture and presumed killing of a *carabiniere* in November prompted Colonel Francesco Delfino, head of Second Army’s CC.RR., to call for the more systematic and severe treatment of “bandits” and their accomplices. Beyond tracking down and arresting the true culprits of guerrilla activity, he suggested interning the families of known insurgents as hostages and sequestering or burning their property. Delfino insisted that his prescriptions be implemented promptly and without hesitation.<sup>95</sup> The VI Corps had already taken civilians hostage earlier that month. When Italian units near Sinj proved unable to locate Communist propagandists that had been reported in the area, they took ten hostages instead.<sup>96</sup> This added another form of reprisal action to the measures outlined by Ambrosio, and demonstrated how frustration with the “struggle against communism” [*lotta contro il comunismo*] prompted Italian repression increasingly to target civilians. Indeed, during winter 1941–42, Italian commanders began to equate the general population with guerrillas, particularly in areas where they faced well-organized Partisan formations. They described entire towns and villages as being “organized for rebellion,” where “the natives generally serve the rebels as service components,” gathering intelligence and providing screens for Partisan units. Pivano warned the officers of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division to suspect anyone whose movements did not have a clear motive.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> “Bande di ribelli,” 20 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, fasc. “Diario storico del Cdo 2a Armata, aprile–settembre 1941,” sf. “Novembre 1941.”

<sup>96</sup> “Notiziario n. 194,” 14 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

<sup>97</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 99,” 9 January 1942, and “Operazioni contro i ribelli,” 1 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1942, allegati. “Notiziario n. 265,” 24 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati. In Slovenia, Robotti had suggested the adoption of a hostage-taking policy as early as September 1941. Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 19.

Mussolini approved and encouraged Second Army's escalating use of terror. In November, he suggested shooting twenty "hostages" for every Italian soldier killed in Dalmatia, although Ciano doubted that he would enforce this quota.<sup>98</sup> At the end of the year, he demanded that anyone suspected of Communist activity in Yugoslavia be "put to the wall [and shot] even without trial." Ambrosio informed Dalmazzo of the *Duce*'s wishes and told him to launch a reconnaissance in force whenever he received "rumours that something fishy is going on" [*quando si ha sentore che in qualche zone vi è del torbido*], surrounding the areas in question and "arresting and shooting the suspects."<sup>99</sup> This demonstrates the convergence of views between Mussolini and military commands at the division, corps, and army level. Military authorities adopted harsh measures firstly in response to military, political, and ideological conditions posed by the Communist Partisan movement; Mussolini's directives prompted or legitimized further radicalization. The opinions, statements, and policies of Mussolini and his generals in Yugoslavia were mutually reinforcing.

In practice, Italian behaviour during winter 1941–42 varied between region and unit. Whereas in Zone II Italian commands exercised sole authority over the legal treatment of "communists," Italian military authorities in Zone III lacked civil powers and were supposed to forward suspected Partisans or partisan-helpers to Croatian courts. Thus, Italian garrisons near the demarcation line were less directly involved in the application of justice than their counterparts closer to the Adriatic. Nonetheless, Dalmazzo reminded the commanders of these garrisons that "naturally [...] anyone caught in the act of hostilities or sabotage against us must immediately be shot."<sup>100</sup> Monticelli's Sassari Division initially remained relatively lenient, due to the lack of casualties it sustained through December and to its continued pro-Serb policy. Croatian officials complained that, while German and Croatian security forces torched entire villages and

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<sup>98</sup> Ciano diary, 11 November 1941.

<sup>99</sup> "Riassunto degli argomenti tratti dall'Eccellenza Ambrosio nella riunione tenuta presso il Comando della 2<sup>a</sup> Armata il 30-XII-41," 31 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>100</sup> "Comunisti e loro arresti," 3 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. Meeting between Ciano and Pavelić, 15 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 26. "Fermi – denuncie nella 3<sup>a</sup> zona," 27 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

killed thousands of Serbs in reprisals, the troops of the Sassari Division on the other side of the demarcation line instead hindered the repression of Serbs.<sup>101</sup> When saboteurs derailed a train north of Knin, Monticelli opted to take no immediate action, but he warned the local population that if such an incident repeated itself he would hold the community responsible and “take severe reprisal measures.”<sup>102</sup> While the Sassari Division remained reluctant to carry out reprisals and continued to rely on the threat of force, the neighbouring Bergamo Division — which had suffered heavier casualties at the hands of Partisans — regularly reported conducting “acts of reprisal,” including the burning of villages.<sup>103</sup> In the territory occupied by the V Corps, the Re Division’s widespread practice of burning homes prompted previously friendly “Orthodox Četniks” to take up arms against Italian forces.<sup>104</sup>

### *Roatta’s 3C Circular*

Partly to establish greater consistency in Italian counterinsurgency against an increasingly well-organized and aggressive opponent, Second Army’s new commander, Mario Roatta, issued his 3C circular on 1 March 1942. In its content, the pamphlet and its appendices — published in the following months — did little more than codify and add detail to the precepts that Ambrosio had laid out in 1941.<sup>105</sup> Roatta sanctioned summary executions of suspected insurgents as well as collective punishment of civilians through hostage-taking, mass internment, and the confiscation or destruction of property. As Burgwyn notes, these measures contravened the articles of the Hague Conventions but were justified by

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<sup>101</sup> “Notiziario n. 216,” 6 December 1941; “Notiziario n. 223,” 13 December 1941; and, “Notiziario n. 224,” 14 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>102</sup> “Supplemento al notiziario n° 1336/I data odierna,” 16 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

<sup>103</sup> “Rapporto situazione per la quindicina dall’1 al 15 dicembre,” 19 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. “Rapporto situazione per la quindicina dal 16 al 31 dicembre 1941,” 5 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>104</sup> “Četnici della II<sup>a</sup> Zona (territorio Div. ‘Re’),” 13 January 1942, NARA T-821/402/0514.

<sup>105</sup> For a similar argument, see Sanela Hodzic, “Deutsche und italienische Besatzung im ‘Unabhängigen Staat Kroatien’ 1941–1943/45,” (doctoral dissertation, University of Bern, 2011), 204–207.

Fascist legislation that deprived “illegitimate” combatants of legal protection.<sup>106</sup> The language of the 3C circular emphasized the illegitimate nature of Second Army’s adversary by referring to “rebels” and “rebel formations” that adopted “guerrilla” methods “comparable to colonial warfare.” Roatta further justified collective reprisals and terror against civilian populations by claiming that the “natives” were “generally hostile” and ought not to be trusted.<sup>107</sup>

The connection between colonial rhetoric and legitimacy was significant. Colonial opponents were not expected to fight according to the same rules of conduct and codes of honour expected of Western armed forces.<sup>108</sup> The language of Italian commands in Yugoslavia was similar to that adopted in Ethiopia. Italian generals in 1941 and 1942 referred to insurgents most frequently as “rebels,” but also occasionally as “brigands” or “raiders.” The Italians were less strict with their vocabulary than were the Germans, who dehumanized their enemies in Yugoslavia by referring to them almost exclusively as “bandits.”<sup>109</sup> The very different policies taken towards Communist Partisans and Četniks forced Italian commanders at times to be more specific. So, Italian intelligence reports and maps on the location of “rebels” differentiated between hostile “Partisans,” “Communists,” and “Četnik-Partisans” on one hand, and friendly “Četniks” or “antipartisan” formations on the other.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps for this reason, a new edition of the 3C circular in December 1942 replaced most references to “rebels” with the word

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<sup>106</sup> H. James Burgwyn, “General Roatta’s War against the Partisans in Yugoslavia: 1942,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 319–20.

<sup>107</sup> No copies of the 3C circular exist in Italian archives. The document is reproduced fully in Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta.”

<sup>108</sup> Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 184.

<sup>109</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 88. Mameli to Ciano, 12 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 11.

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, “Notiziario n. 197,” 17 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati. “Notiziario n. 212,” 2 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. “Presunta dislocazione forze ribelli alla data del 15 aprile 1942,” 15 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1942, allegati. “Presunta dislocazione forze ribelli alla data del 30-6-1942,” 30 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 772, DS XVIII Corps, June 1942, allegati. “Situazione ribelli al 1 settembre 42,” 1 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati.

“partisans.”<sup>111</sup> While defining the Communist Partisans in political-ideological terms was not consistent with Italian colonial rhetoric, it did nothing to legitimize them in the eyes of Italian generals. Indeed, the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division combined colonial and ideological language by labelling insurgents in Slovenia “communist brigands” [*briganti comunisti*, or *b.c.*].<sup>112</sup> Other epithets that surfaced in the army’s internal correspondence and operational orders emphasized the underhanded methods of the guerrilla enemy. In Slovenia, both Robotti and his successor Gambara referred to the Partisans of the Liberation Front as “scoundrels” [*canaglie*].<sup>113</sup>

In his 3C circular, Roatta avoided any direct mention of summary executions of insurgents. However, his use of language to delegitimize the enemy and his calls to treat the enemy according to the principle of a “head for a tooth” indicated his intention to reinforce Second Army’s growing use of the firing squad. Roatta’s official silence on the topic likely reflected his awareness that his policies contravened international law.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, in April 1942, Roatta issued a specific directive on the treatment of insurgents, which he instructed division commanders to impart “only verbally” to their subordinates “for obvious reasons.” The directive was simple: “Rebels, caught bearing arms, will immediately be shot on the spot.” Wounded Partisans, minors, and women would instead be sent to military tribunals.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, his accompanying instructions on the treatment of civilian populations, published as the first appendix to 3C, stipulated that unarmed men captured during anti-partisan operations in the “immediate vicinity” of armed

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<sup>111</sup> The December 1942 edition of the 3C circular is available at <http://www.criminidiguerra.it/CIRC3C1.shtml> (accessed 16 November 2015).

<sup>112</sup> See for example, “Rastrellamento zona: Grosuplje-Skofljica-Turjak-Zdenska Vas,” 14 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942, allegati; and, “Foglio informazione n. 13,” 27 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September–October 1942, allegati. An officer in the division later recalled that the name change had been ordered from above, but the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division appears to have adopted the term most consistently. Casanuova, *I°/51*, 116.

<sup>113</sup> “Epurazione del Kocevski Rog,” 3 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September–October 1942, allegati. Gambara to Maccario, 19 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>114</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 160. Burgwyn, “General Roatta’s War,” 318.

<sup>115</sup> “Trattamento da usare verso i ribelli e le popolazioni che li favoriscono,” 7 and 19 April 1942, NARA T-821/277/0508–17.

insurgents or in areas where combat had taken place should be “treated as rebels” if it seemed “evident” that they had participated in armed struggle. In this case, Roatta left much discretion to the immediate commanding officer on the spot, empowered to carry out a death sentence based on an assumption of guilt.<sup>116</sup> Although Roatta specified that civilian accomplices or supporters of the Partisans should be arrested for further investigation, by permitting the summary execution of presumed rebels deemed to have abandoned or hidden their weapons he provided column commanders in the midst of operations with a justification not to take prisoners. Such loopholes were particularly important given high command’s growing obsession with body counts as the key indication of “success.”<sup>117</sup>

Executions were supposed to take place according to a solemn prescribed ritual based on the speedy application of justice and respect for the condemned. Only a priest, a doctor, and a firing squad of twelve to sixteen men with a commanding officer were permitted on the site of execution. After receiving last rites, the condemned would be led to a chair or wall, blindfolded, shot, confirmed dead, and buried without delay in a spot chosen by family members.<sup>118</sup> As in Ethiopia, postwar testimony reveals that this formula was not always followed — especially in the case of summary executions without court martial — and that mishaps sometimes occurred. In the case of the executions at Zapotok, Mario Casanuova recalled that the “reluctant soldiers” assigned to the firing squad missed many of their targets. It took three rounds of fire to drop all of the prisoners, lined up on their knees with their backs toward the firing squad, and Casanuova was still left with the grim task of administering the *coup de grâce* with his pistol.<sup>119</sup>

Due to their prominent role in the ritual of the execution, army chaplains witnessed more executions than other military personnel. In September 1942, the archbishop in charge of the Military Ordinariate of Italy [*Ordinariato Militare d’Italia*]

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<sup>116</sup> “1^ Appendice alla Circolare n. 3C,” 7 April 1942, NARA T-821/499/0019–22. Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 171.

<sup>117</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 54–57.

<sup>118</sup> “Norme procedurali per i giudizi dei tribunali militari straordinari,” 15 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>119</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 130–31.



asked Roatta not to task Italian chaplains with comforting condemned Slovenes, but instead to provide priests versed in the local tongue who could properly hear confession. However, this appeal fell on deaf ears; military authorities did not trust Slavic clerics and often conducted executions even before an Italian chaplain could arrive on the scene.<sup>120</sup> Pietro Brignoli, a chaplain serving with the Granatieri di Sardegna Division in Slovenia and Croatia between May 1941 and November 1942, kept notes of the most troubling episodes he witnessed during his service. These too include examples of summary executions being carried out without the presence of a priest, of the army's reluctance to provide local priests for confession, of the mutilation of bodies through repeated and excessive rifle volleys or pistol shots, of the failure to provide the condemned with blindfolds, of the regular presence of "curious" onlookers, and of the burial, exhumation, and reburial of bodies by Italian soldiers and the family members of their victims.<sup>121</sup> The frequent messiness of firing squad duty served to brutalize Italian officers and soldiers. Even when the process functioned according to ritual, the solemn and calm appearance of the victims reinforced racial stereotypes of the Balkan populations as an "apathetic people, to whom, maybe, we did a favour by killing them."<sup>122</sup>

To summary executions and executions by courts martial, Roatta's 3C circular added more specific provisions on the shooting of hostages in acts of reprisal. The Hague Convention of 1907 was silent on hostage-taking and, although the International Committee of the Red Cross sought to prohibit the practice in the interwar years, the postwar "Hostages Trial" — which indicted twelve German generals for their actions in the Balkans — justified hostage-taking under certain conditions.<sup>123</sup> Roatta instructed commanders to take and hold hostages from "the suspicious part of the population." In response to "treacherous attacks," hostages from the area would "answer with their lives"

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<sup>120</sup> Franzinelli, *Il riarmo dello spirito*, 99–100.

<sup>121</sup> Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, 16, 19–20, 26, 28–31, 34, 43.

<sup>122</sup> Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, 32.

<sup>123</sup> Yutaka Arai-Takahashi, *The Law of Occupation: Continuity and Change of International Humanitarian Law, and its Interaction with International Human Rights Law* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2009), 291–93. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 4–5.

if the actual culprits could not be apprehended within forty-eight hours.<sup>124</sup> Since this provided little time for a complete investigation, Tone Ferenc has argued that Roatta's policy "had both revenge and terror purposes."<sup>125</sup> These guidelines built upon the practice of hostage-taking initiated by Second Army the previous autumn.

The shooting of hostages took place in all zones occupied by Second Army. The war diaries of the Sassari Division, in occupied Croatian territory, reveal that the informal execution of hostages during operations took place by April 1942. The division established a more systematic policy of hostage-taking in November, when it compiled a "list of hostages for reprisals in consequence of atrocities that take place."<sup>126</sup> In July 1942, General Dalmazzo ordered the execution of eighty-eight hostages held in camps and prisons throughout the VI Corps's zone after discovering Partisan correspondence dating from April that authorized the execution of eighty-seven Italian prisoners.<sup>127</sup> However, the execution of hostages was carried out most rigorously in the annexed provinces. During winter 1941–42, Bastianini had already ordered imprisoned "communists" shot as hostages.<sup>128</sup> In June 1942, following the assassination of the prefect of Zara by Partisans, he declared that all family members of suspected Partisans would be considered "hostages."<sup>129</sup> That same month, Prefect Temistocle Testa ordered the first shooting of hostages in the Carnaro.<sup>130</sup>

In Slovenia, where Robotti had enjoyed a relatively free hand over repression since January, his XI Corps most enthusiastically adopted and applied Roatta's guidelines on the shooting of hostages. On 24 April, Robotti and Grazioli publicly announced a

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<sup>124</sup> Legnagni, "Il 'ginger' del generale Roatta," 162.

<sup>125</sup> Ferenc, *There is Not Enough Killing*, 18.

<sup>126</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 4 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, April 1942. Sassari Division Command war diary, 15 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, November–December 1942.

<sup>127</sup> "Supplemento al notiziario n. 443," 23 July 1942, NARA T-821/498/1226–28.

<sup>128</sup> "Notiziario n. 257," 16 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>129</sup> "Ordinanza del Governo della Dalmazia," 12 June 1942, NARA T-821/498/0955–59. Capogreco, "L'internamento dei civili jugoslavi," 222. Verna, "Notes on Italian Rule," 538–39.

<sup>130</sup> Pisarri, "Occupazione italiana nel Carnaro," 401.

policy consistent with the provisions in the 3C circular.<sup>131</sup> By 17 June, the XI Corps had shot 77 hostages in reprisal for Partisan activity that had claimed the lives of two Italian soldiers and 22 Slovenes and had wounded another 11 Italians. This figure likely far exceeded the number of death sentences passed by military tribunals against individuals actually deemed responsible for insurrection — five were shot between 21 May and 7 June.<sup>132</sup> Robotti always claimed that hostages selected for execution were known Communists or Partisans, “certainly guilty of terrorist activity.” However, it is evident that many of the victims were simply drawn from army prisons with little regard to whether or not they hailed from the locale where the act that prompted the reprisal took place. Italian authorities also targeted prominent intellectuals. The number of hostages shot depended on the seriousness of the offence in the eyes of Italian authorities. This allowed for greater leeway than the German practice of rigidly prescribed quotas, but it could also appear arbitrary. In one case, the Italians shot six hostages in reprisal for the murder of six Slovenes that had refused to join the Partisan movement; in another, they executed eight hostages in retaliation for the murder of a German couple.<sup>133</sup>

When acts of “terrorism” once again began to rise in September 1942, Robotti announced that ten hostages would be shot for every victim of the Partisans.<sup>134</sup> He surpassed this ratio the following month when he ordered twenty-four hostages executed on the same day that Communist agents assassinated Marko Natlačen, a former member of Grazioli’s *Consulta*, in Ljubljana. Carried out in public on the same site as the assassination, this was the single largest execution of hostages recorded in the Province

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<sup>131</sup> Grazioli-Robotti decree, 24 April 1942, NARA T-821/277/0040.

<sup>132</sup> “Elenco degli individui sicuramente colpevoli di attività comunista fucilati in applicazione bando 24 aprile 1942” and “Esecuzione pena capitale emanate dal tribunale militare di guerra sez. Lubiana,” n.d., NARA T-821/277/0495–502.

<sup>133</sup> “Rappresaglie,” 16 and 21 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati. On the selection of Slovene intellectuals as hostages, see Ferenc, *There is Not Enough Killing*, 19–21.

<sup>134</sup> “Verbale del gran rapport tenuto dall’Eccellenza comandante in Videm Krka il 10-9-1942,” 10 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati.

of Ljubljana.<sup>135</sup> Robotti admitted that the executions of hostages prompted fear and concern among many Slovenes for family members in Italian custody. Nonetheless, he felt that “to protect the principle of our authority, we must not deviate from the line of progressive severity [...] that has been forced upon us by the violent activities of a few and by the supine acquiescence of the many.” Robotti was confident that his policy of terror would best guarantee “peace in this new Italian land.”<sup>136</sup>

Another more widely adopted form of hostage-taking sanctioned by the 3C circular involved the internment of family members of suspected Partisans as a “precautionary measure.” During operations, Italian troops would conduct headcounts and check documents in villages and towns. Able-bodied men found to be absent without reason would, according to 3C, be considered “brigands” and their family members arrested and interned.<sup>137</sup> Although Roatta did not refer to these internees as hostages to be shot in reprisals, they effectively functioned as hostages and were treated less-favourably than other internees.<sup>138</sup> General Balocco of the V Corps had advocated the expansion of such a policy prior to the publication of 3C, suggesting the construction of “concentration camps for hostages,” including women and children, on islands in the Adriatic or in Italy itself.<sup>139</sup> Roatta recognized the impracticability of physically interning “all the families in question,” so he opted to send the most threatening family members to Italy while punishing the rest with reduced rations.<sup>140</sup> By April, units of the VI Corps were interning hundreds of family members of presumed rebels at a time.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Robotti to Roatta, 13 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 98. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 39–40. Cuzzi credits the reaction to Grazioli, rather than Robotti. Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” 240.

<sup>136</sup> “Situazione in Slovenia,” 16 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

<sup>137</sup> “Azione contro ribelli comunisti,” 18 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>138</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 161–62.

<sup>139</sup> “Campi di concentramento ostaggi,” 11 February 1942, NARA T-821/402/0083.

<sup>140</sup> “Provvedimenti contro familiari di ribelli,” 5 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, fasc. “Diario storico del Cdo 2a Armata, aprile–settembre 1941,” sf. “U.S. Jug. Marzo 42.”

<sup>141</sup> “Rapporto situazione,” 30 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati.

Roatta also authorized the internment of other groups through 3C and its appendices. These included the inhabitants of dwellings near places where sabotage took place: if Italian security forces could not bring the actual saboteurs to justice within two days, they would hold local populations responsible, confiscating their livestock and burning their homes before interning them. During operations, Italian troops also could intern any non-local civilians they came across as well as locals they suspected of supporting insurgency. Individuals, families, or — in the course of major operations involving multiple battalions — the populations of entire villages could be evacuated and interned “when contingent circumstances or measures demand it.”<sup>142</sup> Finally, there was also a category of “protective” internee that voluntarily sought internment out of fear of reprisals by Partisans or Ustaše. Protective internees included collaborators, some Jews, and civilians that had refused to join the Partisans. Their numbers were dwarfed by those held under repressive “precautionary” internment.<sup>143</sup>

After the war, the Yugoslavian government estimated that between 110,000 and 150,000 of its citizens were interned by Italian authorities during the war.<sup>144</sup> Internment became a cornerstone of Robotti’s policy in Slovenia, where as much as one-fifth of the local population was interned.<sup>145</sup> As we have seen, mass internment in Slovenia dovetailed with the regime’s policies of denationalization and Italianization. Rodogno thus argues that 3C’s provisions for internment “served specific political purposes” by making way for colonization in the annexed territories. Certainly, Italian generals voiced no objections in principle to policies of “de-Balkanization” and “ethnic clearance.”<sup>146</sup> But, it is difficult to determine the extent to which Robotti and other generals were motivated by political rather than military factors.

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<sup>142</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 161–62, 171–72.

<sup>143</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 350.

<sup>144</sup> Capogreco, “L’internamento dei civili jugoslavi,” 212. Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 177.

<sup>145</sup> Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 207.

<sup>146</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 335–37. This interpretation is shared by Capogreco, “L’internamento dei civili jugoslavi,” 206–210, Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” 246, and Conti, *L’occupazione italiana*, 2930.

Although completely disproportionate to the level of insurgency encountered in Slovenia, the policy was consistent with a military mentality that sought total solutions. In February 1942, the XI Corps had constructed a “belt” of barbed wire and machinegun nests around the city of Ljubljana in hopes of cutting off the resistance movement in the countryside from its leadership and recruiting pool in the capital.<sup>147</sup> In May, Ambrosio proposed constructing a barbed-wire barrier along the province’s eastern border, consciously drawing parallels with the wall that Graziani had built between Cyrenaica and Egypt in 1931. Further discussions between Roatta and Mussolini connected the closing of the border with the internment of 20,000 to 30,000 Slovenes.<sup>148</sup> Cavallero and Ambrosio even toyed with the idea of conscripting all able-bodied men in Slovenia and Dalmatia and deploying them to Southern Italy to prevent them from joining the Partisans, a measure that would have amounted to *confino* in uniform had it been feasible.<sup>149</sup> Mass internment fit within a variety of radical means that Italian commands were considering as ways to separate guerrillas from occupied populations, usually by targeting the latter. These approaches and rationales had parallels not only in the Italian “reconquest” of Libya, but in Spanish and British practices of internment in Cuba and South Africa earlier in the century.<sup>150</sup>

Italian military authorities, who exercised full control over public order in Slovenia after January 1942, played the key role in escalating and implementing internment policy in the province.<sup>151</sup> After interning several hundred civilians during a sweep through Ljubljana in February, Robotti informed Grazioli that his troops would

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<sup>147</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 48–49.

<sup>148</sup> “Sintesi della riunione tenuta dall’Eccellenza il capo di Stato Maggiore Generale il 14 maggio 1942,” VCSMG, 3:471–72. Roatta memorandum, 23 May 1942, accessed 29 January 2015, <http://www.criminidiguerra.it/ARBISS1.shtml#133>. Capogreco, “L’internamento dei civili jugoslavi,” 215. Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 337–38.

<sup>149</sup> “Uomini fino ai 55 anni appartenenti ai nuovi territori annessi,” 13 June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:144.

<sup>150</sup> Jonas Kreienbaum, “Deadly Learning?: Concentration Camps in Colonial Wars around 1900,” in *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870–1930: Empires and Encounters*, ed. Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 219–21.

<sup>151</sup> Capogreco, “L’internamento dei civili jugoslavi,” 207–208. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 50.

begin interning families of students absent from the city. Between 24 June and 5 July, the XI Corps checked the documents of 20,000 Slovenes, detained 3,516 students, teachers, vagrants, and other “suspects” [*indiziati*], and interned 2,788 of them at Gonars and Treviso.<sup>152</sup> The policy continued to escalate through the summer, despite protests from local clergy that the arrest and deportation of entire families invariably victimized the innocent, while actual resisters roamed free.<sup>153</sup> On one hand, the prevalence of this practice meant that untrustworthy groups that often would have been shot in Ethiopia were instead interned in Yugoslavia. On the other hand, the large numbers of internees made this form of repression more total; arguably, the army’s repressive policies directly affected a larger proportion of the population in Yugoslavia than in Ethiopia. It has been suggested that the total deportation of the Slovene population was only prevented because Italy lacked the means — including housing and an available pool of Italian colonists ready to replace the internees — to carry it out.<sup>154</sup>

Conditions in army-run camps, both within Supersloda’s jurisdiction and in Italy, reflected the fact that Italian logistical capacity at this point in the war was stretched to its limit. Most notorious were conditions on the island of Rab [*Arbe*], situated off the coast between Fiume and Zara, but all camps generally suffered from insufficient food, shelter, and sanitation, and the inconsistent delivery of correspondence or care packages.<sup>155</sup> But, poor conditions were only partly attributable to unavoidable supply shortages; they were also an intended result of the army’s repressive policy. In his 3C circular, Roatta ordered that the rations of interned family members of suspected Partisans be “reduced to the absolute minimum.”<sup>156</sup> Subsequent guidelines on the organization of internment camps in Second Army’s zone dictated that “the internees will be treated as prisoners.” Security

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<sup>152</sup> Capogreco, “L’internamento dei civili jugoslavi,” 214–16. “Circolare 3C in data 1 marzo del comando 2<sup>a</sup> Armata,” n.d., and “Riepologo internamento note categorie,” n.d., NARA T-821/277/0487–88, 0665–66.

<sup>153</sup> “Guardie armate,” 3 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati.

<sup>154</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 81–82. “Internamenti,” 14 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati.

<sup>155</sup> Capogreco, “L’internamento dei civili jugoslavi,” 211–19. “Relazione mensile,” 18 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>156</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 162.

measures were meant to ensure that “no suspects can deceive themselves of leaving the enclosure of the camp alive.” Men and women were to be kept separate, effectively splitting up families. Conforming to these guidelines, the VI Corps established two concentration camps in fortresses at the mouth of the Bay of Kotor, with its infantry divisions providing the officers and guards. The most dangerous internees, including all those designated as “hostages,” were held on the islet of Mamula. Elderly or infirm internees as well as women and children were kept in a better-equipped camp across the bay on the Prevlaka peninsula. The internees were put to work in nearby fields.<sup>157</sup>

Perhaps the most frequently applied means of repression directed against civilians following the publication of the 3C circular was the destruction of their property, which usually accompanied internment.<sup>158</sup> Roatta held local civilian populations co-responsible for Partisan activity. He authorized the destruction of dwellings and the confiscation of livestock where the perpetrators of sabotage or other acts of insurrection could not be apprehended within forty-eight hours.<sup>159</sup> Such measures had already been sanctioned by Ambrosio; now, Italian field commanders quickly exceeded Roatta’s guidelines. In the month following 3C’s publication, various units reported matter-of-factly the destruction of homes and entire villages as means of reprisal.<sup>160</sup> By early April, Roatta lamented that the burning of villages had become a “double-edged sword” that played into the hands of Partisan propaganda.

After simple skirmishes, or during *rastrellamenti* conducted without injury, entire villages have been destroyed.

The same thing has happened, during actual operations, in regards to villages found abandoned, in areas where there has not been serious fighting, in the assumption that the desertion of the homes constitutes clear and irrefutable proof of the connivance of the populations with the rebels.

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<sup>157</sup> “Campi di concentramento per internati politici,” 17 March 1942, “Campi di concentramento,” 7 April 1942, and “Campi di concentramento,” 29 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati.

<sup>158</sup> Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 177–78.

<sup>159</sup> Legnagni, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 162.

<sup>160</sup> See, for example, “Rapporto situazione per la quindicina del 15 al 31 marzo 1942,” and “Notiziario n. 333,” 4 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati.



Roatta reminded his officers that most of the civilian population was unarmed and lacked the direct protection of Italian garrisons, which left them vulnerable to Partisans that demanded lodging or supplies and often forced villagers to abandon their homes. Roatta insisted that dwellings were only to be burned where the situation could be considered “abnormal,” where sabotage had been conducted nearby, and only after forty-eight hours had elapsed without apprehending the true culprits of said sabotage. Yet, he was not willing to absolutely prohibit the destruction of civilian property. Decision-making ultimately remained in the hands of the commander on the spot.<sup>161</sup>

Roatta’s warnings against the counterproductive destruction of property were echoed by subordinates like Robotti and Armellini. The latter cooperated with Bastianini’s *Carabinieri* in Dalmatia to determine “places and villages that should be considered better or worse” in order to “proportion [*graduare*] the severity” of reprisal measures, but this still amounted to collective rather than individual objective punishment.<sup>162</sup> It is clear that the burning of homes remained common practice, especially during anti-partisan operations in which the situation always was deemed “abnormal.” For the memoirists Casanuova and Brignoli, such forms of reprisal became a natural part of war in the Balkans. Casanuova recalled that Croat “houses all had straw roofs and, after a little artillery and mortar fire, they caught fire like shocks of wheat.”<sup>163</sup> Brignoli noted how rural populations fled the approach of his column during operations in northwest Croatia in September 1942. The only village that was not immediately put to the flame was the one selected to house the regimental command. It too was burned when the Italians departed.<sup>164</sup> Even outside major operations, patrols from Italian garrisons

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<sup>161</sup> “Trattamento da usare verso i ribelli e le popolazioni che li favoriscono,” 7 April 1942, NARA T-821/277/0515–17. VI Corps forwarded Roatta’s directives to its units on 18 April. See AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati.

<sup>162</sup> “Incendio di Dolga Vas,” 27 July 1942, NARA T-821/402/0017. “Operazioni ed organizzazione delle forze nella provincia di Zara,” 14 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1942, allegati.

<sup>163</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 59.

<sup>164</sup> Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, 98.

continued to burn buildings — sometimes shacks constructed by Partisans in the forests or mountains, but also civilian dwellings — on a daily basis.<sup>165</sup>

In some respects, the 3C circular was a highly detailed and prescriptive document that reflected the Italian senior officer corps's tendency towards "oversupervision."<sup>166</sup> In other respects, 3C took the form of an open-ended guideline for conduct. In important areas, its wording was vague and it left much to the initiative of field commanders.<sup>167</sup> As Ben Shepherd has noted in his studies of German field commands in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, such dispositions were open to interpretations ranging from restrained to ruthless depending on circumstances and the mindset of individual commanders.<sup>168</sup> In the case of Circular 3C, the room it left for middle- and lower-level initiative was less obviously a reflection of the Fascist "leadership principle" and more directly a response to the unpredictable and fluid nature of anti-partisan warfare. Despite Roatta's awareness of the double-edged potential of summary executions, hostage-taking, internment, and the destruction or confiscation of property, his directives on these measures functioned as "invitations to abuse."<sup>169</sup>

Following the publication of 3C, previously restrained divisions like the Sassari grew demonstrably more violent in their behaviour. Encouraged by Roatta's circular and responding to the difficult combat conditions that his division found itself in since January, Monticelli now authorized harsh measures in the midst of operations conducted to relieve garrisons that had come under siege during the winter. He tolerated and legitimized behaviour that might otherwise have been considered hazardous to discipline. On 6 March 1942, a group of *alpini* attached to the Sassari Division burned the entire village of Velika Popina because they deemed it a "breeding-ground for rebels." In what can only be described as officially sanctioned looting, the confiscated livestock and

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<sup>165</sup> See, for example, the reports on garrison activity in the daily bulletins for 4, 6, 8, 13, 14, 16, 20, 21, 24, 27, and 29 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>166</sup> Knox, *Common Destiny*, 161–62.

<sup>167</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 177.

<sup>168</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 9–10. Shepherd, *War in the Wild East*, 52.

<sup>169</sup> Burgwyn, "General Roatta's War," 321.

foodstuffs were given to the troops, many of whom had recently been released from military prisons. On 26 March, after liberating the garrison of Srb, the relief column executed their Communist prisoners along with a number of local sympathizers, and evacuated the sixty inhabitants that had remained loyal to the occupiers. Then, in unusually frank language for a unit war log, “free rein was given to the troops to plunder and so the entire town was burned and with it the adjacent Kunovac and Kupirovački. The whole Srb valley was in flames.”<sup>170</sup> Such scenes became routine during the Sassari Division’s operations in the following months. The division’s war diary now recorded such measures more drily: “between Bos[ansko] Grahovo and Drvar everything was burned; in particular the Kamenica plateau where not a single dwelling still exists. [...] Some prisoners were shot; others were interned.”<sup>171</sup> As a rule, “all the villages that have supported the rebels are razed to the ground or burned and the inhabitants guilty of aiding and abetting [*favoreggiamento*] them interned or shot according to conditions and circumstances.”<sup>172</sup> Outside of operations, Monticelli ordered garrison commanders to hold family members of absent able-bodied males as hostages and to confiscate their livestock.<sup>173</sup> During the spring of 1942, his division employed all the repressive measures authorized by 3C. His successor, Paolo Berardi, encouraged his subordinates to reread and memorize the entire circular.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 6 and 26 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942. On the presence of convicts in the reserve *alpini* battalions employed in the 6 March operation, see “Relazione sull’azione eseguita il giorno 8 marzo 1942.XX per sbloccare il presidio di Srb,” 21 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942, allegati.

<sup>171</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 8 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, April 1942. An after-action report of the operation is available in “Operazioni sbloccamento Bos. Grahovo – Drvar,” 19 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), April–May 1942, allegati.

<sup>172</sup> “Premessa” to the Sassari Division Command war diary, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May–June 1942.

<sup>173</sup> Monticelli to Bosansko Grahovo garrison command, 24 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942, allegati.

<sup>174</sup> “Modalità di azione,” 7 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1942, allegati.

That the command of the Sassari Division fell into line with the precepts of Roatta's circular so quickly and willingly was due to its evolving interpretation of the insurgency that it faced in Lika. By this point, officers and men of the division saw themselves as operating in hostile territory. While it resurfaced from time to time, the sympathy previously held for the local populations had dissipated.<sup>175</sup> Italian patrol commanders grew frustrated with the tendency of civilians to flee their approach or, when they were captured, to respond to interrogations only "with the usual phrase: *neznam*" [I don't know].<sup>176</sup> Gazzini concluded that "the [communist] criminals find hospitality and support everywhere."<sup>177</sup> But, he also concluded that the harsh methods employed by the division since March produced positive results.

A trend against the communists begins to show itself among the populations connected to the reprisals executed by us on towns that went over to the Reds; having seen our strong-arm methods [*maniera forte*], the naturally cowardly [*vigliacca*] populations are leaning towards the stronger and are noticing that communist propaganda brings them nothing but bad; there are in fact many bands that are organizing themselves against the Reds and that will fight by our side.<sup>178</sup>

Thus, Gazzini and Monticelli did not consider brutal repression measures inimical to the Sassari Division's earlier policies based on co-opting the Serb populations. The language was reminiscent of that used in Ethiopia; reprisals were merely another form of persuasion to be employed among inferior colonial peoples.

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<sup>175</sup> The commander of a battalion of the Sassari Division sent to reinforce a *rastrellamento* in Dalmatia seemed moved by the even greater brutality inflicted by the Truppe Zara on a village there. He offered medical assistance to the hysterical villagers he came across. "Relazione sulle azioni svolte dal II° Btg. nei giorni 11, 12, 13 e 14 giugno 1942," 15 June 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), June-July 1942, allegati.

<sup>176</sup> "Relazione sull'esplorazione fatta il giorno 9 maggio c.a. nella zona nord-est di Ostrelj della pattuglia esploratori del 1 btg.," 10 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), April-May 1942, allegati.

<sup>177</sup> See the "Premessa" to the Sassari Division Command war diary, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May-June 1942.

<sup>178</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 13 and 18 April 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, April 1942.

### *Grand Operations and the Perversion of Discipline*

While Italian infantry divisions made considerable use of 3C's provisions in their own small- and medium-scale anti-partisan operations, major operations involving multiple divisions saw the fullest application of the circular. Vast swathes of territory could be deemed zones of operations, and therefore "*in situazione anormale.*"<sup>179</sup> The publication of 3C is often portrayed as a turning point precisely because it was followed by a year of large-scale anti-partisan operations; it opened a new phase in Italian counterinsurgency in Yugoslavia.<sup>180</sup> In the first of these grand operations, Trio, Italian policy and behaviour was mitigated to an extent by Roatta's political objective of winning over the Serbs and Četniks in Bosnia. Although initially agreeing that all captured insurgents and their helpers must be shot, Roatta later prevailed upon the Germans to treat those who surrendered as prisoners of war. This was not the result of a more compassionate Italian attitude; Roatta's aim was to avoid driving Četnik formations into resistance.<sup>181</sup>

Arguably, the Italian reliance on terror against insurgents and civilian populations reached its apex in the summer and autumn of 1942 when all four Italian army corps were employed in a series of grand operations intended to secure the annexed territories in the Adriatic once and for all.<sup>182</sup> In July, the V and XI Corps simultaneously launched major operations in Slovenia and Carnaro, while the XVIII Corps cleared out part of the Velebit mountain range along the border between Dalmatia and Croatia. These were followed in October and November with joint operations involving the VI and XVIII Corps in Herzegovina. In their operational orders, corps commanders referred directly to the 3C

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<sup>179</sup> For an example from Operation Trio, see "Località in situazione anormale," 26 April 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, March-April 1942, allegati.

<sup>180</sup> Cuzzi, "La Slovenia italiana," 253. Pisarri, "Occupazione italiana nel Carnaro," 395.

<sup>181</sup> Ambrosio to Cavallero, 5 March 1942, DDI 9, VIII, 339. "Norme di carattere generale emanate dal commando gruppo tattico 'Bader'," 18 April 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, March-April 1942, allegati. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 175.

<sup>182</sup> Burgwyn, "General Roatta's War," 318.

circular and its appendices, particularly in relation to the treatment of insurgents and populations.<sup>183</sup>

Mario Robotti's operations in Slovenia demonstrated the most zealous application of 3C's measures. Running through the summer of 1942, the operations took place directly on annexed territory, where Italian concern for prestige was magnified. In Slovenia, Italian policies were not mitigated by the political dynamics of coalition relations with Germany and Croatia, or by Second Army's desire to win over Serbs and Četniks. Moreover, Italian manpower and resources in the region were at their height; but, with reinforcements drying up, Italian generals knew that they had a limited window to exploit these circumstances. Given these factors, Roatta made it clear at the outset of operations that he expected the harshest measures of his 3C circular to be observed and, indeed, exceeded.

Roatta's preliminary instructions to Robotti demanded that "those who make any act of hostility, or of abetting the rebels, will immediately be shot." He continued to consider the "destruction of homes and villages" as legitimate reprisals, albeit ones that needed to be administered cautiously.<sup>184</sup> Meeting in the field with generals Robotti and Ruggero on the second day of operations, Roatta defined "combat zones" — in which all forms of reprisal were justified — as including not only spots where Italian troops encountered armed resistance, but any area subject to a *rastrellamento*. In addition, Roatta gave individual soldiers the authority to check the documentation of civilians found outdoors during the operations, including those tending their fields, and to "immediately shoot any civilian found at fault." Finally, he reminded Ruggero to confiscate anything useful before burning homes.<sup>185</sup> Robotti went even further, authorizing significant repressive measures throughout the entire Province of Ljubljana.

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<sup>183</sup> See, for example, Santovito's "Operazione 'Alfa': direttive n. 2," 29 September 1942, NARA T-821/63/0392-97, and Spigo's orders for "Operazione 'Beta'," 10 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, September-October 1942, allegati.

<sup>184</sup> "Operazioni in Slovenia," 8 June 1942, NARA T-821/62/0353-65. On the eve of operations, Robotti imparted similar directives to his subordinates. "Trattamento da usare verso i ribelli," 2 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July-August 1942, allegati.

<sup>185</sup> "Relazione visita delle Eccellenze alla divisione 'Cacciatori,'" 17 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July-August 1942, allegati.

He ordered Italian units conducting operations to arrest all able-bodied men found in their homes or villages and to shoot all those found in the countryside.<sup>186</sup> These meetings and directives, coming before or during the first three days of the operation, demonstrated the extent to which Italian commands tolerated and anticipated a higher level of violence against civilians during major anti-partisan operations. The generals also anticipated their meeting with Mussolini on 31 July in Gorizia, where the *Duce* imparted instructions for the harsh repression of Slovenes. Declaring that “this population will never love us,” Mussolini called for his generals to respond with “fire and iron” and authorized “the transfer of the mass of the population.”<sup>187</sup> His encouragement was not necessary.

As envisioned by Roatta and Robotti, the main targets and victims of Italian repression during the course of operations were civilians. This made a mockery of the amnesty that Robotti had offered to villagers who, having been forced to join the Partisans, returned to their homes prior to operations.<sup>188</sup> In practice, the Italian application of terror escalated over the course of operations. Partly, this was due to bottom-up frustration with ineffective *rastrellamenti*, but as Osti Guerrazzi argues, the majority of reprisals were episodes of “cold” violence ordered from above. In particular, General Robotti’s language — which presented the entire civilian population as complicit in the insurgency — grew increasingly rigorous as the operation continued.<sup>189</sup>

These dynamics were illustrated in the *rastrellamento* conducted by the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division south of Grosuplje in the first week of operations. On 16 and 17 July, units of the division encircled an area where some four-hundred Partisans were estimated to be at large. The Italians uncovered various weapons stashes and hideouts but only managed to kill three Partisans in combat. The mopping-up portion of the operation commenced on the 18th, during which two Partisans were killed in combat, one partisan

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<sup>186</sup> “Applicazione dell’ordinanza del 19 luglio 1942,” 18 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>187</sup> Cavallero diary, 31 July 1942. Dassovich, *Fronte jugoslavo 1941–42*, 185–93. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:618. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 106.

<sup>188</sup> “Notiziario informazioni n. 66,” 13 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>189</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 88–91.

helper was executed, and the homes of people held responsible for sabotage were burned. The 19th was a rest day, but on the 20th the Italians executed four “communist brigands,” whose interrogation revealed that a much larger group of Partisans had slipped through the division’s fingers.<sup>190</sup> Robotti chastised the division’s commander, Vittorio Ruggero, for his excessive and premature optimism regarding the loyalty of the local populations. He exhorted Ruggero and his other subordinates to conduct their “purge” according to “strict and restrictive criteria.”<sup>191</sup> Perhaps in response to this pressure, or merely frustrated by its inability to locate and engage larger masses of rebels, the Cacciatori escalated their executions of civilians in the following days. On the 21st nine rebels and “suspect persons” were executed. During the next two days, the 51st Regiment executed the nineteen villagers at Zapotok. Finally, the operation concluded on the 24th when Ruggero claimed to have encountered strong Partisan resistance, although he reported suffering no casualties himself. According to the division’s war log, the Cacciatori killed ten Partisans in combat, executed another 35, interned 38 people, and burned the property of “communist brigands,” but only uncovered one light machinegun and six rifles.<sup>192</sup>

Italian units conducted executions on a daily basis during the operations in Slovenia. More often than not, the victims were not armed Partisans but “suspect persons,” individuals listed as “communists,” or partisan “helpers” found in villages. Often, these executions were accompanied by the burning of property. For statistical purposes, the XI Corps recorded all of its victims as “rebels captured and shot.” As of 23 July, they numbered 84, to go alongside the 32 “enemies killed in combat.” Even with these creative accounting practices, the numbers were not high enough for Robotti, who admitted that the difficult terrain and the shrewdness of the adversary might force him to reduce his expectations. He reiterated his orders to “suppress without mercy not only the guilty, but also the suspect, and intern the able-bodied men that seem to have returned to

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<sup>190</sup> Cacciatori delle Alpi Division Command war diary, 16–20 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942.

<sup>191</sup> “Trattamento verso chi ritorna nei paesi occupati,” 20 July 1942, and “Atteggimento verso i ribelli e loro favoreggiatori,” 21 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>192</sup> Cacciatori delle Alpi Division Command war diary, 21–24 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942.



towns formerly occupied by rebels. [...] Remember that behind every civilian might hide a partisan who, burying his rifle and seizing the spade, is ready to take it up again to shoot our soldiers in the back.”<sup>193</sup> By the end of the month, Robotti claimed that 150 “rebels” had been killed in combat, 239 had been executed, and 250 had turned themselves in. In addition, his divisions captured 90 small arms, burned 134 dwellings, and confiscated 138 head of livestock, at a cost of 35 dead — half of which came in a single encounter at the beginning of the operation — and 92 wounded.<sup>194</sup>

This pattern repeated itself in August, now accompanied by orders from Robotti to intern all able-bodied males encountered in operational zones. The policy of internment, which had previously targeted the urban population of Ljubljana, thus was extended to the countryside, marking its high point.<sup>195</sup> The timing of the order, coming on the heels of Mussolini’s speech at Gorizia, was significant. But, in his meeting with Roatta and Robotti the previous month, Ruggero already had proposed “confiscating the property belonging to men absent from villages and interning their families.”<sup>196</sup> His division adhered to the new directives with zeal, interning at least 420 civilians over the course of August, most of them in roundups that detained between 50 and 100 villagers at a time. Thus, Italian repression targeted civilians to an even greater extent than before. On the other hand, the policy of internment may have provided officers in the field with an alternative to executions. There is some evidence that Ruggero filtered the contents of Robotti’s directives in order to tolerate more moderate, if inconsistent, behaviour from his troops. While still reporting the execution of “brigands,” the Cacciatori Division’s war diary entries now referred to partisan helpers and other suspicious individuals as

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<sup>193</sup> “Risultati dei primi due complessi operativi,” 23 July 1942, and “Statistica risultati ciclo operativo,” 27 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>194</sup> “Bollettino giorno 30 luglio,” 30 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati. On 17 July, a CC.NN. unit lost 17 killed and 16 wounded. See “Bollettino del giorno 21 luglio 1942,” 21 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>195</sup> Cacciatori delle Alpi Division Command war diary, 3 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942. Capogreco, “L’internamento dei civili jugoslavi,” 208–209.

<sup>196</sup> “Relazione visita delle Eccellenze alla divisione ‘Cacciatori,’” 17 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

being “captured” or “arrested” rather than shot.<sup>197</sup> However, this was not Robotti’s intention. He lamented that his division commanders showed “misplaced pity” by not shooting unarmed “brigands.” Robotti reminded them that “many of today’s peaceful workers are yesterday’s brigands that should be shot.”<sup>198</sup>

Ultimately, the Cacciatori Division applied internment as a repressive measure in addition to summary executions, which it continued to commit. During *rastrellamenti*, Ruggero authorized his troops to execute “whoever” they found. On more than one occasion, this included women, even though Roatta’s first appendix to the 3C circular called for them to be spared.<sup>199</sup> Throughout the grand operations in Slovenia, the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division recorded 342 executions. This was the highest number among the participating units and is best explained by the division’s constant employment in mobile operations. As a whole, between 16 July and 15 September, the XI Corps claimed to have killed 965 “rebels” in combat, executed another 791, and took 1,135 prisoners at a cost of 47 dead and 143 wounded. In the process, the corps recovered 695 rifles, 60 pistols, 41 automatic weapons, and 9 mortars, not enough to equal the number of Partisans killed in action.<sup>200</sup> The ratio of 37 Slovenes killed for every Italian soldier lost was remarkably disproportionate. It exceeded the ratio obtained by German and Croatian forces that participated in Operation *Weiss* the following winter.<sup>201</sup> Such a

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<sup>197</sup> See Cacciatori delle Alpi Division Command war diary, August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942. Casanuova claimed that Ruggero protested orders from high command to execute obviously harmless civilians. Casanuova, *I°/51*, 127–30.

<sup>198</sup> “Trattamento ribelli catturati o presentatisi senza le armi,” 5 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati. Underlined in original.

<sup>199</sup> Cacciatori delle Alpi Division Command war diary, 18–19 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942. Osti Guerrazzi discusses similar executions conducted on 24 September. Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 97–98.

<sup>200</sup> “Risultati ciclo operativo conseguiti dal giorno 16 luglio al 15 settembre,” n.d., NARA T-821/62/0419–20. Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 85–86. Slightly different figures are available in Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” 250, and Ferenc, *There is Not Enough Killing*, 27.

<sup>201</sup> According to information furnished to the Italians, German and Croatian forces claimed to have killed 6,500 Partisans in Operation *Weiss*, while losing 337 dead themselves, a ratio of 19:1. “Formazione sommaria delle G.U. tedesche che hanno preso parte al ciclo operazioni ‘Weiss’,” 18 February 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, fasc. “Uff. St. Jug. gennaio–febbraio 1943.” The German 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was considered the most brutal formation in the operation, but even its ratio ranged between 23:1 and 36:1, depending on which statistics are taken into account. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 223.

high ratio, combined with the qualitative evidence from unit war diaries and the language of Robotti's orders, suggests that a large number of the XI Corps's victims were wounded and captured Partisans or unarmed civilians.

The vast majority of those shot or rendered homeless and interned by the Italians were victims of "atrocities by policy." The military leadership had developed increasingly harsh repressive measures in 1941 that were codified and incorporated into operational directives in 1942. The operations themselves witnessed top-down pressure to conform to the spirit of these directives. Bottom-up frustration, not from high casualty rates but with the difficult environmental and logistical conditions and the style of guerrilla warfare encountered in the Balkans, helped ensure that the lower ranks adhered to policy. As we have seen, the army's propaganda consciously exploited this frustration to develop hatred for the enemy and, in turn, bolster unit cohesion and obedience. In addition, the army leadership's reluctance to prosecute subordinates for excesses served intentionally to condone and encourage the application of harsh measures. Even when he warned against counterproductive reprisals, Roatta informed his officers that he had no intention to "question the past" [*fare il processo' al passato*] or to examine alleged excesses on a "case by case" basis.<sup>202</sup>

Although less radical in its form and results, the Italian army in the Balkans underwent a "perversion of discipline" similar to that which, according to Omer Bartov, contributed to the brutalization of German troops in the east.<sup>203</sup> In his examination of Italian military tribunals in Slovenia, Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi found that sentences against Italian troops for theft or violence against local civilians were relatively rare; they were non-existent for officers. More commonly prosecuted were crimes of insubordination or dereliction of duty.<sup>204</sup> This trend holds true for other army corps as well. After a year of occupation, the number of cases forwarded to army tribunals each month by the VI Corps had more than doubled, indicating a growing concern over discipline. However, while

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<sup>202</sup> "Trattamento da usare verso i ribelli e le popolazioni che li favoriscono," 7 April 1942, NARA T-821/277/0515-17.

<sup>203</sup> See Bartov, "The Perversion of Discipline," chap. 3 in *Hitler's Army*.

<sup>204</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 78.

theft of private property or unauthorized requisition was punished occasionally, most charges — and the most exemplary punishments — involved crimes committed against the military establishment: theft from military stores, violence between soldiers, disobedience, desertion, or self-mutilation.<sup>205</sup> There was no significant change after the command of the XVIII Corps took over the northern half of the VI Corps's sector, despite Armellini's calls to crack down on the theft of agricultural produce.<sup>206</sup> With the exception of May 1942, where five soldiers were charged for rape and another four for theft of private property, crimes against civilians usually accounted for only one or two denunciations out of a monthly total ranging from twelve to forty-two.<sup>207</sup>

Looting was far more widespread than tribunal records indicate. Croatian officials and clergy repeatedly harried Supersloda with complaints of pillaging by Italian troops, usually during operations.<sup>208</sup> Pietro Brignoli portrayed Italian soldiers as terrible looters, blaming junior officers for failing to rein in their men.<sup>209</sup> By the end of his operations in Slovenia, Robotti admitted that looting by his troops was out of control.<sup>210</sup> Italian commanders repeatedly condemned the appropriation of foodstuffs and property by individual military personnel and warned of potentially “draconian” punishments, including execution.<sup>211</sup> However, officers in the field appear to have been reluctant to

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<sup>205</sup> See the semimonthly situation reports and the monthly Propaganda Section reports attached to the war logs of VI Corps. AUSSME, N1-11, bb. 583-85, 1265. On exemplary sentences for insubordination and self-mutilation, see “Foglio d’ordine n. 21,” 3 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati; and, “Foglio d’ordine n. 29,” 7 August 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati.

<sup>206</sup> Armellini blamed unit commanders for failing to educate their men. “Furti,” 16 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>207</sup> See the semimonthly situation reports and the monthly Propaganda Section reports attached to the war logs of XVIII Corps. AUSSME, N1-11, bb. 646, 772, 782, 881, 996, 1068, 1188.

<sup>208</sup> “Almissa, saccheggi compiuti da soldati italiani,” 23 July 1943, NARA T-821/403/0271-74. For charges of Italian excesses laid by Archbishop Stepinac in early 1943, see NARA T-821/403/0784-98.

<sup>209</sup> Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, 80, 107-108.

<sup>210</sup> “Verbale del gran rapport tenuto dall’Eccellenza comandante in Videm Krka il 10-9-1942,” 10 September 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati.

<sup>211</sup> “Rapporto situazione 2<sup>a</sup> quindicina di Aprile,” 15 May 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 724, DS Second Army, April-May 1941, allegati. “1<sup>a</sup> Appendice alla Circolare n. 3C,” 7 April 1942, NARA T-821/499/0019-22. “Controllo popolazione civile,” 25 June 1942, and AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, May-June 1942, allegati.

prosecute men whose behaviour could be justified as conforming to directives from above. At the end of 1941, Mussolini and Cavallero had called on Italian forces in Croatia to requisition supplies aggressively. During 1942, Italian commands authorized the confiscation of property belonging to presumed “rebels.” Unable to provide sufficient boots for his men, Roatta permitted the confiscation [*sequestro*] of footwear from Slovene civilians.<sup>212</sup> As elsewhere, expectations to “live off the land” and to confiscate or destroy property as a reprisal measure made excesses difficult to avoid.<sup>213</sup> Thus, during Operation Trio, Mario Casanuova’s men plundered what remained of a village that had been burned in reprisal. Admitting to taking an elderly woman’s quilt and jacket at gunpoint, Casanuova claimed that “the thought never even crossed my mind of having committed armed robbery.”<sup>214</sup> If the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division gained a reputation among the occupied populations as a formation that “looted, burned, killed” — as General Ruggero was forced to admit in autumn 1942 — this was as much the result of higher-level policy as it was of low morale and lack of discipline among exhausted, ill-equipped, and poorly led troops.<sup>215</sup>

Despite their appeals against looting, when it came to discipline Italian generals showed greater concern for the lazy behaviour and slovenly appearance that reflected a lack of enthusiasm or combat spirit among their troops. Dalmazzo complained of soldiers with unpolished boots, long hair, beards, deformed caps, raised collars, and socks or “scarves of every shape and colour,” idling about with their hands in their pockets making poorly executed salutes to equally shabby-looking junior officers. Robotti made similar complaints in Slovenia.<sup>216</sup> The most draconian punishments were reserved for

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<sup>212</sup> Cavallero diary, 30 December 1941. “Ordinanza riguardante la confisca dei beni ai rivoltosi,” 15 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati. “Operazioni in Slovenia,” 8 June 1942, NARA T-821/62/0355.

<sup>213</sup> Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, 67–68.

<sup>214</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 60–61.

<sup>215</sup> “Relazione sullo spirito della truppa e della popolazione dei territori occupati,” 24 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September–October 1942, allegati.

<sup>216</sup> “Foglio d’ordine n. 2,” 6 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati. “Uniformità della tenuta delle truppe,” 15 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati.

officers and soldiers guilty of cowardice that threatened Italian prestige. Less than a month before the armistice and two weeks after Mussolini's fall from power, Second Army's military tribunal sentenced two officers and twenty-six soldiers to death for allowing themselves to be disarmed by Partisans without a fight. In a circular to all four corps, Robotti announced that "the sentence was carried out immediately."<sup>217</sup> This was an exceptional case that came at the very end of the occupation — the *Regio Esercito* executed far more of its own men in the First World War than in the Second — but it highlights the greater emphasis that the Italian military leadership and justice system placed on combat discipline compared to other breaches of discipline regarding the treatment of civilians.<sup>218</sup>

The perversion of discipline during grand operations is illustrated in a report by General Umberto Fabbri, whose formation of *Guardia alla Frontiera* troops conducted a series of *rastrellamenti* south of Slovenia in support of Robotti's operations. Between 12 July and 21 August, Fabbri's men shot 245 people and interned 4,300, while burning 1,854 houses and confiscating 1,950 head of livestock. However, Fabbri concluded that

I did not have to resort to any serious disciplinary measures during the entire operation; on the contrary I noted the desire of all the soldiers to participate willingly in the task of destroying the enemy nests.

They gave respect and assistance to the elderly, women, and children, always animated by that spirit of steady humanity and civilization that distinguishes the Italian soldier, but not separated from the desire to eliminate able-bodied men to avenge their fallen comrades, a few of whom were found cowardly stripped, tortured, and mutilated.<sup>219</sup>

Fabbri's language reflects the message of Italian propaganda, which expected soldiers simultaneously to exalt in violent destruction and espouse humanitarian values that marked them as bearers of a superior civilization. It also reflects the complacent view that such behaviour was possible. But, in the midst of what amounted to officially sanctioned pillaging justified by the barbarity of the guerrilla enemy and the presumed complicity of

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<sup>217</sup> "Disarmo del presidio di Bol (Isola di Brazza)," 15 August 1943, NARA T-821/403/0309. See also Scotti, *Bono italiano*, 190.

<sup>218</sup> On army death sentences in the First and Second World Wars, see Knox, *Common Destiny*, 149.

<sup>219</sup> "Operazioni del V Rgpt. G.a.F. nel periodo 1°–22 agosto," 23 August 1942, NARA T-821/62/1345–46.

the local populations, field commanders were more concerned about the willingness of their troops to follow orders than with the abuse of those orders.

## Intelligence

The escalation of and variation within Second Army's conduct of reprisals during 1941 and 1942 resulted in large part from the way that army, corps, and division commands interpreted resistance in their territorial jurisdictions. These interpretations were fed by assumptions that emanated from past experience facing insurgency, from racial stereotypes of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and from an ideological aversion to communism, which according to Roatta "exerted great fascination among the Slavic populations of the Balkans."<sup>220</sup> The Italian approach to repression grew more severe through 1941 as Italian commands equated revolt with Slavic communism. The widespread targeting of civilians in 1942 reflected judgments that the occupied populations, especially in the annexed territories, were uniformly hostile to Italy and that terror was the most effective means of persuasion for "Balkan peoples," endemic brigands who refused "to suffer any government."<sup>221</sup> Citing a "very good expert on the subject," Robotti argued that the "dissatisfaction, restlessness, hypocrisy and perfidy" of Slovenes was the result of a "servile mentality" formed after years of Austrian and Yugoslavian domination. He concluded that Slovenes lacked the political maturity to handle the autonomy granted them in 1941, which they viewed merely as a sign of weakness, and that only military force could resolve the crisis in the Province of Ljubljana. Robotti predicted that the rural masses, unimpressed by their "sad experience of the communist paradise," would submit to Italian authority once victory had been achieved.<sup>222</sup> When the Muslim populations of Bosnia and Herzegovina began to turn

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<sup>220</sup> Roatta, *Otto milioni di baionette*, 173.

<sup>221</sup> "Delitti dell'O.F.," 18 April 1942, NARA T-821/277/0061. "Organizzazioni militari in Dalmazia," 2 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0953-56.

<sup>222</sup> "Notiziario informativo n. 64," 29 June 1942, and "Notiziario settimanale n. 67 (13-19 luglio 1942-XX)," July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July-August 1942, allegati. The intelligence staff of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division echoed these views on the racial and historical origins of anti-Italian sentiment in Slovenia. "Relazione mensile sullo spirito delle truppe e della popolazione dei territori

against the Italians in 1943, Second Army's commander accused them of "lacking firm will," which he believed stemmed from their history of domination by other races.<sup>223</sup>

Italian generals placed great emphasis on the collection of intelligence and news to inform their civil policies and to avoid or achieve surprise in counterinsurgency operations. Units submitted daily reports on activity and rumours in their sectors, which were filtered up the chain of command.<sup>224</sup> Intelligence officers possibly were the busiest staff officers in Second Army. Their reports, usually several pages long, make up the bulk of material in division- and corps-level war diaries. Oddone Talpo has argued that the reports included too much information for Italian commands to interpret, and he criticizes commanders for neglecting to provide their subordinates with useful summaries or context to inform lower-level initiatives.<sup>225</sup> This might explain the intelligence failure in February 1943, when the Murge Division responded too late to warning signs of a Partisan build-up in the Neretva river valley and was badly mauled as a result.<sup>226</sup> But overall, despite complaints from corps commanders of insufficient, flawed, or exaggerated reports, Italian intelligence services functioned competently and information was shared up, down, and across chains of command.<sup>227</sup> Intelligence staffs included

occupati," 26 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, July-August 1942, allegati.

<sup>223</sup> "Liberazione di mussulmani," 19 June 1943, NARA T-821/294/0366-67.

<sup>224</sup> "Azioni contro ribelli," 23 October 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 569, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, October-November 1941, allegati. "Direttive," 31 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 568, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), August-September 1941, allegati.

<sup>225</sup> Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 3:118.

<sup>226</sup> "Avvenimenti di Val Narenta: azione dei Comandi, impiego delle truppe," 14 April 1943, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, fasc. "Marzo 1943 (U.S. Jug)."

<sup>227</sup> On complaints, see "Direttive ed osservazioni," 18 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 381, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, September 1941, allegati; and, "Accertamento e trasmissione notizie operative," 20 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati. On the distribution of intelligence bulletins to lower-level commands, see "Attività politico militare," 22 October 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 381, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, October 1941, allegati; and "Istruzioni Stato Maggiore reparti partigiani," 29 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 569, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), December 1941-January 1942, allegati. On the sharing of intelligence with neighbouring commands in Montenegro and Albania, see "Notiziario n. 262," 21 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.



officers fluent in Slavic languages, although some smaller units and garrisons lacked translators capable of deciphering the Cyrillic characters used by Serbs.<sup>228</sup>

Corps and division commands employed substantial networks of informants, and they instructed garrison commanders to do the same.<sup>229</sup> In annexed territories, their effectiveness was limited by lack of communication with civil authorities, who had their own informants. In the Independent State of Croatia, Italian commands complained that their informants were being intentionally targeted by Croatian police.<sup>230</sup> Italian authorities acted upon informants' denunciations of "communists," partisan helpers, or individuals hiding weapons. However, Italian officers later commented that many people who lost their homes and were interned as a result of a denunciation showed little evidence of subversive activity. Evidently, personal motivations and, in Croatia, the desire for revenge between Serbs and Croats fuelled many denunciations.<sup>231</sup> This contributed to the arbitrary appearance of Italian repression.

Despite their prodigious accumulation of informants and information, Italian intelligence officers and commanding generals struggled to explain why resistance continued to spread and why the Communist Partisan movement continued to gain adherents among ostensibly anti-communist populations of Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Slovenes. This was particularly vexing and embarrassing to the military leadership, which had predicted in 1941 that the mere presence of Italian troops would restore calm to Croatia, and in 1942 that large-scale operations would definitively end revolt in the

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<sup>228</sup> Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 27. "Relazione del tenente Guido Lucchich Rocchi sulla attività svolta dalla Sezione 'I' prima e durante l'operazione su Bos Grahovo," 9 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August-September 1941, allegati.

<sup>229</sup> "Compiti: Direttive," 1 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati. "Direttive per l'attività invernale," 17 November 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November-December 1942, allegati.

<sup>230</sup> "Censura sulle comunicazioni telefoniche, telegrafiche e postali," 11 June 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati. "Relazione periodica," 2 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati. "Azione della polizia," 7 July 1942, NARA T-821/60/1032. "Notiziario informativo n. 72," 13 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 514, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, November-December 1941, allegati.

<sup>231</sup> "Relazione informativa," 26 October 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 381, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, October 1941, allegati. "Notiziario informativo n. 72," 13 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 514, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, November-December 1941, allegati. "Situazione della zona all'inizio del terzo complesso operativo," 30 July 1942, NARA T-821/62/0222-23.

annexed provinces. Neither prediction was borne out by events. Alongside assumptions on the racial character of the rebellious population, Italian generals explained their failure by citing foreign influences and interference, namely from the Croatian Ustaše and from the Allied powers. While these actors did play important parts fuelling resistance, Italian intelligence services tended to exaggerate or overemphasize their roles, thereby clouding Italian understanding of revolt and guerrilla movements in Yugoslavia.

Indiscriminate Ustaša violence undoubtedly was a central factor instigating and perpetuating revolt in the Independent State of Croatia and neighbouring regions. However, Italian generals — like their German allies — used the Ustaše as scapegoats for revolt, masking their own contributions and failures.<sup>232</sup> As we have seen, Italian commands in Croatia held Ante Pavelić's regime primarily responsible for the outbreak of revolt. Combined with pre-existing anti-Croatian sentiment and martial race theory, these views prompted Italian generals to favour Serbs over Croats in the region. They were unconcerned by Serb nationalism because they considered it essentially anti-communist and anti-Croatian in nature.<sup>233</sup> When the Italian reoccupation of Croatian territory failed to stifle the Serb revolt, generals blamed Zagreb's continued meddling and illegal Ustaša activity for undermining Italian occupation policy.<sup>234</sup>

Commanders in the annexed provinces also blamed the Ustaše directly or indirectly for continued resistance in their jurisdictions. In 1941, Italian commands in Dalmatia placed far too much emphasis on Ustaša intrigue and irredentist agitation when local resistance was in fact Communist-led.<sup>235</sup> They viewed Zagreb's inability to keep its own house in order as the main cause of instability in Dalmatia. After a series of operations and reprisals at the end of 1941, Dalmazzo attributed continued guerrilla raids in Dalmatia to "endemic brigandage, poverty, and the arrival of rebels from across the

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<sup>232</sup> Trifković, "Rivalry between Germany and Italy," 882. On the German case, see Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 160.

<sup>233</sup> "Notiziario n. 179," 30 October 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>234</sup> "Notiziario n. 256," 15 January 1942, and "Notiziario n. 272," 31 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>235</sup> "Notiziario n. 69," 11 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati. Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 35-36.

border.”<sup>236</sup> Given his spat with Bastianini, General Armellini was more willing to place blame upon the unpopular imposition of Italian civil government in the region, but even he saw the Ustaša regime as the most significant obstacle to security in Dalmatia.<sup>237</sup> Although Italian commanders in Slovenia could not accuse the Ustaše of meddling directly in their affairs, they blamed the situation in neighbouring Croatia for the resurgence of Partisan activity following Robotti’s grand operations of summer 1942. Having declared victory over the Slovene Liberation Front in September, Roatta and Robotti explained to Mussolini that renewed sabotage and ambushes in October were the work of “Serbo-Croat rebels” that had crossed the border.<sup>238</sup>

Another common explanation for resistance in Yugoslavia was Allied influence via propaganda and special operations. This too was a fixation that Italian generals shared with their German counterparts, partly because they both viewed the conflict in occupied Yugoslavia as part of the broader Mediterranean theatre of war.<sup>239</sup> Military authorities in Dalmatia reported the spread of “English propaganda” by British spies and “Russian propaganda” by Communist agents during the first months of the occupation.<sup>240</sup> Reflecting messages within Fascist propaganda after the Soviet Union’s entry into the war, Italian intelligence officers assumed close collaboration between “Radio London and Moscow.” Italian commands did not believe that home-grown resistance movements had the organizational capacity or resources to operate as effectively as they did without foreign assistance. They concluded that the Communists were able to play the lead role in the spontaneous anti-Ustaša revolt in Croatia only with “the indirect or direct guidance of

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<sup>236</sup> “Notiziario n. 244,” 3 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>237</sup> “Sistemazione futura del C. d’A.,” 29 May 1942, NARA T-821/51/0685–91.

<sup>238</sup> Roatta to Magli, 5 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati. “Combattimento di Tanca Gora del 22 settembre c.a.,” 17 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

<sup>239</sup> Milazzo, *The Chetnik Movement*, 155.

<sup>240</sup> “Notiziario n. 69,” 11 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati. “Situazione in Dalmazia,” 29 July 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. “Relazione informativa,” 10 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati.

London and Moscow.”<sup>241</sup> By 1942, Italian generals were convinced that they faced a vast underground Communist network “under the direction of Russian and British agents, wielding large financial means.” Robotti claimed that Slovene Partisan leaders were “paid with Russian and English money,” while Italian naval intelligence reported that British submarines were landing agents, funds, and supplies along the Adriatic coast.<sup>242</sup> Assuming that Communist propaganda must have been financed and produced by Soviet agents, a lower-level intelligence report in 1943 argued that this rendered “the Balkan front [...] a continuation of the Russian one.”<sup>243</sup>

The actual level of contact and support between Yugoslavian resistance movements and the Allied powers was very limited through mid-1943. Tito’s command maintained a radio link with the Comintern throughout the occupation, but the Soviet Union was involved in its own struggle for survival and could offer no significant material aid until the latter half of 1944.<sup>244</sup> The British were more deeply involved in Yugoslavia. Especially after the fall of France, British strategy placed great emphasis on economic, psychological, and subversive warfare. However, in 1941 the Special Operations Executive [SOE] was still in its infancy and the outbreak of revolt in Yugoslavia took the British leadership by surprise. The SOE’s strategy involved the development of “secret armies” that would rise up in occupied territories only in conjunction with an Allied landing; the British did not favour the constant open guerrilla warfare adopted by the Communist Partisan movement. These strategic considerations, combined with a fear of communism and the Foreign Office’s support for the Yugoslavian government-in-exile, prompted the British to back Mihailović rather than Tito. Even then, contacts with the Četnik leadership were irregular and confusing; the

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<sup>241</sup> “Notiziario n. 120,” 31 August 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, August 1941, allegati. “Premessa” to the Sassari Division Command war diary, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941.

<sup>242</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 98,” 8 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1942, allegati. “Delitti dell’O.F.,” 18 April 1942, NARA T-821/277/0061. “Sommergibili inflesi in Adriatico,” 20 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati.

<sup>243</sup> “Relazione mensile – Organi informativi,” 15 January 1943, NARA T-821/290/0968–75.

<sup>244</sup> Djilas, *Wartime*, 120, 379–387.

British flew only twenty-five sorties over Yugoslavia in 1942. Only in 1943, when the Allies shifted their focus to the Mediterranean with a view to knocking Italy out of the war, did Yugoslavia become anything other than a sideshow in their eyes. In this context, active guerrilla resistance became desirable; the SOE finally established contact with Tito on 29 May, and long-range aircraft began dropping supplies to the Partisans in July. By then, the Italian presence in the Balkans was nearing its end. Allied interest in and support of Balkan resistance movements peaked well after Italy's surrender.<sup>245</sup>

During the period of Italian occupation, the most significant Allied contributions to the development of resistance in Yugoslavia came from their victories on other fronts. Italian commands credited the state of war with the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, and especially news of Allied victories in Russia and North Africa at the end of 1942, for fuelling resistance among populations that could now envision an Axis defeat.<sup>246</sup> But the Italian claims that London and Moscow directed and supplied the main resistance movements in the Balkans were overblown. This misinterpretation reflected the poor level of Italian intelligence on the organization of the Communist Partisan movement in particular. Despite their growing equation of resistance with communism, it was not until later in 1942 that Italian commands began to understand how the Partisan movement was structured. They did not seem to appreciate Tito's central role in organizing and leading resistance. Although Tito had made the town of Foča — inside the Italian VI Corps's zone of occupation — his base in January 1942, Italian intelligence reports in April believed that the 2,400 rebels signalled in the area were "not yet organized."<sup>247</sup> Later reports referred to "the well-known leader Tito," but only in the same breath as the "well-known Partisan General Novaković," and primarily in the context of Tito's alleged negotiations with British agents.<sup>248</sup> By holding to their view that

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<sup>245</sup> On the organization and strategy of the SOE in general, see Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance*. On British policy towards and contact with Mihailović, see Trew, *Britain, Mihailović and the Chetniks*.

<sup>246</sup> "Sistemazione futura del C. d'A.," 29 May 1942, NARA T-821/51/0685-91. "Situazione in Slovenia," 8 December 1942, NARA T-821/60/0906-910. "Situazione in Slovenia," 13 December 1942, and "Notiziario politico militare n. 68," 15 December 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November-December 1942, allegati.

<sup>247</sup> "Notiziario n. 330," 1 April 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati.

<sup>248</sup> "Notiziario n. 386," 27 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati.

resistance in Yugoslavia was the result of endemic brigandage and anti-Ustaša reaction co-opted by Communist leaders directed and funded by London and Moscow, Italian commanders tended to underestimate the organization, resiliency, and flexibility of their enemies while undervaluing the extent to which the insurgency represented a broad-based liberation movement directed against foreign occupation.

## Counterpropaganda

Fuelled by a set of racist and political assumptions about the populations of the Balkans, and by an institutionalized contempt for irregular warfare, Italian commands responded to guerrilla resistance with forms of military repression based on terrorizing the civilian masses. However, the army's approach to counterinsurgency was not completely one-dimensional. In one of few studies to examine Italian propaganda efforts, Sanela Schmid demonstrates that authorities in occupied Croatia made genuine efforts to win over the local populations through persuasive propaganda backed by social welfare policies. This approach contrasted sharply with German policy in Croatia but, she argues, it conformed to the more inclusive form of empire-building touted by the Fascist regime.<sup>249</sup> A similar contrast existed between Italian generals in Yugoslavia and their colleagues in Ethiopia who, especially before 1939, had largely rejected a population-centric approach to counterinsurgency. This difference certainly reflected Italian concepts of a racial hierarchy that placed South Slavs, and particularly Slovenes, on a higher intellectual plane than East Africans. Moreover, the need to combat the spread of a modern ideology like communism and the political opportunity presented by the Ustaša-Četnik conflict in Croatia prompted Italian commands to adopt multiple avenues in their appeals for obedience and loyalty. Still, the level of sophistication of Italian counterpropaganda was limited by the same racial hierarchy, which did not credit Balkan peoples with fully developed faculties of reason, by the structural deficiencies of the propaganda apparatus

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<sup>249</sup> Sanela Hodzic, "Propaganda als Waffe bei der Aufständischenbekämpfung," chap. 11 in "Deutsche und italienische Besatzung."

in Yugoslavia, and by an inferiority complex stemming from Italy's deteriorating situation on other fronts.

The impetus for a more population-centric approach in the region came not from the army but from Fascist civil authorities. At the beginning of the occupation, the Fascist regime hoped to win over Slavic populations as willing subjects within Italy's Imperial Community. Under the guidance of Minculpop, Italian newspapers presented Fascist policy in Slovenia in liberal terms, emphasizing the political and cultural autonomy granted to the new Province of Ljubljana.<sup>250</sup> Similarly, Minculpop officials hoped that they could make headway among Dalmatian Croats, by contrasting Italian policies to those of the "brutal Germans" and "bloodthirsty Ustaše." However, they admitted that the annexation of Dalmatian territory alongside the formation of an independent Croatian state rendered this work difficult. They also concluded that the Slavic "mentality" was not susceptible to sophisticated propaganda based on oratory, but placed greater "significance on order and the propriety of deeds and actions."<sup>251</sup> As Schmid argues, Italian authorities deliberately employed "propaganda of the deed" to illustrate the benefits of belonging to Fascism's new Adriatic empire, governed according to Roman principles of "justice" and "civilization."<sup>252</sup>

The army largely shared this approach in 1941. At the beginning of its occupation of Lika, the Sassari Division employed locals that had attended Italian universities to spread propaganda about the great public works of the "Fascist Government" in Italy. This raised hopes that Italian authorities would drain the malarial marshes and regulate the flow of rivers near Knin.<sup>253</sup> Officers also believed that the "pride, correctness and discipline" of their troops would convince the population that Italians came "as defenders

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<sup>250</sup> "Rapporto del Ministro ai gironalisti," 2 May 1941, in Tranfaglia, *Ministri e giornalisti*, 129. "Una domenica storica a Lubiana," *Corriere della Sera*, 5 May 1941, 6; and, "Sfilano a Lubiana i soldati della Seconda Armata," *Corriere della Sera*, 9–10 May 1941, 1.

<sup>251</sup> "Relazione riassuntiva," 20 May 1941, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. "Dalmazia."

<sup>252</sup> Hodzic, "Deutsche und italienische Besatzung," 408–409.

<sup>253</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 11 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941.

of justice and of a new social order that will be established in Europe.”<sup>254</sup> Intelligence officers attached to Ambrosio’s command reported that

the serious, correct, balanced behaviour of our troops in the annexed territories and in those of occupation have been and remain the most effective propagandist of *italianità*.

The contrast with the Serbian, German, and Croatian military occupations goes to our clear advantage.<sup>255</sup>

These early appeals to a Fascist new order and Italian civilizing mission were not empty rhetoric. Italian commands at various levels believed that moderate behaviour and progressive policies would enable them to maintain security on the cheap and pave the way for a permanent Italian presence in the region.

During the reoccupation of Croatian territory in September and October 1941, Italian propaganda officers again emphasized “the correctness of our units and material aid to populations” that suffered from “distressing poverty” as “the best counterpropaganda action” available.<sup>256</sup> Alongside this, Italian propaganda sections distributed leaflets and showed documentary films that demonstrated “the wonderful achievements of Fascist Italy” and “the progress made by our civilization.”<sup>257</sup> By early 1942, Italian intelligence officers were convinced that they had benefited from Italy’s reputation of relative “civility and liberality;” they hoped to exploit this perception further.<sup>258</sup> The “pacification of minds” comprised an important component in the army’s schemes to expand Italian influence into Bosnia. In a region with such a diverse population, Roatta advocated a policy of religious freedom that would distinguish the

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<sup>254</sup> “Relazione sulla situazione di Drvar,” 12 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May 1941, allegati. This rhetoric is repeated in the division’s war diary entry for 12 May.

<sup>255</sup> “Slovenia, Dalmazia e Croazia. Sintesi della situazione,” 8 June 1941, DSCS, 4/II:80–81.

<sup>256</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 agosto al 15 settembre 1941,” 24 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>257</sup> “Relazione sull’attività svolta in Croazia della 2<sup>a</sup> Divisione Celere ‘E.F.T.F.’ nel ciclo operativo 4 ottobre–14 novembre 1941,” 24 January 1942, NARA T-821/60/0824. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 agosto al 15 settembre 1941,” 24 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 settembre al 15 ottobre 1941,” 31 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 novembre al 15 dicembre 1941,” 5 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>258</sup> “Notiziario n. 354,” 25 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, April 1942, allegati.



Italian regime from the anti-Jewish and anti-Orthodox attitudes of their German and Croatian counterparts, even — and perhaps especially — if it undermined the sovereignty of Pavelić's administration.<sup>259</sup>

The most important social welfare programme developed by Italian authorities in Yugoslavia involved the distribution of food to the occupied populations. Here, they responded to a food crisis that broke out almost immediately in the annexed territories and Independent State of Croatia. Most of the territory occupied by Second Army comprised food-deficit areas cut off from their traditional sources of agricultural produce when Yugoslavia was partitioned. In Croatia especially, circumstances were exacerbated by the loss of persecuted rural Serbs as agricultural labour, peasant hoarding in response to Zagreb's food price policies, meagre and irregular official rations, and the inability to gather harvests in areas held by Partisans or Četniks.<sup>260</sup> Already in mid-May 1941, the Sassari Division reported serious food shortages in Drvar. The division's entire zone of occupation required "steps to confront the economic situation, which becomes worse every day."<sup>261</sup>

Even before the annexation of Dalmatia, Fascist Party officials stressed the necessity of establishing party-run welfare services in the new provinces and of supplying food by sea to the hungry population.<sup>262</sup> Bastianini's government quickly reduced taxes and duties on foodstuffs and began distributing food to Dalmatians, although he later transformed food supply into a weapon by restricting access to rations in specific regions as punishment for Partisan activity.<sup>263</sup> Military authorities praised both sides of Bastianini's policy. The Sassari Division credited civil commissioners for improving

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<sup>259</sup> "Questioni varie," 14 March 1942, NARA T-821/402/0371. Leonardi memorandum, 4 November 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 569, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, October–November 1941, allegati.

<sup>260</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 707–714. Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 48.

<sup>261</sup> "Relazione sulla situazione di Drvar," 12 May 1941, and "Notiziario giornaliero," 14 and 15 May 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 14 and 15 May 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 240, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May 1941.

<sup>262</sup> Suppieri to Mussolini, 19 April 1941, DDI 9, VI, 942.

<sup>263</sup> Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 1:647–53. Hodzic, "Deutsche und italienische Besatzung," 385–89. Bastianini decree, 7 June 1942, NARA T-821/405/1029–30.

relations with the local populations by distributing pasta and rice.<sup>264</sup> By 1942, its units were providing escorts for the transport and distribution of food by Fascist authorities. Army officers took advantage of such occasions to arrest family members of presumed communists who showed up to collect their rations.<sup>265</sup> Ultimately, Dalmatia's economic woes were too deep for Bastianini's policy to meet with total success. The food crisis continued to provide ammunition for anti-Italian sentiment. While the VI Corps reported public criticism of Fascist authorities for being more interested in parades than feeding the population, its intelligence staff typically blamed the high price and scarcity of food on Pavelić's trade policies.<sup>266</sup>

When Italian troops reoccupied Zones II and III in Croatia, they distributed grain to villagers and the army established commissions to oversee the steady supply of food.<sup>267</sup> Dalmazzo believed that the policy ingratiated his troops to the population by highlighting the "generosity of the Italian soldier, who shares his rations with the poor and with children and who demonstrates on every occasion the age-old civilization of our people."<sup>268</sup> However, here too, food shortages remained a problem and the Italian army was partly responsible. Second Army's presence added further strain on Croatia's already fragile supply system. Agreements with Zagreb in late 1941 held the Croatian government responsible for feeding not only the civilian population but the occupying forces as well.<sup>269</sup> Despite their awareness that mass hunger in the occupied zones could transform itself into rebellion, Italian officers continued to requisition local resources for

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<sup>264</sup> "Notiziario giornaliero," 21 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 523, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, June-July 1941, allegati.

<sup>265</sup> "Relazione sull'azione svolta dal II° Battaglione il giorno 17 giugno 1942," 18 June 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment ("Sassari"), June-July 1942, allegati.

<sup>266</sup> "Notiziario n. 69," 11 July 1941; "Notiziario n. 72," 14 July 1941; and, "Notiziario n. 79," 21 July 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, July 1941, allegati.

<sup>267</sup> "Notiziario giornaliero," 20 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 568, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, August-September 1941, allegati. "Notiziario n. 146," 27 September 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>268</sup> "Notiziario n. 156," 7 October 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>269</sup> Leonardi memorandum, 4 November 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 569, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, October-November 1941, allegati.

their own needs. At the beginning of the occupation, units of the Sassari Division had ferreted out livestock that had formerly belonged to the Yugoslavian armed forces and were therefore considered war booty.<sup>270</sup> Some Croats — already convinced that Italy was a second-rate military power that had done nothing to deserve its expanded role in the Balkans — accused the Italians of having “taken away everything.”<sup>271</sup> Cut off from regular supply in the winter of 1941–42, the garrison at Drvar covered its own needs through local requisitioning while reporting that civilians were dying of hunger. This behaviour, although considered an unavoidable necessity, undermined the message that Dalmazzo hoped to send. The return of good weather in April permitted Italian aircraft to drop supplies that were doled out both to troops and civilians in the town, but the damage had already been done. Much of the population had deserted to the Partisans in search of food.<sup>272</sup>

The army lacked the means and sometimes the willpower to provide a solution to the food problem in Croatia. By the end of September 1941, the city of Knin suffered serious grain shortages and a barter economy had taken over.<sup>273</sup> Although Italian military authorities held civil powers in Zone II, they were not interested in micromanaging economic affairs. In Knin, Monticelli left price controls and other measures up to Croatian civil authorities while complaining of their incompetence and lack of concern for economic questions. Prices never did normalize and by December Knin was completely devoid of bread and basic foodstuffs.<sup>274</sup> Similarly, Italian authorities in

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<sup>270</sup> “Censimento quadrupedi dell’ex esercito jugoslavo,” 15 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 240, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), April–May 1941, allegati.

<sup>271</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 16 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 523, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, June–July 1941, allegati.

<sup>272</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 17 February and 14 and 22 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942. “Notiziario giornaliero,” 17 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 4 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, April 1942. On the difficult supply situation faced by the Drvar garrison, see “Situazione dei reparti del battaglione,” 11 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), February–March 1942, allegati.

<sup>273</sup> “Notiziario n. 149,” 30 September 1941, NARA T-821/402/0132–35.

<sup>274</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero,” 11 October 1941, and “Notiziario giornaliero,” 8 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati. “Notiziario giornaliero,” 1

Dubrovnik allowed local Croatian officials to shoulder the burden of food supply, despite allegations of corruption. Only when requested by provincial officials did Pivano agree to help with “facilitating and securing the transport of foodstuffs for the population,” to little effect.<sup>275</sup> Following public demonstrations against municipal Croatian authorities in March 1942, intelligence officers of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division reported that the local population was now amenable to the idea of Italian rule and possibly even annexation. In early April, the Italian government announced its decision to send 400 tonnes of flour to Dubrovnik. The division’s propaganda section made much of the “*Duce’s* gift” of flour to the population.<sup>276</sup> As well as demonstrating the tardiness of some lower-level commands to address the food crisis in their zones of control, this case suggests a correlation between the humanitarian food policy of the Italian army and the Fascist regime’s politics of imperial expansion. As late as April 1943, the XVIII Corps — noting that “poor people driven by hunger align themselves politically with the powers that give the best guarantee of giving them something to eat” — claimed that their dependence on Italian military authorities for food had strengthened “annexationist” sentiment among the Croat island populations in the Adriatic.<sup>277</sup>

The food crisis never dissipated and Second Army’s response remained inconsistent. Indeed, like Dalmatian authorities, Italian military commanders weaponized food in 1942. Already by February, the V Corps had implemented a policy of withholding food from populations considered partisan helpers due to the absence of

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December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

<sup>275</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 127,” 10 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1942, allegati. “Notiziario informativo n. 146,” 1 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>276</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 147,” 2 March 1942; “Notiziario informativo n. 180,” 4 April 1942; and, “Relazione mensile sullo spirito della truppa e della popolazione dei territori occupati,” 19 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>277</sup> “Relazione periodica mensile,” 27 April 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1188, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1943, allegati.

able-bodied men from their villages.<sup>278</sup> During the grand operations later that year, Roatta reasoned that, since Partisans gained their provisions from the local populations,

if the resources of the latter are restricted to the bare necessities of those populations, or even withdrawn (through the evacuation of inhabitants, livestock and foodstuffs) there is no doubt that the rebels will sooner or later find themselves short of supplies. And if they take the resources that we left for the populations, and just enough for their own needs, the sympathy and connivance of the populace towards rebellion will diminish considerably.<sup>279</sup>

These measures contradicted Second Army's welfare policies and propaganda. Italian officers in Slovenia admitted that the policy mainly impacted civilian populations.<sup>280</sup>

While there are examples of the free distribution of army rations to loyal civilians, in other cases the army proved reluctant to give away its resources without prospect for tangible returns.<sup>281</sup> Military authorities in Slovenia agreed that welfare was the most effective counterpropaganda tool available to the occupying powers. To contribute to the normalization of daily life in the province, Robotti ordered his units to facilitate the supply of food by Fascist civil authorities. However, he insisted that any food delivered from army stores be paid for by the civilian population.<sup>282</sup> In September 1942, Robotti asked for government funds in order to subsidize the poorest families and households in Slovenia, but the requested sum of 100,000 Lire was relatively insignificant. According to Second Army's pay scales, the corresponding value would have been enough to maintain no more than 370 irregular militiamen for thirty days. At the time, Robotti was employing nearly 3,000 irregular troops.<sup>283</sup> While the maintenance of auxiliaries and their

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<sup>278</sup> "Passaggio di giovani ai ribelli," 25 February 1942, NARA T-821/402/0461.

<sup>279</sup> "Operazioni in Slovenia," 8 June 1942, NARA T-821/62/0355.

<sup>280</sup> "Relazione mensile," 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July-August 1942, allegati. "Attività briganti comunisti," 21 November 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1189, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, November-December 1942, allegati.

<sup>281</sup> See the distribution of army ration packs to evacuees from Petrovac. Sassari Division Command war diary, 25 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May-June 1942.

<sup>282</sup> "Ricostruzione servizi civili nelle sedi dei presidi ricostituiti," 9 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July-August 1942, allegati.

<sup>283</sup> "Relazione mensile," 20 September 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 107. For the MVAC pay scale, see Sassari Division Command war diary, 26 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, July-August 1942.

families contributed to the welfare of select portions of the population, these figures suggest that the army's generosity was not open-handed. Generals expected to see immediate and tangible political or military results from their policies.

Robotti maintained his niggardly attitude as commander of Supersloda in 1943. In the weeks before Mussolini's arrest, Robotti rejected Croatian requests for foodstuffs on credit, citing Zagreb's inability or unwillingness to pay for Italian supplies in the past. He preferred to offer smaller donations of food in Croatian towns where Italian troops were present and able to exploit the propaganda value of their generosity.<sup>284</sup> By this point in the war, Italian food policy had long since failed to achieve its desired results. Already at the beginning of 1942, Dalmazzo had concluded that the inability to solve Croatia's economic problems had driven Croats and Serbs into the arms of the Partisans, whose propaganda ably exploited the food crisis.<sup>285</sup> The major problem facing Second Army's policy of engagement through food and welfare programmes during 1942 and 1943 was the lack of a consistent Italian presence in the towns and countryside. The only way to counter Communist propaganda among all social strata was to firmly occupy areas on a permanent basis.<sup>286</sup> The withdrawal and consolidation of Italian garrisons through 1942 hampered the effectiveness of Italian social policies on a broad scale. The provision of food reflected a genuine commitment by Italian civil and military authorities to counter the economic causes of insurgency and back up their claims that Fascism's Imperial Community promised an equitable and well-organized new order. However, political and military calculations imposed limitations on the policy, which never received the resources or conditions to ensure its success.

By 1942, Italian generals recognized that they were losing the propaganda war against the Communist Partisans, who employed social incentives of their own alongside

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<sup>284</sup> See the documents dated 11 June to 23 July 1943, NARA T-821/294/0200-223.

<sup>285</sup> "Notiziario n. 233," 23 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

"Notiziario n. 302," 4 March 1942, NARA T-821/402/0426-32.

<sup>286</sup> "Relazione mensile sul servizio 'P' per il periodo dal 15 aprile al 15 maggio 1942," 28 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati.

emotional appeals to the population.<sup>287</sup> In areas where Partisan occupation was secure, Communist authorities relied on orderly requisitioning rather than plunder. Tito's policy of redistributing land confiscated from collaborators also met with local support. After 1941, Partisan propaganda emphasized national liberation and regional patriotism over class struggle, thereby broadening its appeal.<sup>288</sup> Italian intelligence officers noted that Communist propaganda sections were well-organized, issuing pamphlets and newspapers in areas under their control.<sup>289</sup> The success of the Partisans in this field suggested that, despite the dismissive attitude of the Italian leadership, words did in fact have some importance for populations in the Balkans. Through 1941, Italian authorities had complacently relied on legal, economic, and security measures to gain loyalty from the public, eschewing more sophisticated appeals for mass support and participation. Most of the army's propaganda activity had been conducted at the local level on the initiative of corps and division commands with small propaganda sections commanded by junior officers primarily concerned with troop morale. After spring 1942, Second Army sought to develop a more systematic and intensive approach to propaganda for civilian populations, now centralized and coordinated under the Counterpropaganda Section of its own Propaganda Office.<sup>290</sup>

The Counterpropaganda Section reports are replete with accounts of problems, obstacles, and delays, revealing that the army's propaganda activity remained limited and ineffectual for the remainder of the occupation. One of the greatest challenges facing propaganda sections at every level was a lack of officers fluent in South Slavic languages.<sup>291</sup> Although the Venezia-Giulia region — governed by Italy since 1919 —

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<sup>287</sup> "Relazione mensile 15 febbraio-15 marzo 1942," 29 March 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 646, DS XVIII Corps, March-April 1942, allegati.

<sup>288</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 96, 152. Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 268-69, 351-52.

<sup>289</sup> "Notiziario n. 205," 25 November 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

<sup>290</sup> Monthly reports for the Counterpropaganda Section, later renamed the Propaganda Section for the Civilian Populations, covering May through December 1942 are available in NARA T-821/414/0625-68.

<sup>291</sup> "Richiesta di personale che conosca la lingua slovena," 8 May 1942, NARA T-821/413/0054. "Traduttore ed interprete di sloveno," 5 June 1942, NARA T-821/413/0286. "Prova di conoscenza della lingua croata da parte del Sottotenente Riboli Renato," 29 July 1942, NARA T-821/413/0284.

included significant numbers of Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian speakers, the Italian army remained suspicious of their loyalties through the Second World War, especially after guerrilla activity spread from Slovenia to Venezia-Giulia in 1942.<sup>292</sup> The imperfect use of local languages could undermine the credibility of the army's message, thereby posing significant problems for Italian counterpropaganda in Yugoslavia.

Second Army's propaganda officers were aware that poorly conceived propaganda could be counterproductive. However, their concerns in this regard sometimes led to inertia. The Propaganda Office commissioned several studies on areas it deemed too complex for immediate action — such as propaganda in schools or material aimed at Muslim populations — that do not appear to have resulted in any tangible action. Other ambitious and expensive projects, like the development of an anti-partisan version of the “Game of the Goose” board game, were delayed indefinitely awaiting approval from central authorities in Rome.<sup>293</sup> Conflict and competition with civil authorities further hindered the work of army propagandists. In Croatia, the Propaganda Office struggled to gain permission from Pavelić's government to distribute its posters outside Italian-occupied towns. In Slovenia and Dalmatia, it quibbled with Fascist officials over the use of languages other than Italian in its propaganda.<sup>294</sup>

A lack of resources prevented Second Army from making much use of film or radio in its propaganda for local populations. In 1942, military authorities began providing film screenings in Croatian urban centres, but these suffered from a shortage of suitable content. The VI Corps showed mostly comedies interspersed with LUCE documentaries. Propaganda officers claimed that the comedies were popular, even though they were not dubbed in Serbo-Croatian. On the other hand, documentaries with “irredentist or immoral” themes proved counterproductive. The Cacciatori delle Alpi Division's “P” Section hoped that the local populations would be more impressed by

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<sup>292</sup> “Militari allogeni,” 30 March 1942, NARA T-821/413/0653. Elio Apih, *Italia fascismo e antifascismo nella Venezia Giulia, 1918–1943* (Bari: Laterza, 1966), 387–89, 395–434.

<sup>293</sup> “Relazione per il mese di maggio sullo sviluppo della contropropaganda,” n.d. (but from June 1942), NARA T-821/414/0666–68. “Relazione mensile sull'attività svolta presso le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati nel mese di novembre 1942,” 15 December 1942, NARA T-821/414/0633–36.

<sup>294</sup> “Relazione per il mese di ottobre sullo sviluppo della propaganda presso le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati dalle FF.AA. Italiane,” 5 November 1942, NARA T-821/414/0641–42.



straightforward war newsreels emphasizing Italian military strength.<sup>295</sup> These concerns paralleled those of colonial officials in East Africa, where assumptions that Africans were unable “to distinguish illusion from reality” led Fascist authorities to avoid showing films with morally ambiguous Italian characters.<sup>296</sup> Most of the films available to Italian authorities were originally intended for Italian audiences and therefore were not suitable for the occupied populations. In Slovenia, the XI Corps complained that the LUCE documentaries shown by civil authorities did more harm than good. Most offered a “forced lesson in Italian patriotism” that repelled Slovene theatregoers.<sup>297</sup> Army garrisons in Slovenia preferred to show films that lacked political content and were for entertainment value only.<sup>298</sup>

Italian radio propaganda was even less successful. Civilian populations in the annexed territories were suspicious of broadcasts set up by Fascist civil authorities.<sup>299</sup> The army issued its own broadcasts in Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian, but Supersloda’s most powerful radio transmitter operated at a frequency that most radios in Yugoslavia could not receive, and Italian garrisons lacked loudspeakers to facilitate community listening.<sup>300</sup> Unable to compete with Partisan and Allied radio propaganda, Second Army’s Counterpropaganda Section studied the issue and developed plans to expand its activity in that field after spring 1942. However, these plans were based on the acquisition of new technology, including a high-powered receiver to intercept enemy

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<sup>295</sup> “Relazione mensile sullo spirito della truppa e della popolazione civile dei territori occupati,” 20 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, March–April 1942, allegati. “Relazione per il mese di luglio sullo sviluppo della propaganda presso le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati dalle FF.AA. Italiane,” 10 August 1942, NARA T-821/414/0658–60.

<sup>296</sup> Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism’s Empire Cinema*, 60–62.

<sup>297</sup> Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” 237.

<sup>298</sup> “Relazione mensile sullo spirito della truppa e della popolazione dei territori occupati,” 21 February 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1943, allegati.

<sup>299</sup> “Notiziario n. 224,” 14 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>300</sup> “Relazione mensile sul servizio ‘P’ per il periodo dal 15 ottobre al 15 novembre 1941,” 8 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. “Relazione per il mese di agosto sullo sviluppo della propaganda presso le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati dalle FF.AA. Italiane,” September 1942, NARA T-821/414/0654–56.

propaganda and a new transmitter to broadcast satirical commentary on the same frequency that the Allies used. At the end of the year, the army's radio propaganda remained at a "standstill" as the new equipment had not materialized.<sup>301</sup>

As a result of these obstacles, Second Army's propaganda apparatus was limited largely to print. But, even here, its propaganda officers could claim few outright successes. According to their reports, the army's most creative and popular publication was a children's colour magazine, which included crude moral tales extolling the values and benefits of collaboration, especially as informants. From an administrative point of view, the children's magazine was successful because it enjoyed the enthusiastic support of local Fascist authorities in Split and Fiume.<sup>302</sup> In the annexed provinces, censorship and control of the newspaper press largely was in the hands of the civil authorities, which limited the army's involvement in the production of print media before 1942. However, the civil authorities faced problems of their own in this field. Bastianini suffered public criticism for the delay in establishing a separate newspaper in Split.<sup>303</sup> His attempt to found a magazine in Dalmatia to counter Croatian irredentism was a dismal failure; its launch date repeatedly was pushed back due to lack of material.<sup>304</sup> The shortage of locally produced propaganda could be alleviated in part by the distribution of the major daily newspapers from metropolitan Italy. But, aside from the language constraints, these papers often confused readers in the annexed provinces because they did not address the actual situation in the Balkans.<sup>305</sup> With a rich newspaper tradition and Rome's initially lenient attitude towards the Slovenian language, Ljubljana maintained an active but

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<sup>301</sup> See the monthly reports of Supersloda's Counterpropaganda Section for May through December 1942, NARA T-821/414/0625-68. As of June 1943, the radio equipment had still not arrived. "Propaganda svolta fra le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati dal Comando 2<sup>a</sup> Armata," 1 June 1943, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. "Varie Croazia."

<sup>302</sup> Hodzic, "Deutsche und italienische Besatzung," 373-74. "Relazione per il mese di luglio sullo sviluppo della propaganda presso le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati dalle FF.AA. Italiane," 10 August 1942, NARA T-821/414/0658-60.

<sup>303</sup> "Notiziario n. 203," 23 November 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

<sup>304</sup> See ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. "Dalmazia."

<sup>305</sup> "Relazione per il mese di agosto sullo sviluppo della propaganda presso le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati dalle FF.AA. Italiane," September 1942, NARA T-821/414/0654-56.

problematically autonomous local press. While Catholic papers in the province reacted against the “sovietisation” of territories occupied by the Liberation Front, they nonetheless obstinately refused to collaborate with Italian authorities.<sup>306</sup> When the XI Corps began publishing its own articles in local papers in summer 1942, some Slovene journalists responded with a boycott.<sup>307</sup>

Print media in the Independent State of Croatia posed a different set of challenges. Here, Minculpop and the Italian Foreign Ministry sought to spread Italian language, culture, and socio-political ideals by sponsoring language classes and publishing a weekly newspaper, but it was unable to compete with Croatian and German dailies.<sup>308</sup> In mid-1942, an Italo-Croatian press agency was established to spread propaganda on the greatness of “Imperial Italy” and on Croatia’s role in the “new order,” emphasizing episodes of friendship and solidarity between the two countries.<sup>309</sup> Second Army supported these initiatives, collaborating with the press agency and eventually publishing its own magazine, *Moc* [Power], specifically to counter German influence in the country. However, these efforts all came very late — in the latter part of 1942 or 1943 — by which point any chance of cultural penetration in Croatia was lost.<sup>310</sup>

Taking pride of place in the reports of the Counterpropaganda Section was Second Army’s counterpropaganda “bulletin.” Subsidized by the Ministry of Popular Culture, the bulletin — first printed in broadsheet format in April 1942 — reflected Supersloda’s pursuit of a more systematic and controlled distribution of written

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<sup>306</sup> “Notiziario informazioni n. 64,” 22 June 1942, and “Relazione mensile,” 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>307</sup> “Relazione per il mese di settembre sullo sviluppo della propaganda presso le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati dalle FF.AA. Italiane,” 7 October 1942, NARA T-821/414/0649–50.

<sup>308</sup> “Costituzione di società italo-croata,” 4 September 1942, NARA T-821/402/0689. On Minculpop’s weekly newspaper, *Preporod* [Rebirth], see ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. “Croazia,” sf. “Settimanale italo-croato ‘Rinascita’ già ‘Preporod’.”

<sup>309</sup> AIC memorandum no. 1, 12 June 1942, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. “Croazia,” sf. “Agenzia Italo Croata.” Journalists of the agency wrote articles in both languages for publication in Italy and Croatia.

<sup>310</sup> “Relazione per il mese di ottobre sullo sviluppo della propaganda presso le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati dalle FF.AA. Italiane,” 5 November 1942, NARA T-821/414/0641–42. “Propaganda svolta fra le popolazioni civili dei territori occupati dal Comando 2<sup>a</sup> Armata,” 1 June 1943, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 135, fasc. “Varie Croazia.”

propaganda to the occupied populations.<sup>311</sup> The newspaper illustrates the army's overall approach to counterpropaganda — as well as the challenges and shortcomings it faced — after spring 1942. Initially, it was published as a weekly, with an ambitious print run of 100,000 copies. However, difficulties with logistics and transport meant that many of these were never delivered and had to be pulped. This compelled the Propaganda Office in July to reduce the paper to a semi-monthly bulletin and to cut its print run in half. Throughout its run, which continued for over a year, the bulletin was published in three editions intended for Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. The Slovenian edition was titled *Work for Slovenes* [*Delo za Slovence*]. The Croatian edition was initially called *Sincere Croatian Man* [*Ispravan Hrvatski Čovjek*], but after just over a month it was changed simply to *Sincere Man* because the army deemed the original title too polarizing in ethnically mixed regions. After spring 1943, it was simply referred to as *The Newspaper* [*Novine*]. Similarly, the army changed the title of its Serbian edition from the provocative *Free Serbia* to *Paper of Truth*, and eventually to *News*. The original title reflected Second Army's objective in spring 1942 of winning over Serb populations in Bosnia. So too did the Propaganda Office's decision to print the title — and, once suitable typographic material had been acquired, the entire Serb edition — in Cyrillic characters. This predictably raised the ire of the Croatian government, which had prohibited the use of Cyrillic within its borders. The army went ahead with the project anyway, concluding that the majority of Serbs preferred reading Cyrillic text and that its use served as a means of demonstrating the Italian army's independence from Zagreb.<sup>312</sup>

Italian propaganda officers also admitted that the use of Cyrillic in the Serb edition was necessary to mask the fact that its content was no different from that of the Croatian edition.<sup>313</sup> Indeed, in terms of content, Second Army's bulletin was not particularly inspired or sophisticated. The first editions were made up entirely of news on

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<sup>311</sup> Castellano to Direzione Generale Stampa (Minculpop), 4 July 1942, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 141, fasc. "Bollettino settimanale dei contropropaganda della Seconda Armata."

<sup>312</sup> See the monthly reports of Second Army's Counterpropaganda Section in NARA T-821/414/0627-68. See also Hodzic, "Deutsche und italienische Besatzung," 368-70.

<sup>313</sup> "Relazione per il mese di maggio sullo sviluppo della contropropaganda," n.d. [June 1942], NARA T-821/414/0666-68.

international affairs and on the war in general, attempting to portray Axis victory as inevitable. For example, the 9 April issue highlighted the submarine blockade against Allied nations, Japanese victories on land and sea, American unpreparedness for war, anti-British feeling in Egypt and India, costly and futile mass attacks by the Red Army, ineffective and desperate British commando raids in France, the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Holy See, German medical aid to Polish and Soviet civilians, and a diplomatic rupture between Australia and Canada.<sup>314</sup> Italian civil authorities complained that Second Army's bulletins were replete with translation errors and worthless content. From Rome, the Ministry of Popular Culture suggested that the army include more local material in the paper, highlighting Italian civil policies and demonstrating the material advantages brought by Italian rule.<sup>315</sup> Second Army defended its emphasis on war news, arguing that it was a fundamental aspect of counterpropaganda, but its Propaganda Office agreed to collaborate with civil authorities to develop more targeted propaganda for Slovenes, who the Italians considered more intellectually advanced than the Croats or Serbs.<sup>316</sup> After mid-June, the Slovenian edition of the bulletin included articles on the provision by Italian authorities of medical aid and food to the poor, on the values of Roman-style Fascist justice, and on the godless barbarism of the Partisans.<sup>317</sup> However, collaboration with the overworked civil press office in Ljubljana did not go smoothly and its contributions to the bulletin often were limited. In October, the Propaganda Office decided to simplify the layout of all three editions, once again limiting their content to very brief news bulletins and denunciations of Partisan brutality. Thereafter, the main objective of the paper was to counter news of

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<sup>314</sup> Italian translations of the bulletins are available in ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 141, fasc. "Bollettino settimanale dei contropropaganda della Seconda Armata."

<sup>315</sup> "Appunto per il Capo di Gabinetto," 3 May 1942; "Giornale 'Delo za Slovence'," 6 May 1942; and, Luciano to Reisoli, 19 May 1942, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 141, fasc. "Bollettino settimanale dei contropropaganda della Seconda Armata."

<sup>316</sup> "Diffusione del 'Bollettino settimanale di contropropaganda' in provincia di Lubiana," 11 June 1942, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 141, fasc. "Bollettino settimanale dei contropropaganda della Seconda Armata." "Relazione per il mese di maggio sullo sviluppo della contropropaganda," n.d. [June 1942], NARA T-821/414/0666-68.

<sup>317</sup> "Bollettino settimanale di contropropaganda," 21 June, 8 July, 4 August, and 4 September 1942, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 141, fasc. "Bollettino settimanale dei contropropaganda della Seconda Armata."

Axis defeats in North Africa and the Soviet Union with stories of Allied barbarity and with claims that the Allies were overstretched and that the Axis therefore would soon regain the initiative.<sup>318</sup> More ideological themes always struggled against widespread “antipathy to Fascism,” which propaganda officers concluded was due to “ignorance of our doctrine.”<sup>319</sup>

The army’s reliance on war news in its bulletins is indicative of how military authorities in Yugoslavia, like their predecessors in Ethiopia, based their efforts at persuasion primarily on the use of intimidation and force. Once again, it was the Fascist authorities in Rome that advocated for more sophisticated propaganda. Italian intelligence reports reveal that news bulletins did not always achieve their desired effect. The XI Corps noted that the Slovene population, “still loyal to the democratic myth and its conviction, however stale, of the invincibility of England and therefore of all its allies,” was not impressed by news of Axis victories in Russia and North Africa.<sup>320</sup> Already by the end of summer 1942, Slovenes sensed that the war had shifted definitively in favour of the Allies. Soviet resistance in Stalingrad meant that the war would continue into 1943, by which time it was expected that American aid would reach Europe in full force.<sup>321</sup> Allied victories at Stalingrad and El Alamein further emboldened the Partisans and prompted the spread of rumours among the civilian populations concerning an

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<sup>318</sup> See the Counterpropaganda Section’s monthly reports from 10 August, 7 October, and 15 December 1942, NARA T-821/414/0633–36, 649–50, and 658–60. See also “Bollettino settimanale di contropropaganda,” 28 November 1942, 11 March 1943, and 23 April 1943, ACS, MCP-Gab, b. 141, fasc. “Bollettino settimanale dei contropropaganda della Seconda Armata.” Hodzic, “Deutsche und italienische Besatzung,” 370–72.

<sup>319</sup> “Relazione mensile sullo spirito delle truppe e della popolazione dei territori occupati,” 22 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>320</sup> “Relazione mensile,” 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>321</sup> “Relazione mensile,” 20 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati.

imminent Italian exit from the war. Military authorities had to focus their propaganda efforts on countering this type of “sensational news.”<sup>322</sup>

Much of the army’s written propaganda came in the form of public decrees [*bandi*] posted on walls and dropped by aircraft as leaflets. Their content further reflected the army’s view that Balkan peoples responded better to facts and deeds than to sophisticated arguments. Reassuring the public that Italian occupation brought justice and security, these announcements outlined the regulations and policies of the occupying authorities, which usually involved threats of punishment for acts of resistance. Ambrosio’s 7 September 1941 decree, announcing the assumption of civil powers by the Italian army in parts of Croatia, promised the populations that “the Italian armed forces are guarantors of their safety, freedom and well-being” while also outlining offences that would result in execution.<sup>323</sup> During the siege of Drvar later that month, Italian aircraft dropped pamphlets to the population that presented the Italian army as bringers of “peace and order.” Italian authorities guaranteed safety of person and property to those who returned to their homes but warned of strict measures against those foolish enough to impede the work of Italian authorities.<sup>324</sup> Likewise, Ambrosio’s Christmas amnesty was accompanied by anti-communist themes and warnings that those who did not return to their homes would be “pursued relentlessly.”<sup>325</sup> The language of these decrees, emphasizing the futility of resistance, the opportunity for normal economic life under Italian rule, and rewards for collaboration — Roatta offered money for the capture of enemy agents or Partisan leaders — differed little from that employed in Ethiopia.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> “La situazione attuale e i compiti degli organi informativi,” 6 December 1942, and “Situazione in Slovenia,” 13 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>323</sup> “Proclama alla popolazione,” 7 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, August–September 1941, allegati. “Situazione nella zona demilitarizzata dalla pubblicazione del Bando del 7 settembre 1941 ad oggi,” 7 October 1941, DSCS, 5/II:44–46.

<sup>324</sup> “Lancio manifestini,” 16 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>325</sup> “Bando per la pacificazione per la 2<sup>a</sup> zona,” 24 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati.

<sup>326</sup> Roatta decree, 12 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

As insurgency mounted in 1942, the balance of carrot and stick in Italian decrees tilted towards the latter. Robotti announced his grand operations in Slovenia with a decree printed on 22,000 posters and 120,000 aerial leaflets. Co-signed by High Commissioner Grazioli, the decree lamented that “many Slovenes” had responded to Italy’s “extremely humane and favourable” treatment by “raising the communist banner and trampling upon the principles of religion and civilization” upheld by Italian authorities and troops. Warning that all Slovenes would now pay for the crimes of a few, Robotti and Grazioli announced prohibitions on travel and communications in the entire province, the summary execution of those who “in any way support the rebels,” and the destruction of dwellings of those who aided the Partisans. The decree concluded with a promise of clemency for Partisans who surrendered before combat, and assured the public that “the populations that remain calm [...] will have nothing to fear, neither for their persons nor their property.”<sup>327</sup> The offer of amnesty in the midst of major operations was a standard tactic that was hoped at the very least to spread distrust within Partisan formations, compelling Partisan commanders to keep a closer eye on their men.<sup>328</sup> Ultimately, such guarantees and amnesties were undermined by the actual conduct of Italian operations and the lack of discipline displayed by some Italian units. Partisan propaganda took advantage of this. At precisely the same time that Italian repressive policies in Slovenia reached their most indiscriminate levels, the Partisan leadership ordered fairer treatment of collaborators and neutrals and greater respect for private property.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Grazioli-Robotti decree, 15 July 1942, NARA T-821/62/0567, and “Manifesti bilingui,” 16 July 1942, NARA T-821/62/0563.

<sup>328</sup> “Proclami che garantiscono ‘salva la vita’ a ribelli che si arrendano o ritornino alla loro dimora abituale,” 13 August 1942, NARA T-821/405/1043–44. “Notiziario informazioni n. 66,” 13 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati. Spigo offered a similar amnesty in between Operations Velebit and Dinara. Spigo decree, August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>329</sup> “Attività del nemico,” 11 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 11 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, November–December 1942.



Second Army's emphasis on demonstrating its strength and its power over life and death in its appeals to the occupied populations was not just phenomenologically similar to colonial practices. Army propagandists bolstered these themes with explicitly colonial rhetoric, employed alongside themes of anti-communism and nationalism. At the close of his operations in autumn 1942, Robotti addressed Slovenes through a large bilingual poster. After claiming to have killed, captured, or wounded upwards of 5,000 "bandits," Robotti offered clemency to those who remained at large while promising that his garrisons would continue to hunt down "outlaws" in order to free Slovenes from terror, bringing peace and order.<sup>330</sup> This appeal was accompanied by a short article drafted by the XI Corps's intelligence staff — not the more Fascitized propaganda section — for publication in Slovene newspapers. Entitled "A Devout Wish" [*Un pio desiderio*], the article combined Catholic and anti-communist themes with classic *romanità*. Like their ancient forebears, Italian soldiers now fought "Red barbarism" in defence of "Catholic Slovene civilization." To counter rumours of an imminent Italian withdrawal from Slovenia, the article also likened Italian soldiers to those of the ancient Roman legions, who permanently settled in conquered lands as "warrior-colonists," bringing peace and civilization. While "the already very civilized populations of Slovenia" did not require further civilization, the article justified the Italian army's presence there by its desire "to harmonize the civilization of the two neighbouring countries within the framework of [*nel quadro di*] the larger Italian community." By "conquering Slovenia," the Italian army assumed this "right" as the "victor."<sup>331</sup> Despite granting the Slovenes preferential status within its racial or cultural hierarchy, the army's use of *romanità* was intended primarily to remind locals of their subordinate status within the Imperial Community and to bolster the flagging prestige of Italian arms.

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<sup>330</sup> "Manifesto murale," 22 November 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>331</sup> "Contropropaganda," 10 December 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

Similar themes are evident in propaganda leaflets distributed in late summer 1942 by the Sassari Division in western Bosnia, Lika, and Dalmatia.<sup>332</sup> The longest leaflet comprised over six-hundred words of text and assumed a relatively high level of literacy among its audience, but its arguments would not have been out of place in Graziani's Ethiopia. It highlighted the destructive power of the Italian army, drawing attention to recently concluded operations against Partisans in the Velebit Mountains. The leaflet castigated the insurgents who had demonstrated their "habitual cowardice" and fled the Italian advance, but not before "more than two hundred of these people's traitors were caught by Italian lead." It then emphasized the terrible punishment inflicted by Italian troops upon the general civilian population of the region as a threat and warning to others.

The populations that had placed their trust in these enemies of humanity saw their property destroyed and for the most part were transferred to another part of Lika. The villages of the Velebit – Glogovo – Dabašnica – Bruvno and many other places battered by our cannons, our flamethrowers, our airplanes, were put to the flame or razed to the ground.

This is the fate that awaits he who gives refuge to communists.

At the same time, the leaflet promised its readers the enlightenment of "Roman civilization." It reminded Serbs of the humane protection they received from Italian troops in 1941 and concluded that "only Italy, guardian of all healthy [*sani*] nationalisms, is able to ensure your peace and make your country rise again."<sup>333</sup> This conformed to Fascist concepts of an Imperial Community that included not only annexed Dalmatia and Slovenia but Croatia and Bosnia as well.

A second leaflet was primarily anti-Communist and went beyond colonial themes. It adhered to the general line in Fascist propaganda that Italy was fighting a just war as a proletarian nation against materialistic Allied powers united by international Jewry. Aware that some Serbs shared a pan-Slavic sympathy for the Soviet Union, the Italians vilified the capitalist British and Americans for using communism to enrich themselves. The leaflet further alleged that Jews made up the leadership of the Partisan movement in

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<sup>332</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 21 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, July–August 1942.

<sup>333</sup> "Popolo della Bosnia, Lika e Dalmazia," August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

Yugoslavia, which aimed “to tyrannize the poor and especially the peasants.” Italian soldiers, on the other hand, defended the poor: “they have protected you, they have given you food, they have died to defend your lives, your peace, your homes. [...] They are not occupiers, they are defenders.”<sup>334</sup> This example demonstrates how food policy and the army’s written propaganda were intertwined. It also reveals the complexity and inconsistency of the Italian army’s message in occupied Yugoslavia. The presence of a Communist-led insurgency and the context of a broader European war meant that colonial propaganda alone would not suffice to persuade civilian populations to submit to Italian rule. The Italian army employed a wider array of propaganda techniques in Yugoslavia, but this led to contradictions in the message itself and with the army’s consistently brutal approach to repression in military operations.

Schmid argues that the army’s “Janus-faced” contradictions in Croatia — also evident in Slovenia — are best explained by Fascist concepts of empire based on Roman values of justice, civilization, and strength that sought voluntary incorporation within the “new order.”<sup>335</sup> Clearly, the policies and themes implemented both by Italian civil and military authorities in occupied Yugoslavia were consistent with these vaguely defined notions. However, it is more difficult to determine the extent to which the army’s efforts at positive persuasion were motivated directly by Fascist concepts of a civilizing mission. Military commands explained their approach by adopting Rome’s rhetoric of spreading “civilization.” But, Italian policies also were informed by opportunism and responded to immediate circumstances. Italian authorities publicized their limited political and religious concessions to exploit rumours of harsher rule in German- and Croatian-occupied zones. Food policy was certainly intended to portray Italian superiority and humanity, but Italian leaders also saw it as a means of justifying their territorial claims, discrediting their Croatian counterparts, punishing suspected partisan helpers, and preventing neutral civilians from joining the Partisan movement out of desperation. The

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<sup>334</sup> Untitled leaflet (allegato 55a), August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>335</sup> Sanela Schmid, “*Spazio Vitale*. Understanding the Janus-Faced Italian Occupation Policy in the ‘Independent State of Croatia’, 1941 to 1943,” in *Italian Occupation Regimes in Europe*, ed. Karlo Ruzicic-Kessler and Sanela Schmid (Bern: Peter Lang, forthcoming).

army only developed systematic written propaganda at a late date in reaction to Partisan successes in that field. Furthermore, a chronic shortage of resources and willpower relegated propaganda and persuasion to a secondary role in Second Army's approach to pacification. Efforts to win the hearts and minds of the local populations through positive measures and messages were genuine, but they often came with strings attached and were backed explicitly or implicitly by threats of overwhelming force.

## Deployment and Tactics

Second Army's emphasis on persuasion through propaganda and social measures in occupied Yugoslavia was not accompanied by any limitations on the use of military force. Especially after the army's shift to grand operations in 1942, Italian generals considered "operational activity" to be the most effective means of "political action" available to them.<sup>336</sup> While its political, economic, and social measures were received "passively" and sometimes "favourably" by locals, the XVIII Corps concluded that a "strong and military approach [*maniera forte e militare*] is the most understandable for these populations, for centuries habituated to such treatment by various rulers. The humanitarian and compassionate approach is considered a sign of weakness and inability to govern."<sup>337</sup> For Italian generals, crushing resistance militarily was the surest way to gain the acceptance and loyalty of the occupied populations. Compared to the inconsistency of its propaganda, the army's operational methods and repressive techniques were remarkably consistent, their intensity magnifying over time in response to guerrilla activity. Arguably, the greatest similarities between the army's behaviour in colonial Ethiopia and occupied Yugoslavia were in the military strategies and tactics adopted against insurgents. Italian commanders in the Balkans displayed the same preferences and proclivities that they had in East Africa, from their deployment of manpower to their reliance on heavy weaponry and destructive *rastrellamenti* operations.

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<sup>336</sup> "Premessa" to the Sassari Division Command war diary, September–October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, September–October 1942.

<sup>337</sup> "Relazione periodica mensile," 25 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 996, DS XVIII Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

The Italian army faced the same dilemma over the deployment of garrisons in Yugoslavia that it had a few years earlier in Ethiopia. Following the capitulation of Yugoslavia, Cavallero and Ambrosio agreed to avoid “excessive dispersal of force” by occupying only the most important communications centres with garrisons preferably of regiment-sized units and certainly no smaller than battalion strength.<sup>338</sup> However, military precepts on the concentration of force soon gave way to political interests of expanding Italy’s presence in the region. The army’s redeployment to Croatia in autumn 1941 resulted in very large zones of occupation that left Italian forces spread thin. The area under the jurisdiction of Renzo Dalmazzo’s VI Corps amounted to 32,670 square kilometres. As General Dalmazzo pointed out, this was roughly equivalent to the Italian regions of Lazio, Umbria, and Marche put together, and twice as large as the zone occupied by the XIV Corps in neighbouring Montenegro. The Cacciatori delle Alpi Division joined Dalmazzo’s corps in September and, along with the enlarged garrison of Zara, it took over the occupation of the Dalmatian provinces and much of the Croatian coastline. This still left the Sassari, Bergamo, and Marche Divisions with 27,490 square kilometres of Croatian territory between them.<sup>339</sup>

The divisions deployed to Croatia each were expected to garrison between six and eight towns. Each division consisted of six infantry battalions and two CC.NN. battalions, meaning that much of their strength was required for garrison duty.<sup>340</sup> By the end of the year, the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division — short one battalion that was detached to another division’s sector — had been transferred to Herzegovina, where its forces were spread out between ten garrisons, three of which were manned by lone infantry companies.<sup>341</sup> Ambrosio admitted that his units were “anchored to the ground by many

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<sup>338</sup> “Linea di demarcazione italo-tedesca nei territori ex-jugoslavi,” 27 April 1941, DSCS, 3/II:392–93. “Organizzazione del territorio occupato: variant alla circolare 3700,” 3 May 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, April–May 1941, allegati.

<sup>339</sup> “Notiziario n. 181,” 1 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

<sup>340</sup> “Giurisdizione territoriale ed ordinamento delle forze in Dalmazia,” 7 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>341</sup> “Situazione nei vari presidi,” 25 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

garrisons.” To address the problem, he assigned independent *carabinieri* [CC.RR.], *camicie nere* [CC.NN.], *bersaglieri*, *alpini*, and *territoriali mobili* [T.M.] units to each sector in varying quantities.<sup>342</sup> Many of these formations were made up of poorly equipped older reservists and had to be assigned secondary tasks — guard duty, coastal defence, or patrolling communications lines — that were meant to free up infantry battalions for mobile operations. In some cases, they provided garrisons on their own.<sup>343</sup>

During the winter of 1941–42, small, isolated, and vulnerable Italian units increasingly came under attack by Partisans. Following an incident suffered by an infantry regiment in Croatia, Cavallero ordered Second Army to conduct its movements with strong columns and to implement a “more economical” deployment of its forces, limited to the occupation of the most important centres and defence of essential communication lines. Cavallero’s orders reflected his experience and tendencies as military commander in Ethiopia. He wanted Second Army to concentrate its strength in order to conduct the “police operations in grand style” that he had a penchant for.<sup>344</sup> When Mario Roatta took over as commander of Second Army at the beginning of 1942, he ordered the abolition of smaller garrisons in order to concentrate the army’s mobile forces for operations intended to deal a swift death blow to the surging Partisan movement. Roatta drew explicitly from the teachings of colonial warfare. His 3C circular called for mobile columns to operate “as in Africa,” laagering on high ground or in villages at night.<sup>345</sup> In preparation for major operations in Slovenia that summer, Roatta

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<sup>342</sup> Ambrosio memorandum, 18 December 1941, DDI 9, VIII, 40.

<sup>343</sup> “Impiego CC.RR.,” 26 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 583, DS VI Corps, September 1941, allegati. “Giurisdizione territoriale ed ordinamento delle forze in Dalmazia,” 7 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September 1941, allegati. “Riassunto degli argomenti tratti dall’Eccellenza Ambrosio nella riunione tenuta presso il Comando della 2<sup>a</sup> Armata il 30-XII-41,” 31 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. “Ricognizione in zona Slivnica,” 27 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1942, allegati. “Reparti camicie nere del Comando Superiore Forze Armate Slovenia-Dalmazia,” 19 May 1942, DSCS, 7/II:53–54. “Impressioni sul morale del 220 Battaglione T.M.,” 14 June 1942, NARA T-821/413/0565.

<sup>344</sup> Cavallero diary, 4 and 27 January 1942.

<sup>345</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 170.

advised Robotti to employ his forces “as in the colonial wars,” coupling a system of static garrisons with mobile columns.<sup>346</sup>

Subordinate commanders did not need to be convinced by Cavallero or Roatta. Dalmazzo already had admitted that the “passivity” forced upon his corps by lack of manpower had damaged Italian morale and emboldened the enemy. He ordered his divisions to form sizeable mobile groups led by “resolute and energetic leaders [...] on the ‘*arditi*’ model.”<sup>347</sup> After a difficult winter, the Sassari Division — previously an advocate of territorial expansion at Croatia’s expense and of engagement with Serb populations — was now content “to abandon the third zone to its fate, leaving behind garrisons of Croatian troops.” The growth of the Partisan movement through the winter convinced Monticelli and Gazzini that a population-centric approach to counterinsurgency in the Balkans was futile. They praised Roatta’s measures as “very wise and in accordance with the principles of economy of force and mass.”<sup>348</sup>

The army’s switch towards heavy operations in early 1942 was intended to defeat the Partisans in battle, boost troop morale, and demonstrate Italian strength and resolve. However, it came with a political cost. Despite some reinforcement from Rome, concentration in one area required withdrawals from other sectors. Thus, while the new policy was supposed to make the Italian army appear less passive, it effectively eliminated the army’s presence throughout much of the countryside outside the course of operations. This was the same paradox that Frusci had confronted in Amhara in 1939. As we have seen, civil authorities in Dalmatia and Slovenia lobbied with some success for the maintenance of garrisons in the annexed provinces. Roatta agreed that these territories could not be treated “solely according to military concepts of ordinary war,” and that smaller garrisons were necessary there for reasons of prestige.<sup>349</sup> Nonetheless, he ordered the consolidation of garrisons in the provinces while abandoning large swathes of the

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<sup>346</sup> “Operazioni in Slovenia,” 8 June 1942, NARA T-821/62/0360–61.

<sup>347</sup> “Compiti: Direttive,” 1 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati.

<sup>348</sup> “Premessa” to the Sassari Division Command war diary, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May–June 1942.

<sup>349</sup> Cavallero diary, 14 May 1942. “Operazioni in Slovenia,” 8 June 1942, NARA T-821/62/0360–61.

Croatian hinterland. Grazioli complained in June 1942 that, thanks to the army's "lack of drive," Italy controlled only 39 of 95 administrative centres in the Province of Ljubljana while 1,900 of 1,936 hamlets were in Partisan hands.<sup>350</sup> In his memoirs, Mario Casanuova considered this one of the "most serious errors" committed by the army in Yugoslavia: "We occupied a town, we reorganized everything, the population became our friends, and just when things got better we abandoned them to the revenge and pillaging of the [Partisan, Četnik, and Ustaša] adversaries."<sup>351</sup> The reduction of Italian garrisons, which began in the first winter of the occupation, severely crippled the army's ability to win over the hearts and minds of the local populations. At least some Italian generals were aware of this, and they hoped to return to a system of more numerous smaller garrisons after successful operations against the Partisans.<sup>352</sup>

The problem was that the Italians lacked the strength to effectively employ their new policy. Even with the reduction of garrisons, division commanders complained that they needed several more battalions to establish mobile reserves adequate to control their sectors.<sup>353</sup> However, it soon became clear that they could expect no further reinforcement from Italy. In May 1942, while reiterating his directives for Second Army to concentrate its forces for greater "dynamism," Cavallero informed Roatta that he would have to cede two divisions after summer. Roatta made plans to evacuate Zone III entirely and focus on the defence of the annexed provinces, although this would still leave his army with a deficit of ten battalions and was likely to be construed by the public as an Italian retreat.<sup>354</sup> On 19 June, Roatta and Pavelić signed an accord in Zagreb that would see

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<sup>350</sup> "Trasmissione documenti vari," June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:146–53.

<sup>351</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 82. For a similar assessment, see Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, 23.

<sup>352</sup> "Organizzazione autunno-invernale del territorio di giurisdizione," 26 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, September–October 1942, allegati.

<sup>353</sup> "Forze a disposizione – schieramento," 16 March 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, March–April 1942, allegati.

<sup>354</sup> Cavallero diary, 18 May 1942. "Sintesi della riunione tenuta dall'Eccellenza il capo di Stato Maggiore Generale il 17 maggio 1942," VCSMG, 3:487–88. Roatta informed Armellini that the XVIII Corps's main priority now was the "protection and security of Italian territory" in Dalmatia. Roatta to Bastianini, 5 June 1942, in Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:337.



Croatian forces replace Italian garrisons in Zone III and parts of Zone II.<sup>355</sup> In theory, the accord would have resulted in a network of Croatian garrisons between which Italian forces operated as an offensive mass of manoeuvre. However, the Croats proved unable — or, Roatta thought, unwilling — to replace all the Italian garrisons. Additionally, the withdrawals coincided with Tito's "long march" from eastern to western Bosnia, which placed Axis forces in both zones under great pressure. By August, it was clear to Roatta that his offensive-minded concept of deployment could not be instituted fully until spring 1943, if at all.<sup>356</sup>

Nonetheless, informed by Cavallero and Mussolini that Second Army would have to give up more divisions than initially indicated, Roatta continued to withdraw garrisons from the Croatian interior.<sup>357</sup> According to Klaus Schmider, the Italian withdrawals were a "godsend" for the Partisans, who gained a safe base to regroup and consolidate.<sup>358</sup> Roatta understood that the Partisans likely would fill the void left by his forces but, forced to prioritize, he deemed the maintenance of public order in the Independent State of Croatia to be of lesser import to Italian prestige than it was in the annexed territories.<sup>359</sup> Likewise, he wanted to avoid a repeat of events from the previous winter, where isolated garrisons had been cut off and besieged by Partisan forces, damaging Italian prestige.<sup>360</sup>

From the point of view of Italian commanders in 1942, prestige relied on military successes and body counts. However, the forces available to them were ill-equipped to obtain these results. The Italian Second Army was a poor military formation, in which the shortcomings of the *Regio Esercito* as a whole — characterized by obsolete equipment,

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<sup>355</sup> "Accordo di Zagabria del 19 giugno 1942," 25 June 1942, DSCS, 7/II:202–208.

<sup>356</sup> Roatta memorandum, 11 August 1942, DSCS, 7/II:312–14. "Contatti col Governo Croato," 20 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati. Monzali, "La difficile alleanza," 106–107.

<sup>357</sup> Cavallero diary, 10 and 31 July 1942.

<sup>358</sup> Schmider, foreword to "Yugoslavia," part 3 in Shepherd and Pattinson, *War in a Twilight World*, 184.

<sup>359</sup> "Direttive operative per il periodo autunnale ed invernale," 31 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati. Planned withdrawals from Herzegovina were cancelled because they threatened the security of neighbouring Montenegro.

<sup>360</sup> Roatta memorandum, 11 August 1942, DSCS, 7/II:312–14.

inadequate training, and unprepared officers — were exacerbated by the logistical difficulties and low priority of asymmetrical warfare in the Balkans.<sup>361</sup> Second Army was made up mostly of frontline infantry divisions that had been denuded of much of their supporting equipment. For example, the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division retained its organic artillery but lost much of its motor transport, mules, and ammunition, especially for its machineguns, mortars, and artillery.<sup>362</sup> Manpower and material shortages within the Italian divisions worsened as the war dragged on. These problems were not unique to the Italians. The bulk of German forces sent to Yugoslavia in 1941 and 1942 comprised substandard and under-armed infantry divisions raised from older recruits intended only for occupation duty.<sup>363</sup>

Mobilization for total war ensured that, as in Ethiopia, the vast majority of officers in Second Army were reservists whose level of competence varied greatly. After the war, Armellini claimed that only twenty of the five hundred officers in his XVIII Corps were professionals.<sup>364</sup> By necessity, reserve officers often wound up in charge of platoons and companies, units critical to low-level counterinsurgency operations.<sup>365</sup> General Pivano lamented that the junior officers of his Cacciatori delle Alpi Division, while enthusiastic, lacked professionalism. He considered few of his company commanders up to their tasks and feared that there were not enough career non-

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<sup>361</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, 130–31. Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 63–71, 126. Knox, *Common Destiny*, 148–85. Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 51–58, 143–57. Brian R. Sullivan, “The Italian Soldier in Combat, June 1940–September 1943: Myths, Realities and Expectations,” in *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939–1945*, ed. Paul Addison and Angus Calder (London: Pimlico, 1997), 179–80.

<sup>362</sup> “Riduzione dotazioni,” 9 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>363</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 81.

<sup>364</sup> Armellini, *La crisi dell'Esercito*, 83. Armellini either exaggerated or he did not include staff officers in this calculation. Of the eighty officers attached directly to his command, twenty-two were regulars. Twelve of them held the rank of major or higher, reflecting the paucity of career junior officers during wartime. “Elenco nominativo degli ufficiali di questo comando – comando artiglieria – comando genio e direzioni alla data 1° luglio 1942,” 1 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>365</sup> Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, 1:48. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 372. A structural surplus of senior officers and shortage of career junior officers was the product of the Italian army's interwar politics. Knox, *Common Destiny*, 153, 171–72. Oliva, *Soldati e ufficiali*, 177–81.

commissioned officers to assist them.<sup>366</sup> Indeed, following the loss of fifty-four men by his garrison at Zavala in December 1941, Pivano lambasted his officers for their tactical ineptitude. Defensively, they placed their machineguns in seemingly random positions and were slow to react to enemy attacks. Offensively, they tended to launch operations with vague objectives, relying on inadequate forces that became so widely scattered that guerrilla forces were able to attack and capture isolated groups.<sup>367</sup> Italian commands tried to prepare junior officers for greater responsibility and initiative by leaving them “complete freedom in execution” of basic tasks, such as patrols and guard duty.<sup>368</sup> This was hardly a suitable substitute for proper tactical instruction. The Italian high command would blame the embarrassingly rapid collapse of the battalion-strength garrison at Prozor — well-fortified and reinforced with tanks and artillery — in February 1943 primarily on the incompetence of its commander, a reserve captain that lacked the trust of his subordinates and did not know how to coordinate such a large mixed force in combat.<sup>369</sup>

In 1941, Italian soldiers and officers arrived in the theatre without any specialized training for guerrilla warfare. Like the rest of the *Regio Esercito*, Second Army units received the SMRE’s new guidelines for training in June 1941. Developed by Roatta, they were intended first and foremost for frontline operations, with particular emphasis on anti-tank exercises. But the new regulations also focused on squad- and platoon-level tactics and sought to inculcate energy and initiative in squad leaders, characteristics that were applicable to counterinsurgency.<sup>370</sup> With the outbreak of revolt and Second Army’s reoccupation of Croatian territory in September, Ambrosio urged commanders to provide

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<sup>366</sup> “Attività addestrativa,” 13 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati.

<sup>367</sup> “Disciplina – Addestramento,” 27 December 1941, and “Avvenimenti di Zavala,” 29 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

<sup>368</sup> “Posti di controllo e vigilanza: compiti,” 7 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), October–November 1941, allegati.

<sup>369</sup> “Riassunto interrogatorio del S. Tenente Sforza e di quattro militari del III/259 di stanza a Prozor,” 5 March 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, fasc. “Marzo 1943 (U.S. Jug.)”

<sup>370</sup> “Addestramento capi squadra fanteria,” 26 June 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 582, DS VI Corps, June 1941, allegati.

additional small-unit training to their troops. Envisioning small-scale warfare conducted by patrols against weak guerrilla bands, Ambrosio wanted his troops to function as lightly armed, well-trained squads capable of operating alone under the command of non-commissioned officers, ready to “oppose slyness with slyness.” On the other hand, Ambrosio precluded any notion of hunting down rebels in unfavourable terrain: “in such cases there is nothing else to do other than cut their lines of supply and wait until hunger and hardship make them come out.”<sup>371</sup> Dalmazzo rephrased and relayed Ambrosio’s instructions to his own men. However, he complained that many of his officers had failed to assimilate the army leadership’s new emphasis on manoeuvre over frontal attacks.<sup>372</sup>

In October, Ambrosio issued more aggressive instructions. He now encouraged his men to “take the reins, acting offensively, leaving the road,” regardless of who initiated combat. He instructed squad leaders not to close up and form a base of fire when encountering the enemy, but rather to spread out and try to encircle their opponents. Although Ambrosio referred explicitly to the need to adopt “hunter tactics” [*tattica del cacciatore*], this should not be confused with “hunter group tactics” that eschewed encirclement as a panacea and favoured swift and direct attacks by fast-moving combined-arms formations. Despite his heightened emphasis on small-unit tactics, Ambrosio’s ideal operation was the large-scale *rastrellamento* aimed at encircling and destroying entire enemy formations. Ambrosio instructed corps and division commanders to plan operations carefully and with the greatest possible concentration of forces, preferring that they amass their units for single operations rather than disperse them for actions in multiple sectors simultaneously.<sup>373</sup> Ambrosio thus envisioned something similar to what characterized combat in Amhara during 1937–39: a constant cycle of operations, one after another, focusing on individual regions one at a time.

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<sup>371</sup> “Addestramento reparti croati,” 12 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 724, DS Second Army, August–September 1941, allegati. Although the document provided guidelines for the training of Croatian troops, Ambrosio added that his own forces should receive similar training.

<sup>372</sup> “Direttive ed osservazioni,” 18 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September 1941, allegati.

<sup>373</sup> “Azioni contro ribelli,” 23 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati. On “hunter group tactics” and their application by the German 718th Infantry Division in summer 1942, see Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 107, 181–82, 239. Generally, the German army also avoided the use of hunter groups in its operations between 1941 and 1943.

In practice, most Italian *rastrellamenti* in 1941 were relatively small affairs authorized by division or garrison commanders in response to the activity of “rebel raiders” or intelligence on their whereabouts. By November, Italian commands were conducting these operations on a daily basis.<sup>374</sup> Operations undertaken by the Sassari Division in November and December 1941 involved reinforced battalions operating in company-sized columns converging over tens of kilometres upon a shared objective in a timeframe of four or five days. The troops were lightly armed — with rifles, light machineguns, hand grenades, and sometimes with mortars — but they carried extra ammunition, rations, and rain gear that slowed them down in the mountainous terrain. These operations rarely resulted in sustained combat. More often, they concluded anticlimactically with the detainment and interrogation of suspect civilians, arms searches, anti-communist lectures, and warnings to the local populations that they would be held responsible for further hostile acts.<sup>375</sup> A lack of speed and mobility hampered Italian infantry in these early operations. Monticelli had his units train for mountain movement and warfare by combing the hills around Knin every day.<sup>376</sup> Based on the experience of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division — which, despite its name, was not equipped with mountain gear — Pivano encouraged his commanders to travel lightly and allocate realistic objectives to be pursued ruthlessly, if necessary using local civilians to carry supplies, “whether they like it or not.”<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> For example, Dalmazzo’s intelligence bulletin on 1 November noted that all four of his divisions were conducting separate *rastrellamenti*. “Notiziario n. 181,” 1 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, November 1941, allegati.

<sup>375</sup> See, for example, Monticelli to Leonardi, 19 November 1941, and “Notiziario giornaliero,” 29 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati. “Azione di rastrellamento,” 20 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), October–November 1941, allegati. “Azioni di rastrellamento zona M. Polaca,” 22 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

<sup>376</sup> “Addestramento,” 24 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

<sup>377</sup> “Attività addestrativa,” 13 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati. “Operazioni contro i ribelli,” 1 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1942, allegati.

Commanding officers never were fully satisfied with the level of efficiency of their troops. They repeatedly emphasised the need to improve the preparation of companies, platoons, squads, and individuals, and bemoaned “numerous incidents” of friendly fire that stemmed from lack of training.<sup>378</sup> Fire discipline was a major concern. Units tended to overreact to Partisan harassment, firing profusely at unseen targets, giving away their position and strength, and sometimes leaving themselves dangerously low on ammunition.<sup>379</sup> Partisan successes emphasized the need for additional training for truck-borne defence and combat.<sup>380</sup> Dalmazzo was concerned that his units did not institute effective security measures on the march. In one egregious example, an Italian column lost ninety-two men in an ambush because it failed to deploy flankers or sufficient scouts.<sup>381</sup> Other incidents prompted orders from Ambrosio and Dalmazzo at the end of 1941 to reduce operational activity in order to avoid costly ambushes, giving some truth to German criticism of “the passiveness of the Italians.”<sup>382</sup> While Roatta’s 3C circular is best known for the repressive measures it sanctioned, the majority of the document in fact was made up of technical details meant to address these tactical shortcomings. It included sections on garrison defence, march security, traffic control, guard duty, and convoy escort.<sup>383</sup> Burgwyn has argued that Roatta’s circular was in part a

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<sup>378</sup> Calls for improved training in spring 1942 originated in Rome, but received local impetus from unit commanders in the Balkans. See “Attività addestrativa dei reparti di fanteria e bersaglieri nel periodo primavera-estate 1942,” 4 May 1942, “Attività addestrativa nel periodo primavera-estate 1942,” 13 May 1942, “Attività addestrativa,” 21 May 1942, and “Attività addestrativa nel periodo primavera-estate 1942,” 1 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1942, allegati.

<sup>379</sup> “Azioni contro ribelli,” 23 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati. “Verbale del gran rapport tenuto dall’Eccellenza comandante in Videm Krka il 10-9-1942,” 10 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati. See also the warnings in *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 11 October 1942, 2; 3 January 1943, 4; and, 26 April 1943, 6.

<sup>380</sup> “Addestramento,” 10 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), December 1941–January 1942, allegati. “Attacco dei ribelli agli autocarri ed elementi isolati,” 12 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1942, allegati.

<sup>381</sup> “Servizio di sicurezza,” 6 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>382</sup> “Perlustrazioni – rastrellamenti,” 11 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. “Morale della truppa,” 6 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati. Hehn, *German Struggle*, 89. Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 237.

<sup>383</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta.” 159–74.

response to German critique.<sup>384</sup> Like most formations of the *Regio Esercito*, Second Army relied upon “on-the-job training.”<sup>385</sup> The difficulty was that many units, fully employed in garrison and escort duty as well as construction and roadwork, had only limited time even for this.<sup>386</sup>

Partisan successes in the winter of 1941–42 brought the army’s methods and tactics under greater scrutiny from civilian authorities and observers. In Slovenia, Grazioli and Italian business leaders criticized the army’s “garrison mentality” and “passive attitude,” arguing that the XI Corps should adopt guerrilla-style techniques of its own, leaving the roads to hunt down insurgents in the woods. Robotti brusquely rejected these suggestions as dilettantish, which indeed they were in their details. Nonetheless, the proposal to adopt something other than *rastrellamento* tactics based on the encirclement and total destruction of Partisan formations had merit. In a meeting with civil authorities from Slovenia and Dalmatia, Ugo Cavallero explained more clearly the rationale behind the army’s aversion to adopting hunter group tactics. It was impossible to fight guerrillas with their own techniques, he contended, because “one will never manage to eliminate the difference between soldier and rebel” — soldiers sought combat, whereas guerrillas chose to avoid it. Cavallero assured Grazioli that the problem was not Second Army’s tactics but its lack of armoured vehicles.<sup>387</sup>

With plenty of encouragement from the *Comando Supremo* in Rome, Italian army and corps commanders in Yugoslavia reinforced their faith in conventional means to combat insurgency in 1942. The problem with *rastrellamenti* operations in the autumn and winter of 1941, they concluded, was that they were not large enough and they were not properly coordinated. Operations to relieve stranded Italian and Croatian garrisons in the first months of 1942 provided a model for what was to come: multiple columns of

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<sup>384</sup> Burgwyn, “General Roatta’s War,” 317.

<sup>385</sup> Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 145.

<sup>386</sup> “Rapporto situazione,” 28 December 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 514, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1941, allegati.

<sup>387</sup> Eugenio Gualdi to Amedeo Giannini, 12 May 1942, NARA T-821/402/0021–26. “Esposto dell’ing. Gualdi all’Eccellenza Giannini,” 9 June 1942, NARA T-821/402/0018. “Sintesi della riunione tenuta dall’Eccellenza il capo di Stato Maggiore Generale il 14 maggio 1942,” VCSMG, 3:471–72.

infantry, supported by all the artillery and aircraft available in an area, converged on one spot in an effort to prevent Partisan forces from escaping.<sup>388</sup> Roatta's 3C circular of March 1942 effectively launched the cycle of grand operations that Ambrosio had recommended the previous fall. These began in April with Operation Trio and continued into November, employing multiple infantry divisions at a time. Divisions not involved in major operations still devoted much of their activity to medium-scale *rastrellamenti*. All these operations displayed similar features: futile efforts to encircle and destroy enemy formations; a reliance on heavy weaponry to demonstrate Italian strength and avoid Italian casualties; and, the targeted destruction of civilian property and resources.

Anti-partisan operations of 1942 demonstrated the army's intensified obsession with encirclement in order to achieve a Cannae-like victory of annihilation over the Communist Partisans. Despite the political motivations and intrigue behind Operation Trio in April and May 1942, it is clear that Roatta desperately wanted to destroy the Partisan formations that made up the Foča Republic. The tone of Roatta's telegrams to his commanders reveals his urgency to "immediately close the bag" on the Partisans.<sup>389</sup> However, the objectives given to individual formations often proved unrealistic. The progress of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division was slowed by difficult terrain and weather conditions, as well as by road blocks and effective rear-guard actions by the Partisans. Pivano's main column comprised seven battalions with supporting artillery and engineers, but he still lacked enough men to scour the areas envisioned in his operational plans. Heavy resistance compelled him to leave three battalions to guard communications lines and advance on a narrower front, eliminating any possibility of trapping large numbers of Partisans. The column lost 20 dead, 43 wounded, and 48 missing, most of them in a single ambush. His men only captured fifteen insurgents, of which ten were immediately shot; but Pivano claimed that the Partisans left "quite a few dead on the ground."<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, 1:189–90.

<sup>389</sup> See for example, Roatta to Dalmazzo, 10 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>390</sup> "Operazione su Gacko," 3 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, May–June 1942, allegati.



A second column of four under-strength infantry battalions suffered far fewer casualties but proved a logistical embarrassment for the Italians. Lacking enough troops to secure its own supply line, the column was laden with extra materiel, including fifteen days rations, 20,000 litres of water, bridge-building equipment, and a field hospital.<sup>391</sup> Because the zone of operations lacked natural sources of water, the column left behind most of its pack animals in favour of motor transport. However, there were not enough vehicles to move all the supplies at once; trucks made double-trips that slowed the column down even further. The advance proceeded along the road, with Italian infantry fanning out along a 1.5 km front to avoid an ambush. The partisans vacated the zone two days ahead of the column. High command then ordered Pivano to redirect his forces to a new objective, which could be reached only by mule paths. This prompted yet another delay of several days as Pivano's units switched back to animal transport. By the time this was completed, the operation had been cancelled.<sup>392</sup> The experience of the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division in Operation Trio demonstrates the difficulties inherent to large-scale *rastrellamenti* conducted by conventional forces with artillery and baggage trains in mountainous terrain.

From mid-July, the same division — now under the command of Vittorio Ruggero — was employed in the XI Corps's grand operations in Slovenia. Since the Partisans here operated in small dispersed units, Ruggero advocated innovative tactics very different from those employed in Operation Trio. In contrast to Cavallero's early statements on the matter, Ruggero argued that to defeat these guerrillas "it is necessary that we fight their type of war with their methods." He agreed that the chief objective of anti-partisan operations must be the capture and destruction of insurgents, which had so often eluded Italian forces in the past: "I do not want to receive messages of the sort, 'our immediate response put the enemy to flight. Losses not ascertained' which is the same as saying: 'the enemy suffered no losses'." However, he suggested that the best way to engage and destroy enemy forces was through ambush and surprise. He told column

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<sup>391</sup> "Avanzata du Kalinovik," 4 May 1942, and "Autonomia logistica," 4 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, May-June 1942, allegati.

<sup>392</sup> "Operazione su Kalinovik," 17 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, May-June 1942, allegati.

commanders to change direction frequently on the march and to lay ambushes for Partisans who tried to return to an area following a *rastrellamento*.<sup>393</sup> According to Casanuova, Ruggero's change in approach made his officers feel "a bit like Sherlock Holmes in uniform, [...] we had to use more intelligence than force."<sup>394</sup> Nonetheless, Ruggero's operational orders for *rastrellamenti* conducted by his division still were based on the dubious objective of encircling an area and preventing Partisans from escaping.<sup>395</sup>

Ultimately, Ruggero had little opportunity to employ his new tactics because army and corps commands envisioned operations in Slovenia to take place along lines similar to those in Croatia. Although the Slovene Liberation Front generally had not organized into large combat units, Roatta's instructions for the operations emphasized the destruction of large Partisan formations as their principal objective. He reasoned that this was the surest way to demoralize smaller bands and discredit the Liberation Front in the eyes of the population.<sup>396</sup> Conduct of the operations was entrusted to the commander of the XI Corps, Mario Robotti, who provided his divisions with meticulously planned itineraries and instructed them to avoid smaller improvised operations.<sup>397</sup>

It was clear from the outset that the Italians lacked the element of surprise. The Partisans had been forewarned by the influx of Italian forces into Slovenia and they had plans in place to disperse and evade capture when the Italian offensive began.<sup>398</sup> The difficulties encountered by the Cacciatori in eastern Bosnia resurfaced immediately in the mountainous and heavily forested Slovenian countryside. Ruggero estimated that to properly cover an area of 4 to 5 km, Italian troops needed to traverse 15 to 20 km. He

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<sup>393</sup> "Azioni dei ribelli," 24 June 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, May-June 1942, allegati.

<sup>394</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 108.

<sup>395</sup> "Rastrellamento zona Draga," 28 June 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, May-June 1942, allegati.

<sup>396</sup> "Operazioni in Slovenia," 8 June 1942, NARA T-821/62/0361-63.

<sup>397</sup> "Azioni contro i ribelli," 12 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July-August 1942, allegati.

<sup>398</sup> "Notiziario informazioni n. 65," 6 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July-August 1942, allegati.

asked Robotti for more time to complete his objectives.<sup>399</sup> Operations in July failed to trap the bulk of Partisan forces, which fled to the Kočevski Rog forest. Again, Robotti hoped to encircle the area with the Cacciatori and Granatieri divisions and comb it with converging troop movements which he carefully plotted out in advance in order to capture “all, I say all, the rebel forces.”<sup>400</sup> Again, most of the Partisans managed to melt away, only to return to the area after Italian forces had left. Robotti ordered the Cacciatori Division back to the forest in September with orders to “FIND THEM, FLUSH THEM OUT ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE AND HIT THEM, HIT THEM OFTEN.”<sup>401</sup> Despite his obvious frustration, Robotti did not choose to alter his tactics. His directives for the last major operations in October and November echoed those from July: “Pursue, engage, and destroy rebel formations [...] with the rapid action of several concurrent and converging columns.”<sup>402</sup> The task remained to “exterminate them all.”<sup>403</sup> As Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi has noted, Robotti’s increasing frustration during the operations — magnified by pressure for results from Roatta, Ambrosio, Cavallero, and Mussolini — was paralleled by the increasingly harsh “tone” of his orders on the treatment of local populations.<sup>404</sup> The Italian obsession with body counts and the chimera of total victory created an atmosphere that favoured violence over restraint. As we have seen, within this context repressive measures against the general civilian population became radicalized.

Large-scale anti-partisan operations certainly were the most total in their application of force. However, the same basic criteria and techniques also applied to

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<sup>399</sup> “Azione contro ribelli comunisti,” 18 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>400</sup> “Attacco posizione del Kocevski Rog,” 7 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942, allegati. Underlined in original.

<sup>401</sup> “Rastrellamento del Kocevski Rog e della zona compresa fra i solchi di Zuzemberk e di Trebnje,” 22 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September–October 1942, allegati. Emphasis in original.

<sup>402</sup> “Operazioni a cavallo del Kupa e lungo la ferrovie Fuzine-Delnice-Vrbovska-Ogulin-Karlovac-Zdecina,” 1 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September–October 1942, allegati.

<sup>403</sup> Robotti to Ruggero, 1 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>404</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 89–90.

more localized or improvised *rastrellamenti* in 1942. In October, the Sassari Division employed much of its forces in a combing operation southeast of Knin. As in the larger operations organized by corps commanders, the division aimed to “destroy the partisans and clear up the political situation of the villages” in the area. Multiple columns conducted a “concentric march combing the zone” assigned to them “without finding a trace of the enemy.”<sup>405</sup>

Italian operations of 1942, big and small, made use of conventional heavy weaponry to the greatest extent possible. Experience demonstrated that Italian columns burdened with artillery lost much of the mobility they needed to successfully carry out their enveloping manoeuvres. Even mule-borne pack artillery proved too slow in mobile operations.<sup>406</sup> Often, heavy weapons were “only of moral effect.”<sup>407</sup> However, their moral value was precisely why Italian commanders relied upon them to such an extent. Already in 1941, Dalmazzo had told his division commanders to employ a preponderance of force in every occupation. Even if seemingly “excessive,” he felt that the demonstration of Italian “decisiveness and strength” and of the army’s “abilities in the exploitation of our means” had an important moral effect on insurgents and civilian populations.<sup>408</sup> Roatta’s 3C circular advocated the “massive” use of artillery and aerial bombardment, “even against normally disproportionate objectives,” in order to exploit the enemy’s supposed “moral vulnerability.” Roatta based his assumptions upon precepts from “colonial warfare, in which it is advisable to give the enemy the clear and immediate feeling of our overwhelming superiority, and of the relentlessness of our reaction.”<sup>409</sup> The Italian

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<sup>405</sup> “Azione del Koziak,” 10 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 12 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942.

<sup>406</sup> “Operazioni contro i ribelli,” 1 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1942, allegati. “Operazioni del V Rgpt. G.a.F. nel periodo 1°–22 agosto,” 23 August 1942, NARA T-821/62/1341–42.

<sup>407</sup> “Azioni contro ribelli,” 23 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati.

<sup>408</sup> “Direttive ed osservazioni,” 14 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 381, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, October 1941, allegati. “Azione su Drvar,” 22 and 23 September 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 568, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, August–September 1941, allegati.

<sup>409</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 170.

army's use of heavy weaponry in Yugoslavia largely paralleled its methods from Ethiopia. Roatta even considered the use of aggressive chemicals justified against an illegitimate guerrilla enemy, but he was unwilling to set a precedent by employing lethal gas in a broader war involving great powers that also had large stocks of chemical weapons. Unlike in Ethiopia, Roatta also voiced humanitarian concern for the civilian populations that could be exposed to gas.<sup>410</sup>

The Italian army deployed a limited number of armoured vehicles to Yugoslavia. These included the same three-tonne tankettes that had served in East Africa and which Casanuova described as "broken down field kitchens."<sup>411</sup> Second Army also deployed the newer six-tonne model L6/40 light tank and Fiat armoured cars. Their main role was to patrol communications lines and provide escort for supply convoys. During an ambush, light tanks would move up and down the column to prevent insurgents from approaching disabled vehicles and seizing weapons.<sup>412</sup> Second Army also modified light trucks with the addition of armoured plate, machineguns, and flamethrowers to bolster the defensive capability of its convoys.<sup>413</sup> The grand operations of 1942 saw greater emphasis on the use of armour offensively. During Operation Trio, the Cacciatori delle Alpi and Taurinense Divisions both were assigned companies of light tanks.<sup>414</sup> For his operations in Slovenia, Robotti had an independent tank company, a section of self-propelled guns, three armoured car platoons, and a company of light tanks equipped with

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<sup>410</sup> "Impiego di gas," 12 and 20 March 1942, NARA T-821/60/0885-86. Burgwyn, "General Roatta's War," 321.

<sup>411</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 72.

<sup>412</sup> "Notiziario n. 230," 20 December 1941, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, December 1941, allegati. "Formazione di marcia della autocolonna," 28 April 1942, NARA T-821/70/0714. "Relazione sulla imboscata subita dall'autocolonna rifornimento viveri ai presidi nella mattina del 10 agosto sulla rotabile Mrzla Vodica," 12 August 1942, NARA T-821/62/0516-19.

<sup>413</sup> "Sintesi della riunione tenuta dall'Eccellenza il capo di Stato Maggiore Generale il 17 maggio 1942," VCSMG, 3:487-88. "Sezione autoprotetti," 31 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October-November 1942, allegati.

<sup>414</sup> "Direttive ed ordini dati dal Comando 2<sup>a</sup> Armata alle truppe dipendenti in merito alle operazioni in Bosnia," May 1942, NARA T-821/70/0592-601.

flamethrowers that could be parceled out accordingly.<sup>415</sup> The usefulness of the flamethrower tankettes available to Second Army was limited by the two-wheeled fuel trailer that some models had to tow behind them. In its own operations, the VI Corps found these vehicles too slow and unwieldy for use in rugged terrain.<sup>416</sup> Rather than accompanying Italian columns into the mountains, armour often remained in the valleys to bolster blocking forces in *rastrellamenti*.<sup>417</sup>

Italian aviation suffered its own limitations in Yugoslavia, but remained a significant component of the army's counterinsurgency strategy primarily for its moral effect. The aircraft available to Supersloda suffered from "precarious conditions of personnel and materiel."<sup>418</sup> The Italians had only a handful of obsolete reconnaissance planes and Br.20 bombers in the theatre, and it has been argued that aviation played less of a role in the Balkans than it did in Ethiopia. The number of sorties flown was relatively low and the pilots lacked training for the geographic conditions of the region.<sup>419</sup> Nonetheless, commanders like Furio Monticelli considered air power one of Italy's greatest assets in counterinsurgency because of its terror value: "Aviation is a nightmare for the populations [...] in fact, if on a day of good weather a couple of aircraft could bomb and machinegun a few areas designated by this command, the moral results would be enormous."<sup>420</sup> Italian commanders favoured air power as a means to carry out reprisals against otherwise inaccessible locales.<sup>421</sup> During operations, aircraft bombed villages and

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<sup>415</sup> A complete order of battle for XI Corps is available in "Dislocazione reparti XI C.A.," n.d., AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>416</sup> "Carri 'L' lanciafiamme," 29 March and 12 May 1942, NARA T-821/65/0774–79. On the L3 tankette and its *lanciafiamme* variant, see Nicolas Pignato, *Italian Armoured Vehicles of World War Two* (Carrollton, TX: Squadron/Signal, 2004), 7–19.

<sup>417</sup> "Relazione operazione 'Alfa'," 9 November 1942, NARA T-821/63/0007–21.

<sup>418</sup> "Costituzione del 'Comando Aviazione Slovenia–Dalmazia,'" May 1942, DSCS, 7/II:40.

<sup>419</sup> Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 364.

<sup>420</sup> "Notiziario giornaliero," 21 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 569, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, December 1941–January 1942, allegati.

<sup>421</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 1 and 4 March 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 769, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, February–March 1942. "Rapporto situazione per la quindicina dal 16 al 31 dicembre 1941," 5 January 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 585, DS VI Corps, January 1942, allegati. "Relazione sulle

dropped propaganda.<sup>422</sup> After operations, with Italian manpower reduced in number and exhausted, commanders used aviation as an unsatisfactory replacement for mobile forces. They hoped that the bombing and strafing of “the most dangerous localities” would prevent the “reconstruction” of Partisan organization and force populations to “return under our protection,” recognizing that “future life” depended upon Italian protection.<sup>423</sup> To ensure the safety of Italian pilots, bombing typically was conducted from high altitude; however, this was not very accurate and gave any Partisans in the area time to flee.<sup>424</sup> The most likely result of a bombing run was the destruction of civilian property and infrastructure.

The weapon that Italian commanders relied on most heavily for its moral and practical effect was artillery. Although Rome could not meet all of Second Army’s requests for additional mortars — whose relative mobility and high angle of fire was particularly useful in mountain warfare — Italian garrisons, mobile columns, and armoured trains generally were well-endowed with mortars, howitzers, and guns of various calibre.<sup>425</sup> In preparation for operations in Slovenia, Roatta and Robotti advised the use of artillery en masse to boost Italian morale and to “terrorize both the partisan formations and the elements more or less conniving with them.”<sup>426</sup> The operations commenced with hour-long bombardments using heavy 149 mm and 152 mm guns. Italian intelligence did not know the precise positions of the Partisans or their

azioni svolte dal II° Btg. nei giorni 11, 12, 13 e 14 giugno 1942,” 15 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1942, allegati.

<sup>422</sup> Dalmazzo to Roatta, 9 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati. “Notiziario settimanale n. 74,” 7 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati.

<sup>423</sup> “Operazioni del V Rgpt. G.a.F. nel periodo 1°–22 agosto,” 23 August 1942, NARA T-821/62/1343.

<sup>424</sup> “Norme tattiche dei partigiani,” 21 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>425</sup> “Reparti mortai da 81 per rgt. bersaglieri,” 20 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati. “Armi a tiro curvo per la piazza di Cattaro,” 16 September 1942, NARA T-821/51/0349.

<sup>426</sup> “Operazioni in Slovenia,” 8 June 1942, NARA T-821/62/0361. “Ciclo operative contro le bande ribelli,” 26 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, May–June 1942, allegati.

headquarters, so the artillery targeted villages that were considered “totally supporting or strongly favourable” towards the insurgents.<sup>427</sup> Army chaplain Pietro Brignoli confirmed that civilian women and children were killed in these barrages.<sup>428</sup>

As in Ethiopia, Italian commanders displayed scant regard for collateral damage caused by artillery fire. They did not hesitate to fire on inhabited villages, especially in the course of anti-partisan operations. During a *rastrellamento* conducted by battalions of the Sassari Division north of Bosansko Grahovo in April 1942, the accompanying batteries hammered any villages they approached with artillery fire before the infantry arrived: “in this way the operations are conducted without any loss on our part.” On one occasion, while a battery of 100/17 howitzers laid fire on a village where “communists” had been spotted, “a delegation from the town rushed up to the command of one of our nearby battalions with a white flag asking that we stop firing” since the Partisans had fled. Alongside the desire to limit their own casualties, Italian commanders in this case considered collateral damage acceptable because it took place in territory they considered hostile and whose populations therefore were subject to all the repressive measures laid out in the 3C circular. During the operation, villages that were not destroyed by artillery were burned to the ground since “they had gone over to the enemy.”<sup>429</sup> Using the same rationale, officers of the XVIII Corps shrugged off Croatian protests over civilian deaths. While admitting that Italian artillery fire “produced many victims,” Italian officers argued that the presence of Partisans in an area justified these casualties.<sup>430</sup> Conversely, Casanuova recalled that the commander of his regiment’s mortar company preferred to direct a few shots around the outskirts of a village “in order to gently announce our arrival without harming the remaining population.”<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> “Rastrellamento zona: Grosuplje-Skofljica-Turjak-Zdenska Vas,” 14 July 1942, and “Attacco posizione del Kocevski Rog,” 7 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1036, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, July–August 1942, allegati. Casanuova, *I°/51*, 117.

<sup>428</sup> Brignoli, *Santa Messa per i miei fucilati*, 25.

<sup>429</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 5–6 April 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, April 1942.

<sup>430</sup> “Operazioni delle FF.AA. italiane nel villaggio di Zrnovizza presso Spalato,” 1 September 1943, NARA T-821/403/0289-90.

<sup>431</sup> Casanuova, *I°/51*, 89.



Artillery was seen as a way to make up for Italian weaknesses and demonstrate that Second Army still had destructive power. By 1942, the Partisans often enjoyed parity with Italian formations in terms of small arms and machineguns. Because garrison defence relied heavily on machineguns, Second Army lacked sufficient automatic weapons to support its mobile formations in offensive operations. Many of the army's machineguns were obsolete and unreliable models from the Great War.<sup>432</sup> Like aviation, artillery offered Italian commanders a way to project power without risking their own troops. During the winters of 1942 and 1943, garrisons disrupted Partisan movements and conducted "reprisals" against nearby villages and dwellings with artillery salvos fired from the safety of their own fortifications.<sup>433</sup> These practices displayed none of the concern for counterproductive excesses that Italian commanders sometimes voiced in their directives.

As in Ethiopia, the use of heavy weapons with significant destructive power and limited accuracy made collateral damage inevitable, especially when combined with an attitude that civilian populations and infrastructure in hostile territory were legitimate targets. Robotti's orders for the eleventh set of operations in Slovenia aimed at "not only the encapsulation and annihilation of the rebels, still hidden in the area, but, especially, the destruction of their supporters and reserves so as to render life impossible to formations that would later try to return to the region to reorganize."<sup>434</sup> During the withdrawal of garrisons from Zone III, Armellini adopted a scorched-earth policy on allied Croatian soil. He ordered his men to remove or destroy everything of value, leaving only a "void" to the Partisans. Factories in Drvar were systematically dismantled and

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<sup>432</sup> "Rapporto situazione relativo al mese di luglio 1942," 28 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati. "Armi automatiche extra-organico," 6 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati.

<sup>433</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 24 February 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 769, DS 12<sup>th</sup> "Sassari" Division, February–March 1942. "Attività operativa," 11 January 1943, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1189, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, January–February 1943, allegati.

<sup>434</sup> "Rastrellamento zona Gorianci," 19 October 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1189, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, September–October 1942, allegati.

several dozen tonnes of scrap metal sent back to Italy as war booty.<sup>435</sup> Later operations in the Velebit Mountains intended to reduce the Croatian hinterland north of the Dalmatian border to a wasteland where nothing could survive. As part of this strategy, Italian aircraft machine-gunned livestock in the hills.<sup>436</sup> Armellini proudly announced that if “rebel losses were serious, even more serious was the destruction carried out [by the troops]: villages, resources, wells, etc.”<sup>437</sup>

While capable of tremendous destruction, the Italian Second Army never was a particularly effective fighting machine. It suffered from subpar armament and leadership. Its officers and men received little specialized training in guerrilla warfare. Even when Robotti instituted a series of lectures for officers and non-commissioned officers of his XI Corps towards the end of 1942, the topics covered were very basic — repeating many of the precepts from the 3C circular — and the reading materials to accompany the lectures largely were irrelevant to counterinsurgency.<sup>438</sup> Circumstances prevented the commanders of Second Army from implementing fully their vision for deployment and operations. Nonetheless, 1942 marked the apogee of the Italian army’s strength in Yugoslavia, with relatively fresh manpower and under the fewest political and military constraints. The grand operations of 1942 demonstrate how Italian commanders preferred to conduct counterinsurgency given relative freedom to do so. These operations closely paralleled the colonial “police operations” that had characterized the middle phase of counterinsurgency in Ethiopia, especially in their reliance on heavy weapons and

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<sup>435</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 5–6, 10 June 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May–June 1942.

<sup>436</sup> “Relazione sulla operazione del Velebit,” 2 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 21 and 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942.

<sup>437</sup> “Situazione dopo operazione del Velebit e attività futura,” 25 July 1942, NARA T-821/63/0854–56.

<sup>438</sup> “Conferenza,” 20 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati. Lecture topics included: “Counter guerrilla warfare in Slovenia: how it must be understood and conducted”; “Reconnaissance in counter guerrilla warfare”; “Security in counter guerrilla warfare”; “Devices and tricks in counter guerrilla warfare”; “Purpose and importance of fortification”; and, “Will to command.” Required reading included manuals on the use of armoured units, combined arms, and infantry training for the eastern front.

*rastrellamenti* that, combined with harsh reprisal policies, targeted civilian populations and property as much as the insurgents themselves.

## Irregular Forces

The Italian army's use of locally recruited auxiliary forces in Yugoslavia also demonstrated strong parallels with colonial practice in Ethiopia. It has been argued that generals with colonial experience especially leaned towards a pro-Četnik policy.<sup>439</sup> This certainly was the case with Pirzio Biroli in Montenegro. However, it is worth bearing in mind that Italian generals in Ethiopia had mixed feelings about irregular soldiers, which they often deemed militarily ineffective and politically unreliable. Armellini advocated disbanding irregular units in Amhara in 1939, but in 1942 he defended Second Army's alliances with "Četnik organizations" as "extremely useful in the struggle against communism."<sup>440</sup> The army's eventual reliance on irregular bands in Yugoslavia primarily came as a response to local circumstances, which in many respects did parallel those encountered in East Africa.

We have already seen that the development of irregular forces within Second Army originated in occupied Croatia, primarily for political motives of expansion. By the middle of 1942, these motives had been trumped by military necessity. Italian forces in Yugoslavia were short on manpower and they lacked any equivalents to the colonial *askari* troops that could function as specialized counter guerrilla units. Given the army's reluctance or inability to train its regular divisions for unconventional warfare, and its poor relationship with the Croatian armed forces and Ustaša militia, Italian commanders turned to local Serb auxiliaries as a less-than-satisfactory substitute.<sup>441</sup> During the first half of 1942, low-level negotiations and arrangements with individual Četnik bands

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<sup>439</sup> Sala, *Fascismo italiano e Slavi del sud*, 304. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 184–85.

<sup>440</sup> "Situazione," 25 May 1942, NARA T-821/65/0976–79.

<sup>441</sup> On Roatta's continued skepticism regarding cooperation with Croatian forces, see "Contatti col Governo Croato," 20 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati. Calls for greater use of Croatian forces at the end of 1942 amounted to little. "Collaborazione militare italo-croata," 28 September 1942, DSCS, 8/II:22–23. "Direttive operative per il periodo autunnale ed invernale," 11 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 881, DS XVIII Corps, September 1942, allegati.

transformed itself into policy.<sup>442</sup> By June, the VI and XVIII Corps were subsidizing, training, and arming irregular bands to help garrison territory that was to be abandoned as part of the army's efforts to consolidate its manpower for mobile operations. Italian commands employed auxiliary forces offensively as well, launching *rastrellamento* operations "conducted only by Četniks" with Italian artillery support.<sup>443</sup>

Over the summer, irregular territorial battalions and mobile formations gained official sanction under the auspices of Supersloda's *Milizia Volontaria Anticomunista* [MVAC], which became integral to the army's strategy in Croatia.<sup>444</sup> Armellini envisioned filling the "void" left by his Velebit operations with the deployment of "Četnik" bands.<sup>445</sup> As the XVIII Corps sought to conserve its manpower for additional grand operations, Armellini's successor ordered division and garrison commanders to avoid autonomous operations. At the same time, Spigo placed no restrictions on the use of MVAC forces, instead urging commanders to lean on them as much as possible.<sup>446</sup> Thus, irregular bands took over much of the work previously conducted in small-scale patrols and *rastrellamenti* at the lower level. While Italian infantry remained on alert in their garrisons, MVAC columns — reinforced with Italian artillery, mortars, and machinegun platoons — combed the surrounding countryside.<sup>447</sup> By autumn, the XVIII

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<sup>442</sup> The early development of the Sassari Division's and XVIII Corps's policy towards Serb bands is summarized in "Linea di condotta," 23 April 1942, NARA T-821/402/0974-78.

<sup>443</sup> "Notiziario n. 388," 29 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 5, 9, 13, and 21 June 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, May-June 1942.

<sup>444</sup> "Direttive operative per il periodo autunnale ed invernale," 31 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April-September 1942, allegati. "M.V.A.C.," 13 September 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, September-October 1942, allegati.

<sup>445</sup> "Situazione dopo operazione del Velebit e attività futura," 25 July 1942, NARA T-821/63/0854-56.

<sup>446</sup> Spigo to Berardi, 9 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, July-August 1942, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 11-12 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, July-August 1942.

<sup>447</sup> See, for example, Sassari Division Command war diary, 23 and 27 August 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, July-August 1942. Armellini's objective was to expand the tasks of the MVAC, "rendering it — theoretically — equal to the employment of our troops." "Formazioni M.V.A.C.," 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

Corps employed 5,100 Orthodox Serbs in its MVAC formations. The VI Corps incorporated another 6,000 or 7,000 “Četniks” as anti-Communist militia.<sup>448</sup>

By that point, MVAC organizations had extended to the annexed territories as well. In Dalmatia, “anti-communist bands” were recruited by the Governorate but controlled, equipped, and supplied by army divisions.<sup>449</sup> In Slovenia, where there was not a large pool of Serb recruits to draw from, the XI Corps proceeded cautiously with its use of irregular forces. In April, Slovene Catholic political leaders had approached Italian authorities with an offer for military collaboration in return for greater administrative autonomy in Slovenia. The Italians rejected any political concessions, so clericalist forces clandestinely established their own bands that cooperated on an ad hoc basis with Italian units during operations in the summer. Roatta sought to take advantage of this situation by meeting with the Bishop of Ljubljana, Gregorij Rožman. The bishop’s “very favorable” reaction has been described as a decisive turning point for Slovene collaborationism.<sup>450</sup>

Even so, Robotti remained wary. Collaborationist Catholic groups still desired greater political autonomy or independence, as well as an end to mass operations, Fascistization, and Italianization. Robotti continued to reject concessions as harmful to Italian sovereignty and prestige. Instead, he demanded collaboration on his own terms, more consistent with the relationship between a “beaten people” and a “victorious” one.<sup>451</sup> Robotti warned Rožman to stop “fiddling around with political conditions” [*premesse programmatiche*] and accept military collaboration solely on the basis of anti-communism. His written appeals to the bishop and the Slovene population emphasized the horrors of the Communist programme and the violent atrocities committed by the

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<sup>448</sup> “Sintesi degli argomenti trattati nella riunione del pomeriggio 12 ottobre a Spalato,” 14 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati.

<sup>449</sup> “Trasformazione del Comando ‘Truppe Zara’ in comando di Divisione,” 6 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 993, DS Second Army, April–September 1942, allegati. Talpo, *Dalmazia*, 2:622, 633.

<sup>450</sup> Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” 238. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 101–102, 107.

<sup>451</sup> “Memoriale della ‘Gioventù cattolica universitaria e delle scuole medie di Lubiana,’” 13 September 1942, NARA T-821/402/0722–66. “Situazione politica in Lubiana: Azione del Vescovo,” 6 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

Liberation Front.<sup>452</sup> This propaganda and, more likely, economic factors helped the XI Corps recruit 4,500 members for its MVAC by the end of the year.<sup>453</sup> The subsequent “Slovenization” of the army’s repression policy — which unleashed a chaotic year of sectarian violence between Partisans and anti-Communists in the province — was a response to the exhaustion, demoralization, and reduced manpower within Italian formations.<sup>454</sup> As in Croatia, it was hoped that Slovene MVAC bands would police areas lightly garrisoned by Italian troops and act as vanguards or flankers in Italian operations, constituting “the elite in the struggle against the partisan.” Italian commands still did not trust these formations to operate en masse, preferring to keep them in company-sized units more than a day’s march from each other.<sup>455</sup>

Lingering doubts over the loyalty of MVAC bands led Robotti intentionally to restrict the military effectiveness of his militia units. He favoured heterogeneous units — made up of multiple political and ethnic groups — to avoid “excessive harmony” [*affiatamento*] within auxiliary formations. He armed his militia primarily with captured French rifles and machineguns, for which parts and ammunition — limited to thirty rounds per man — were difficult to come by. As well as ensuring that any weapons that fell into enemy hands were of limited use, this practice was intended to keep MVAC formations reliant upon Italian commands.<sup>456</sup> The XVIII Corps adopted similar measures

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<sup>452</sup> “Situazione in Slovenia,” 16 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati. “Atrocità comunisti,” 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1058, DS XI Corps, July–August 1942, allegati. “Manifesto murale,” 22 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati. “Situazione in Slovenia,” 8 December 1942, NARA T-821/60/0906–910.

<sup>453</sup> “Notiziario politico militare n. 68,” 15 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>454</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 107. Gregor Joseph Kranjc, “Propaganda and the Partisan War in Ljubljana 1943–45,” in Shepherd and Pattinson, *War in a Twilight World*, 233–35.

<sup>455</sup> “Organizzazione autunno-invernale del territorio di giurisdizione,” 26 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, September–October 1942, allegati. “Direttive per l’attività invernale,” 30 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1942, allegati. “Precisazioni varie,” 1 January 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1943, allegati.

<sup>456</sup> “Guardie armate,” 3 September 1942, and “Milizia Volontaria Anti Comunista,” 4 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, September 1942, allegati.

in occupied Croatia.<sup>457</sup> Given that Italian commands expected MVAC forces to perform a wide variety of tasks and to operate independently, the level of armament for these formations was inadequate. The Partisans quickly learned to target MVAC formations, inflicting heavy losses. A series of defeats in November led to “dejection” among Slovene auxiliaries, precisely because they found themselves outgunned. This forced Robotti and his successor, Gambarà, to revise earlier limitations on the armament of MVAC units.<sup>458</sup> The Sassari Division’s MVAC office in Croatia echoed these sentiments, arguing that the poor armament granted to auxiliaries reflected negatively on the prestige of “a great army like ours.” Noting that its MVAC formations often had to abandon their positions due to lack of ammunition, the office asked to establish magazines for MVAC forces and to dole out more automatic weapons.<sup>459</sup> The lack of armaments and the growing, largely accurate, conviction that Italian commands assigned the most difficult assignments to the militia contributed to poor morale within MVAC formations in Croatia and Slovenia.<sup>460</sup>

Poor discipline made the bands prone to committing excesses. In Slovenia, Gambarà noted the tendency of MVAC personnel to operate “*pro domo sua*” as the province descended into civil war.<sup>461</sup> In January 1943 he disbanded a unit of auxiliary “secret police” that had gained a reputation for harsh behaviour and had provoked public

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<sup>457</sup> “M.V.A.C.,” 13 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942, allegati. Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 120.

<sup>458</sup> “Situazione in Slovenia,” 3 December 1942, and “Relazione mensile,” 18 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati. “Precisazioni varie,” 1 January 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1943, allegati.

<sup>459</sup> “Armamento e munizionamento formazioni M.V.A.C.,” 23 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942, allegati. The document, dated “23/&/42.XX,” is misfiled. Because the “9” and “&” keys were adjacent on Italian typewriters of the era, the document most likely dates from September.

<sup>460</sup> “Azioni della M.V.A.C.,” 16 November 1942, Berardi to Piazzoni, 24 December 1942, and Berardi to Piazzoni, 26 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, November–December 1942, allegati. “Direttive impartite dall’Eccellenza comandante nel rapporto tenuto presso il comando di C.A. ai comandanti di G.U. il 19 novembre 1942,” 19 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>461</sup> “Precisazioni varie,” 1 January 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1943, allegati. Gambarà’s circular was forwarded to the units and garrisons in the Cacciatori Division’s sector on 12 January.

protests in Ljubljana.<sup>462</sup> Greater excesses were committed by MVAC formations and allied Serb bands in Croatia, where indiscipline was combined with ethnic conflict and a desire to avenge Ustaša massacres. Many Četnik leaders shared what has been described as a genocidal ideology. Marko Attila Hoare has argued that Bosnian Četniks consciously took advantage of Italian protection to cleanse territories of Catholics and Muslims — by extermination, expulsion, or assimilation — in the name of Great Serb imperialism. The Italian army, he contends, effectively “aided and abetted” Četnik mass violence, further alienating non-Serbs from the Italian administration.<sup>463</sup>

The Great Serb nationalism espoused by their Četnik allies was no secret to Italian generals. Less clear is the extent to which Italian officers appreciated the ideological roots of Četnik violence. Long before the establishment of the MVAC, they were well aware of the tendency of Četnik bands to commit excesses against Croats and Muslims.<sup>464</sup> After the withdrawal of his troops from Foča at the end of 1941, Pivano learned that Četniks had occupied the town and murdered hundreds of Muslims. These events repeated themselves the following summer.<sup>465</sup> By spring 1942, the Sassari Division had established a close working relationship with Momčilo Đujić, one of the principle Četnik leaders in western Bosnia. Monticelli knew that Đujić’s men issued threats and conducted reprisals of their own against civilian populations but, in the midst of anti-partisan operations, he was not overly concerned about it. The band left a swathe of destruction in its wake during a series of operations in April.<sup>466</sup> Even after Đujić’s

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<sup>462</sup> Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 108. The function of the secret police unit is described in “Situazione in Slovenia,” 16 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

<sup>463</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 21, 143–54, 171.

<sup>464</sup> “Notiziario n. 179,” 30 October 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 584, DS VI Corps, October 1941, allegati. 12 November 1941, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 569, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, October–November 1941, allegati.

<sup>465</sup> “Notiziario informativo n. 92,” 2 January 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 652, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1942, allegati. On the massacre of August 1942, see Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico*, 125–26.

<sup>466</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 10 and 26 April 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, April 1942. On Đujić, see Jozo Tomasevich, *The Chetniks* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), 158, 177, 218, 428; and, Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 514.



band was formally incorporated into the MVAC, the Sassari Division reported that individual members tended to “wander about plundering,” but this was dismissed as reflecting their bandit-like “nature,” made evident by the tendency of rival bands to raid each other’s territory.<sup>467</sup> More revealing were statements by Serb leaders voicing their intentions to “raze Croatian towns to the ground.”<sup>468</sup>

There is little evidence that Italian commands actively encouraged internecine ethnic violence between Serbs and Croats.<sup>469</sup> However, Italian propaganda geared towards Serb populations came close to doing so, at least indirectly. Leaflets distributed by the Sassari Division in August 1942 reminded Serbs of “what happened in this land in the not distant summer of 1941” and criticized the Communists for seeking “the brotherly union of Serbs and Croats.”<sup>470</sup> The Italians appealed for collaboration in forming local anti-Communist militias, since “only the Italians with the help of the Četniks have brought you peace, tranquility and work.”<sup>471</sup> By directly praising the “Četniks,” the Sassari Division effectively endorsed the Četnik movement and Serb nationalism. Without making explicit promises, another leaflet spoke of national revival under Italian tutelage.<sup>472</sup> The objective of these leaflets was to promote collaboration and dissuade civilians from supporting the Partisans, not to foment ethnic violence. However, by using Serb nationalism and anti-Croat sentiment to counter Communist propaganda and keep the population divided, Italian propagandists exploited ethnic conflict. The particular

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<sup>467</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 20 and 27 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942.

<sup>468</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero informativo,” 3 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>469</sup> Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 110–11.

<sup>470</sup> “Alle popolazioni della Lika, Bosnia e Dalmazia,” August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>471</sup> Untitled leaflet (allegato 55a), August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>472</sup> “Popolo della Bosnia, Lika e Dalmazia,” August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

arguments employed here reflected the themes used in Četnik propaganda, which had proved successful in eastern Bosnia earlier that year.<sup>473</sup>

Italian commands largely excused the excesses committed by their MVAC detachments. Responding to protests from Croatian authorities, Berardi claimed that it was absurd “to expect the rigid observance of legality in a country subject to so much disorder and full guerrilla warfare.”<sup>474</sup> He further justified Četnik behaviour on the basis that Partisan agents intentionally provoked violence between Serbs and Croats.<sup>475</sup> Facing pressure from Zagreb, Roatta initially claimed to have little knowledge of Četnik violence against Croat civilians. When he later admitted that excesses were a problem, he promised to instruct Četnik leaders not to undertake “anti-Croatian actions” and to implement tougher punishments for perpetrators.<sup>476</sup> However, up to the end of the occupation, Italian commanders continued to defend their MVAC forces against Croatian charges, citing a lack of evidence or blaming Partisans for masquerading as Četniks.<sup>477</sup>

The army’s ability to rein in the behaviour of its irregular formations was limited by the lack of control it exercised over them. The MVAC units remained under the command of local leaders, who were far more successful at recruiting followers than the Italians were.<sup>478</sup> Recruits and leaders often served on their own terms. Even in the mobile bands, few wanted to stray far from their communities, which they sought to protect.<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 201–202.

<sup>474</sup> “Segnalazione del Prefetto Sincic,” 23 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942, allegati.

<sup>475</sup> “Notiziario giornaliero informativo,” 18 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>476</sup> “Seduta del 19 settembre 1941 [*sic*] a Zagabria,” 21 September 1942, NARA T-821/52/0328–37. “Accordi col Poglavnik circa le formazioni M.V.A.C. ‘cetniche’,” 18 October 1942, and “M.V.A.C.,” 31 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati.

<sup>477</sup> “Comportamento di cetnici,” 4 May 1943, NARA T-821/294/0476–77. “Eccessi di cetnici nella Provincia di Ogulin,” 17 August 1943, NARA T-821/403/0333–35.

<sup>478</sup> When the Sassari Division began actively recruiting militia for its MVAC bands, it took three days for one lone volunteer to present himself. Berardi assumed that recruits preferred to enlist directly with the bands. Sassari Division Command war diary, 24–26 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942.

<sup>479</sup> “Premessa” to the Sassari Division Command war diary, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, November–December 1942.

Đujić continued to refer to his formation as the “Četnik Dinara Division” that had been organized in January 1942. He conducted his own operations and sometimes refused to follow Italian direction.<sup>480</sup> The Italians provided the bands with former Yugoslavian army officers and non-commissioned officers to improve their professionalism, but soon complained that these men were prone to drinking or gambling and often proved incompetent. Replacing them with Italian officers was deemed impracticable, given the “insurmountable difficulties” posed by language and culture.” Each formation was supposed to have two Italian liaison officers, but a lack of personnel ensured that some bands were not directly supervised at all.<sup>481</sup> The same problems manifested themselves in Slovenia.<sup>482</sup> Although Zanussi later claimed that the main task of Italian liaison officers in MVAC units was to “guide them towards more humanitarian behaviour,” their main role was not to enforce discipline but to assist the organization and training of bands for improved tactical control during joint operations with Italian units.<sup>483</sup> While Berardi lamented looting and violence committed by his irregulars against Croats, generally he was content to leave discipline in the hands of their Serb leaders.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 2 and 5 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942. “Fratelli serbi e sorelle serbe,” n.d., AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, November–December 1942, allegati. On the formation of the Dinara Division, see Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 291.

<sup>481</sup> “Formazioni M.V.A.C.,” 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati. “M.V.A.C.,” 13 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 29 August 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942. Sassari Division Command war diary, 20 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942. Gobetti, *L’occupazione allegra*, 114.

<sup>482</sup> “Nuova ripartizione territoriale,” 29 January 1943, and “Precisazioni Varie n. 1,” 12 February 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, January–February 1943, allegati. “Difficoltà inerenti alla nuova sistemazione territoriale della ‘Cacciatori’,” 1 May 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, May–June 1943, allegati.

<sup>483</sup> Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d’Italia*, 1:249. Sassari Division Command war diary, 25 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942. “M.V.A.C.,” 13 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942, allegati.

<sup>484</sup> For example, Berardi approved of Đujić’s disciplinary response to an assault on a Croatian officer. Sassari Division Command war diary, 6 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, September–October 1942.

In Croatia, both MVAC and independent Četnik bands operated with almost complete autonomy.<sup>485</sup> This was a tactical and strategic preference of Italian commands. Early experience suggested that irregular bands were best employed on their own or in peripheral roles, “because it is impossible to coordinate actions of certain importance with them.”<sup>486</sup> Army and corps commanders hoped that the MVAC formations would solve their problems providing garrisons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By the end of 1942, the VI Corps relied on a combination of MVAC formations and independent Četnik or Montenegrin bands to control Herzegovina without Italian oversight. Meanwhile, the XVIII Corps had abandoned Croatian territory in favour of “forming a defensive wall around annexed Dalmatia: in front of it either friendly populations with respective units loyal to us, but that fight alone, or the enemy.”<sup>487</sup> In these circumstances, which placed vast zones in the hands of Četnik bands, Second Army could not realistically expect to exercise control over its irregular forces.

As we have seen, Italian reprisal policy begat excesses. By tasking their unsupervised MVAC formations with carrying out reprisals, Italian commands effectively encouraged excesses. Prior to the establishment of the MVAC, units of the Sassari Division on more than one occasion turned over captured Partisans or suspect civilians to the Četniks for execution.<sup>488</sup> When possible, Italian commanders opted to spare their own troops the grisly work of conducting reprisals by offloading the task to irregular forces. Two weeks into the destructive Velebit operations, the Sassari Division ordered its troops to “abstain from carrying out burnings and destruction, tasks that have

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<sup>485</sup> Gobetti, “The Royal Army’s Betrayal,” 196.

<sup>486</sup> “Rastrellamento zona Tenin – Drnis – Roski Slap,” 3 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1942, allegati. “Relazione sul rastrellamento della zona Tenin–Dernis–Roskislav,” 6 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942, allegati.

<sup>487</sup> Roatta memorandum, 11 August 1942, DSCS, 7/II:312–14. “Notiziario politico militare n. 68,” 15 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati. Piazzoni to Berardi, 29 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>488</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 26 February 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 769, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, February–March 1942. Sassari Division Command war diary, 13 May 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, May–June 1942.

been given exclusively to the M.V.A.P. [*Milizia Volontaria Antipartigiana*].”<sup>489</sup> Roatta assured Croatian officials that he could avoid Četnik excesses by keeping his bands busy in operations.<sup>490</sup> But, since Italian commands permitted harsh measures against populations during operations, this hardly proved the case. During a major anti-partisan operation in October 1942, the VI Corps reported that its MVAC forces committed “some excesses.” They burned 30 homes and killed 18 people in one village, prompting 3,000 Catholics to flee the surrounding area. While General Santovito promised a court martial for the leaders of these “raiders,” he excused the wholesale destruction of other villages as justified because his MVAC formations had encountered armed resistance. Presumably to prove the even-handedness of his auxiliaries, Santovito added that, of the 56 villagers killed in another village, 13 had been Orthodox.<sup>491</sup>

Despite directives that prohibited unjustified and disproportionate reprisals by MVAC units, operations conducted by the VI and XVIII Corps the following month similarly were plagued by excesses and a lack of Italian control.<sup>492</sup> During the entire series of operations, the VI Corps recorded 681 Partisans killed and 337 firearms captured at a cost of 192 MVAC casualties. The participating Italian units recorded not a single casualty. This reflects that the irregular troops bore the brunt of combat alone in the mountains while the heavier Italian columns remained stationary in Prozor and Mostar. Given that real combat against organized Partisan formations clearly had taken place, and that the region was deemed “entirely Partisan — as demonstrated by the writings and posters found in every house,” Santovito considered the reprisals conducted by his MVAC forces justified. These included the executions of “inhabitants that showed signs of connivance with the Partisans.” Santovito also condoned the murder of a

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<sup>489</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 28 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, July–August 1942. During July and early August, the Sassari Division referred to its mobile bands by the acronym MVAP.

<sup>490</sup> “Sunto degli argomenti trattati nel ‘convegno di Zagabria del 19.9.’42.XX’,” 19 September 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati.

<sup>491</sup> “Sintesi degli argomenti trattati nella riunione del pomeriggio 12 ottobre a Spalato,” 14 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati.

<sup>492</sup> “Operazione ‘Alfa’: direttive n. 2,” 29 September 1942, NARA T-821/63/0392–97. “Relazione sulle operazioni ‘Beta’ del XVIII C.A.,” 9 November 1942, NARA T-821/63/0055–65.

Croatian soldier and two women as a “natural reaction” to having come under fire and as the unavoidable result of the “primitive and emotional character of the troops.”<sup>493</sup>

Santovito suggested that future “mishaps” could be avoided by disciplinary measures including reductions to rations, arrest, and physical beatings [*bastonatura*].<sup>494</sup> While reliance upon irregular forces was not necessarily a trait of Italian colonial warfare doctrine, Italian commanders certainly treated their local auxiliaries as racially inferior colonial subjects. Zanussi attributed the ineffectiveness of his Četnik collaborators to a “Balkan” tendency to deceive oneself as to one’s own abilities and importance.<sup>495</sup> Combined with the desire to avoid Italian casualties, this racist mindset made the militia expendable in the eyes of Italian generals. Warning his subordinates of the possibility of Partisans masquerading as Četniks in order to approach and surprise Italian positions, Berardi insisted that it was “better to kill a Četnik by accident than to lose an Italian soldier.”<sup>496</sup>

There are obvious similarities between the Italian army’s reliance and use of irregular forces in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia. In neither case did Italian commanders initially envision employing auxiliary formations to such a large degree. Their development was a response to successful insurgency and their main military purpose was to bolster the army’s insufficient manpower while limiting Italian casualties. As a result, Italian commands assigned irregular formations with operational tasks that their own colonial doctrine and experience had warned against. Predictably, the bands proved unreliable and ill-equipped for the objectives assigned to them. The army expected irregular formations to operate independently, but was reluctant and probably unable to provide its bands with the arms necessary to make them self-sufficient. The Italians also lacked the means or desire to supervise directly all irregular formations. Italian generals largely accepted the excessive looting and violence committed by these units as the cost

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<sup>493</sup> “Relazione operazione ‘Alfa’,” 9 November 1942, NARA T-821/63/0007–21.

<sup>494</sup> “Relazione operazione ‘Alfa’,” 9 November 1942, NARA T-821/63/0007–21.

<sup>495</sup> Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrophe d’Italia*, 1:194.

<sup>496</sup> “Modalità di azione,” 7 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 999, DS 151st Infantry Regiment (“Sassari”), June–July 1942, allegati.

for their support. From the Italian perspective, the violence of the bands was consistent with the military and cultural characteristics of the occupied territories and with the army's terror-based approach to counterinsurgency.

## De-escalation and Defeat

The evolution of Second Army's counterinsurgency strategy culminated in its ambitious cycle of grand operations in 1942. This was the year in which Italian commanders were best able to act as they wished, under the fewest military and political constraints. For the better part of the year, Italian commanders stubbornly clung to their approach, despite the failure of terror and mobile forces to achieve their objectives neither against potent Partisan formations in Croatia nor against agile guerrilla bands in Slovenia. By the end of 1942, the Italian army in Yugoslavia had shot its bolt. Reverses on other fronts forced Supersloda to release some of its forces and effectively "wait for the end of the war."<sup>497</sup> As had occurred towards the end of the Italian occupation in Ethiopia, failed operations, exhausted troops, and dwindling manpower reserves compelled Italian commands to de-escalate their repression policy to a limited and inconsistent degree without demonstrating a wholesale shift in mentality.

While destructive for the civilian populations and occasionally for the insurgents, the grand operations of 1942 failed to achieve their main objectives of annihilating all Partisan formations and decapitating their leadership. Recognition of this failure prompted the military leadership to re-evaluate its tactics in counterinsurgency, but only partially. At the end of October 1942, Army Chief of Staff Vittorio Ambrosio issued to Italian commands in every theatre a sixty-four-page circular that amounted to a generic manual on counterinsurgency.<sup>498</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 107. This interpretation is shared by Eric Gobetti, "1943: L'attesa della fine," chap. 11 in *L'occupazione allegra*.

<sup>498</sup> *Combattimenti episodici ed azioni di guerriglia*, (Rome: SMRE, Ufficio Addestramento, 1942), accessed 26 August 2016, <http://www.icsm.it/articoli/documenti/docistorici.html>. Ambrosio's manual also was intended to provide guidelines for combating Allied commando units and special forces.

On the whole, the manual was not particularly remarkable. It paid lip service to the political aspect of counterinsurgency, but devoted only a single page to propaganda and economic activity while confirming that displays of force through radical repressive measures remained “fundamental” [*basilare*] to military occupations.<sup>499</sup> It emphasized the need for basic training in the same small-unit tactics that Italian commanders had found wanting since 1941, although it now added that rifle squads should receive additional training on how to burn buildings.<sup>500</sup> A call for hunter group tactics was the chief innovation of Ambrosio’s circular. The best “antidote” to small groups of guerrillas, it prescribed, was the use of “special units” — formed on a temporary basis from well-trained regular troops or locally recruited militia — which themselves employed guerrilla methods.<sup>501</sup> However, the classic *rastrellamento* — aiming at the “annihilation” of guerrilla formations through “double envelopment,” and involving hostage-taking and reprisals as routine aspects of a mobile column’s itinerary — remained the centrepiece of operations against more “numerous and sizeable bands.”<sup>502</sup> The manual reflected the equivocal and varied approach to counterinsurgency adopted by Italian commands in Yugoslavia after 1942.

Overall, the Italian military leadership was less enthusiastic about grand operations at the end of 1942 than it had been at the beginning of the year. Lack of results in the first half of a joint operation between the VI and XVIII Corps in western Bosnia and Herzegovina prompted field commanders, who doubted that their forces could hold the reconquered territories through the winter, to suggest calling off the second phase. Under German pressure to secure the bauxite mines around Mostar, the *Comando Supremo* insisted that the operation proceed as planned.<sup>503</sup> Like the Italians, the Germans

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<sup>499</sup> *Combattimenti episodici ed azioni di guerriglia*, 28.

<sup>500</sup> *Combattimenti episodici ed azioni di guerriglia*, 62–64.

<sup>501</sup> *Combattimenti episodici ed azioni di guerriglia*, 9–10, 27.

<sup>502</sup> *Combattimenti episodici ed azioni di guerriglia*, 51–54.

<sup>503</sup> “Sintesi degli argomenti trattati nella riunione del pomeriggio 12 ottobre a Spalato,” 14 October 1942; Spigo to Roatta, 19 October 1942; and, “Rapporto tenuto nei giorni 27 e 28 ottobre 1942-XX in Sebenico ai comandi il VI e XVIII Corpo d’Armata,” 28 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, DS Second Army, October–November 1942, allegati.



had largely rejected the use of hunter groups themselves and relied on terror and large-scale encirclement operations in 1942. In 1943, they sent reinforcements to Croatia and planned another big push to defeat Tito before the Allies could land troops in southeastern Europe.<sup>504</sup> When the Germans suggested further joint operations in 1943, Cavallero and Roatta provided a lukewarm response, agreeing that they likely would prove fruitless. Part of this reluctance was due to Italian concerns over the extension of German political influence in their sphere of interest, but it also demonstrated that Second Army was at the end of its tether in terms of manpower and combat efficiency.<sup>505</sup>

Nonetheless, the Italian command contributed three divisions to Operation *Weiss* between January and March 1943. Despite their flagging enthusiasm, Italian commanders expected the operations to be conducted with “firm harshness,” conforming to German guidelines on behaviour towards the local populations.<sup>506</sup> Roatta ordered all adult males found in operation zones shot “on the spot.” As Burgwyn notes, this in fact marked the most radical point of Second Army’s language on repression. No longer pretending that the victims of executions were genuine insurgents, Roatta had fully “embraced the notion of collective guilt and random punishment that left individual responsibility totally out of the equation of justice.”<sup>507</sup> During the operation, the Italians accused their allies of not being rigorous enough when sieving through civilians in “liberated” territory, leaving many Partisans at large.<sup>508</sup> Although the Germans claimed to have killed 12,000 Partisans, Operation *Weiss* was a failure from the Italian perspective. It succeeded only to push Partisan forces deeper into Italian zones, placing Italian garrisons and auxiliary

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<sup>504</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 159, 218. “Direttive germaniche per le operazioni contro le bande,” December 1942, DSCS, 8/II:135–36.

<sup>505</sup> Cavallero diary, 18 November 1942. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d’Italia*, 1:283–85. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 197–202.

<sup>506</sup> “Operazioni invernali combinate italo-tedesco-croate,” 10 January 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, fasc. “Uff. St. Jug. Gennaio–febbraio 1943.”

<sup>507</sup> Burgwyn, “General Roatta’s War,” 318–19.

<sup>508</sup> “Formazione sommaria delle G.U. tedesche che hanno preso parte al ciclo operazioni ‘Weiss’,” 18 February 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, fasc. “Uff. St. Jug. Gennaio–febbraio 1943.”

Četnik forces in difficulty, and upsetting Second Army's plans for redeployment.<sup>509</sup> In particular, the manpower and materiel lost when Tito's forces overran Italian garrisons in the Neretva river valley was a major blow to the army's prestige and confidence.<sup>510</sup> Unimpressed with Italian participation in *Weiss*, the Germans did not even bother to inform their allies of plans to launch another major operation, *Schwarz*, in Herzegovina and Montenegro later in May.<sup>511</sup>

Despite their worsening position, Italian commanders in Croatia and Dalmatia tried to maintain their heavy-handed approach to combating local insurgents. While Spigo admitted that "reprisals against the families and property of partisans always provoke ill feeling," he remained convinced that, "at the same time, they produce a period of calm."<sup>512</sup> As late as March 1943, Spigo still envisioned counterinsurgency in colonial terms. Quoting directly from the year-old 3C circular, he insisted that

the fight that we are conducting is not a duel in which we have to compare arms with those of the enemy, nor is it an ordinary form of war in which the means employed are — in the interests of economy — proportionate to the size of the targets.

But it is instead comparable to colonial warfare, in which it is advisable to give the opponent a clear and immediate sensation of our superiority, and of the inexorability of our reaction.

Spigo continued to advocate "colonial style" movements by powerful mobile columns that "strike fear into the enemy."<sup>513</sup> The problem was that his reduced divisions rarely were able to form columns strong enough to guarantee their own security. The result was inactivity at the lower level. In mid-April, Spigo conceded that the trend of the Partisans to organize into "divisions" that conducted "true tactics of war" necessitated a more passive approach. He no longer expected his garrisons "to conduct operations that, being

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<sup>509</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 334. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 210–12. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 215–21. Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, 1:286–87.

<sup>510</sup> "Avvenimenti di Val Narenta: azione dei Comandi, impiego delle truppe," 14 April 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1222, fasc. "Marzo 1943 (U.S. Jug.)."

<sup>511</sup> Trifkovic, "A Case of Failed Counterinsurgency," 326.

<sup>512</sup> "Relazione peridica mensile," 1 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 996, DS XVIII Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>513</sup> "Potenza di reazione e sicurezza," 9 March 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1188, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1943, allegati.

made with too meagre forces either do not achieve any results or cause us painful losses.”<sup>514</sup> Doubting that his forces were strong enough to hold a defensive perimeter around Dalmatia and aware that no reinforcements were forthcoming, Spigo proposed reducing his zone of occupation to two fortified “beachheads” around the cities of Zara, Split, and Šibenik.<sup>515</sup>

While reducing the activity of its garrisons, the XVIII Corps continued to participate in large operations that shared the features of those from the previous year. In July 1943, fifteen battalions of the VI and XVIII Corps, reinforced by two Croatian and one German battalion, launched a series of operations against Partisans in the Biokovo Mountains. In their first phase, Italian commands claimed to have killed 310 Partisans and wounded another 111 in combat, while conducting 14 executions and interning 900 people, at the cost of 12 Italians killed and 6 wounded. During July and August, Second Army’s body counts totalled 2,414 enemy dead, revealing that the army’s heightened passivity towards the end of the occupation did not entail a total de-escalation of repression.<sup>516</sup> Croatian authorities continued to accuse Italian troops and MVAC personnel of excessive burning and looting. Italian commands continued to justify the destruction as the result of legitimate reprisals that conformed to the 3C circular.<sup>517</sup> Italian activity in Dalmatia and Croatia in 1943 thus displayed significant continuity with Second Army’s approach and behaviour from 1942.

Conversely, in Slovenia the XI Corps made more concerted efforts to shift towards a population-centric approach, reverting to its old policy of covering the land

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<sup>514</sup> “Presidi; riserve mobili,” 17 April 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1188, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1943, allegati.

<sup>515</sup> “Schieramento e compiti del Corpo d’Armata,” 10 April 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1188, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1943, allegati.

<sup>516</sup> “Situazione politico-militare (relazione),” 31 July and 31 August 1943, NARA T-821/31/0246–60, 291–323.

<sup>517</sup> See, for example, “Pretesi eccessi nella zona di Vr̃gorac,” 23 July 1943, NARA T-821/294/0190–91. “Almissa, saccheggi compiuti da soldati italiani,” 23 July 1943, NARA T-821/403/0271–74. “Operazioni delle FF.AA. italiane nel villaggio di Zrnovizza presso Spalato,” 1 September 1943, NARA T-821/403/0289–91. “Rappresaglie,” 26 August 1943, NARA T-821/403/0304–5.

with garrisons while avoiding large-scale operations.<sup>518</sup> By the end of his grand operations in 1942, even Robotti concluded that the enemy-centric approach was unlikely to bear fruit against the small but efficient Slovene Partisan movement: “Converging actions, pincer movements, rapid thrusts (the rebels are always quicker than us, on their terrain), combing operations, have systematically rendered the same inadequate results.”<sup>519</sup> Robotti suggested a new focus on positive measures of attraction. These involved expanding the MVAC and subsidizing loyal populations, initiating make-work projects in garrison towns, gradually releasing internees, and intensifying anti-communist propaganda.<sup>520</sup> Robotti’s conversion had its limits. He voiced doubts that the vast network of garrisons necessary to carry out these positive measures was practicable. Moreover, he instructed division commanders not to hesitate “to burn towns where the population expresses its solidarity morally and materially with the rebels.”<sup>521</sup> Robotti replaced Roatta at the head of Supersloda in January 1943; the implementation of a new strategy in Slovenia was left to the XI Corps’s new commander, Gastone Gambara.<sup>522</sup>

Gambara enthusiastically supported the policy of expanding garrison activity in Slovenia. By January, the XI Corps had 167 garrisons — some numbering no more than 60 men — dispersed throughout Slovenia. Gambara instructed garrisons to keep ninety percent of their strength mobile to respond to Partisan threats, patrol the surrounding countryside, and temporarily occupy smaller centres. In theory, this enabled Italian forces to maintain a presence throughout the province while restricting the Partisans to the

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<sup>518</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 107.

<sup>519</sup> “Notiziario settimanale n. 81,” 26 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

<sup>520</sup> “Relazione mensile,” 19 October 1942, and “Notiziario settimanale n. 81,” 26 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

<sup>521</sup> “Situazione in Slovenia,” 3 December 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>522</sup> Gambara formally replaced Robotti on 15 December 1942. Cuzzi divides the Italian occupation of Slovenia into three phases, defined by the dominant personality during each stage. The first phase was characterized by Grazioli’s failed police operations; the second by Robotti’s “useless” series of grand operations; and the third by Gambara’s “prudent policy of garrisons.” Cuzzi argues that Gambara’s character was “diametrically opposed” to that of Robotti, but he adds that the contrast was more apparent than real since Robotti, as Supersloda’s new chief, accepted Gambara’s policies. Cuzzi, “La Slovenia italiana,” 222, 252–53.

forests where, it was hoped, they would eventually run out of supplies and choose to surrender.<sup>523</sup> In fact, during the winter, small Italian garrisons again came under attack, and in some cases were destroyed, by Partisan forces. Gambarà blamed the defeats on the timidity of his garrison commanders, who lacked initiative and failed to come to each other's aid. He claimed that he would rather see reckless actions that resulted in serious, "but heroic," consequences than excessive caution.<sup>524</sup> Gambarà's determination to make his system work was not shared by all his subordinates. Ruggero — who commanding the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division had proposed several tactical innovations the previous spring — warned Gambarà against relying on very young junior officers left to fend for themselves in isolated garrisons. The entire strength of his division, he complained, effectively was confined to garrisons that lacked the strength to undertake forays into the countryside or support neighbouring garrisons that came under attack. The situation grew more difficult as the XI Corps surrendered additional forces for the defence of Italy, thereby multiplying the responsibilities of its remaining units.<sup>525</sup> By June, a frustrated XI Corps once again was preparing for a major summer offensive that would see its divisions abandon their garrisons to traverse the Slovenian countryside in search of Partisans. Once again, the objective was "to not give any respite to the enemy and to try to annihilate him definitively."<sup>526</sup>

Alongside questions of tactics and deployment, the army's treatment of insurgents also fluctuated during this period. Whereas Italian commanders previously rejected "any negotiations" with Partisan leaders that offered prisoner exchanges, Partisan successes

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<sup>523</sup> "Varianti alla costituzione e dislocazione dei presidi," 28 December 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati. "Precisazioni varie," 1 January 1943, and "Attività operative invernale," 20 January 1943, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1189, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, January–February 1943, allegati.

<sup>524</sup> "Direttive atteggiamento di fronte a notizie sul nemico," 30 December 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1060, DS XI Corps, November–December 1942, allegati. "Attività operativa," 11 January 1943, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1189, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, January–February 1943, allegati.

<sup>525</sup> "Difficoltà inerenti alla nuova sistemazione territoriale della 'Cacciatori'," 1 May 1943, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1189, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, May–June 1943, allegati.

<sup>526</sup> "Attività operativa," 11 June 1943, and "Attività estiva," 18 June 1943, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1189, DS 22nd "Cacciatori delle Alpi" Division, May–June 1943, allegati.

forced them to reconsider this approach.<sup>527</sup> The Sassari Division, which had previously shot hostages to convince Partisans to release Italian captives, exchanged several prisoners with enemy bands in December 1942.<sup>528</sup> When Partisans overwhelmed a battalion of the Murge Division on the Neretva River, capturing 286 Italian personnel, the VI Corps agreed to provide three days rations for the prisoners and it forwarded Partisan requests for prisoner exchanges to Supersloda.<sup>529</sup> The Germans themselves had exchanged prisoners with Partisans under similar circumstances. As Partisan strength increased, a number of senior German officers advocated granting Partisans status as combatants.<sup>530</sup> Robotti finally reined in executions of “rebels that surrendered themselves outside of combat.” He now permitted Partisan deserters to join the MVAC instead of being interned.<sup>531</sup> In March 1943, Robotti appeared to give negotiations official sanction, ordering commands to stop shooting captured Partisans so that they could instead be exchanged for Italian prisoners. However, these orders were rescinded in May.<sup>532</sup> Robotti and Gambarà chastised the commander of the Lombardia Division for treating Slovene Partisans with a “reciprocity that is completely in contrast with higher directives not to grant partisan bands rights as combatants.” They ordered the division to end its negotiations and reiterated that “all rebels captured in Slovenia must be shot.”<sup>533</sup>

The army’s policies in 1943 can best be described as oscillating and incoherent. Italian commanders adopted different approaches month by month and region by region. This resulted from a sense of desperation and futility combined with a stubborn

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<sup>527</sup> “Notiziario n. 360,” 1 May 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1265, DS VI Corps, May 1942, allegati.

<sup>528</sup> Sassari Division Command war diary, 4 April 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 999, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, April 1942. “Notiziario giornaliero informativo,” 10 December 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, November–December 1942, allegati. Sassari Division Command war diary, 29 December 1942, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1004, DS 12th “Sassari” Division, November–December 1942.

<sup>529</sup> Negri to Robotti, 18 February 1943, AUSSME, N1-11, b. 1222, fasc. “Uff. St. Jug. Gennaio–febbraio 1943.”

<sup>530</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 226. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 745.

<sup>531</sup> “Trattamento ai partigiani che si arrendono,” 2 May 1943, NARA T-821/405/0912-16.

<sup>532</sup> Ferenc, *There is Not Enough Killing*, 171–74. Osti Guerrazzi, *L’Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 110–11.

<sup>533</sup> “Incontro con capo ribelle,” 1 July 1943, and “Proposte partigiani,” 2 July 1943, NARA T-821/288/0860-65.

attachment to the idea of empire. Despite the threat of an Allied landing in Italy and the dwindling strength of Italian forces in the Balkans, Italian generals did not consider abandoning the annexed provinces to Partisan, Nazi, or Ustaša control. Military circumstances compelled Italian commanders to change their approach, but they proved reluctant to renounce the methods they had gravitated towards in 1942. With their inefficient forces now exhausted and depleted, Second Army's leadership floundered vainly in search of methods that could stanch the Partisan tide without risking their remaining manpower.

Italian reports from the last months of the occupation indicate that nearly every aspect of the army's counterinsurgency policy had failed. Corps commands unanimously agreed that the fall of Fascism at the end of July had negative repercussions in their zones. In Dalmatia, the XVIII Corps reported that

After the fall of Fascism (that has brought particular joy to everyone, because they see it as the collapse of Italy) and reprisal actions, which struck the masses and not the individual, relations between the troops and the population have been worsening day by day. In every Italian the population sees an occupier, an oppressor and not a bearer of civilization [*civiltà*] and well-being. All these anti-Italian sentiments are skillfully exploited by various parties, but, in particular by the communists.<sup>534</sup>

In Slovenia, the XI Corps found that “the masses remain as restless as ever towards our political dominion and eager to escape it by any means.”<sup>535</sup> In Croatia, the V Corps suffered the scorn of Ustaša authorities, who continued to accuse MVAC personnel of committing excesses. Even the army's Četnik allies appeared to favour the prospect of an Allied victory and the reconstruction of Yugoslavia. The civilian populations appreciated Italian assistance to refugees and destitute families, but the local economy was paralysed and the supply of food was irregular and insufficient.<sup>536</sup> Only the underlying fear that an Italian withdrawal would be replaced with something worse helped to maintain the semblance of order in the Italian zones. All commands reported a resurgence of Partisan

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<sup>534</sup> “Relazione di c. propaganda dal 25 luglio al 25 agosto,” 27 August 1943, NARA T-821/289/0028–31.

<sup>535</sup> “Situazione politico-militare (relazione),” 31 July 1943, NARA T-821/31/0249.

<sup>536</sup> “Relazione mensile,” 28 August 1943, NARA T-821/287/0381–85.

activity and the exodus of local youth to join the insurgents. Partisans increasingly targeted Italian garrisons with attacks and propaganda, aiming to seize Italian arms.<sup>537</sup>

To the end, Italian commands considered the Communist Partisans to be illegitimate and detested enemies. Thus, following the armistice of 8 September, Italian forces in the Balkans were caught “between two fires.” Second Army had been given no forewarning from Rome; most of its units learned about the armistice on the radio. Italian commanders received confusing orders to “react immediately and energetically against any armed violence by the German army or by the population [...] but to give German commands advance notice of intended operations.”<sup>538</sup> Demonstrating a combination of fanaticism and absurdity, Robotti was dismayed that his troops greeted so joyfully “an armistice that frustrated all our hopes of victory.”<sup>539</sup> German forces immediately entered the Italian zones and proceeded to disarm the Italian army. The disoriented Italian commands disintegrated in a matter of days. Despite individual efforts to resist and the flight of many soldiers to the mountains, the majority of Italian personnel surrendered themselves to the Germans and were sent to labour camps in the Third Reich. Only further south in Montenegro, where the delayed arrival of German forces provided time to make decisions, did Italian commands offer coordinated resistance. Even then, alliance with the Partisans came as a last resort and was rejected by many officers. Those who remained to fight the Germans as part of the “Garibaldi” Division did so in complete subordination to Tito’s command.<sup>540</sup> Italy’s occupation of Yugoslavia was over.

Second Army developed its counterinsurgency policies and practices during 1941–42 gradually, responding to political circumstances and the characteristics of resistance that it faced. Given the lack of direct intervention from Rome, the contradictions in Italian

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<sup>537</sup> “Situazione politico-militare (relazione),” 31 August 1943, NARA T-821/31/0291–323.

<sup>538</sup> Arrigo Petacco and Giancarlo Mazzuca, *La Resistenza tricolore: La storia ignorata dei partigiani con le stelletto* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010), 115.

<sup>539</sup> Quoted in Elena Aga Rossi and Maria Teresa Giusti, *Una guerra a parte: I militari italiani nei Balcani, 1940–1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), 131.

<sup>540</sup> On the events in the Balkans following the Italian armistice, see Aga Rossi, *A Nation Collapses*, 112–15; chaps. 4 and 5 in Aga Rossi and Giusti, *Una guerra a parte*; and, Arrigo Petacco and Giancarlo Mazzuca, “Sorpresi dall’armistizio nei Balcani,” chap. 5 in, *La Resistenza tricolore*.



policy, and the critical role of local conditions on the army's behaviour, Italian decision-making in Yugoslavia can appear entirely passive, following a logic that was "more defensive than offensive" and lacked any ideological component.<sup>541</sup> However, much of the nuance in Italian policy stemmed from or conformed to the Fascist regime's imperial objectives in the region. Elements of a hearts-and-minds approach — including the recognition of an independent Croatia, political concessions in Slovenia, a neutral attitude towards religion, and the provision of food and welfare to local populations — reflected the regime's desire to reduce the military cost of occupation while differentiating its Imperial Community from the Nazi New Order. The army's expectation that its reoccupation of Croatian territory in 1941 would proceed bloodlessly thanks to the goodwill of local Serb populations was consistent with these broader objectives.

In fact, the relatively benign attitude of the Italians in the early months of the occupation was not so unique. In Serbia, the German army itself adopted an easy-going stance through June 1941, dispersing its troops among small garrisons, developing propaganda newspapers, limiting requisitioning, and importing food for the populations. These policies were the result of the German army's concern for troop discipline, Hitler's purely strategic interests in the region, a Nazi racial hierarchy that considered South Slavs superior to those in the east, and the lack of active guerrilla resistance until July. German violence and reprisal activity escalated after the outbreak of revolt, peaking with major operations at the end of 1941.<sup>542</sup> The timeline was different for the Italian Second Army. Not until autumn did Italian generals perceive that they confronted a major uprising directed against Italian occupation forces. By then, a swift and harsh response akin to that employed by the Germans in Serbia was no longer possible because Italian troops were immobilized by winter conditions in mountainous territory. Italian military violence did not peak until spring and summer 1942, when climatic and logistical conditions permitted Second Army to launch major anti-partisan operations.

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<sup>541</sup> Oliva, *Soldati e ufficiali*, 232–33.

<sup>542</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 83–85, 89, 107–110. Ben Shepherd and Juliette Pattinson, "Illuminating a Twilight World," in Shepherd and Pattinson, *War in a Twilight World*, 8–9.

These operations targeted civilians as much as combatants. The Italian army was less prescriptive than the *Wehrmacht* in its formulation and application of quotas for reprisals, which in Serbia the Germans had only been able to meet by shooting Jews. However, Italian generals displayed a similar institutional logic with a proclivity towards the use of terror and disproportionate force, reflecting the methods of counterinsurgency employed in Ethiopia. Their reprisal policies — based on the destruction of property, summary executions, and mass internment — aimed to separate populations from insurgents through terror. Statistics from Slovenia indicate the arbitrary character of the army's repressive activity. While Italian authorities carried out 51 executions as the result of courts martial proceedings, another 146 Slovenes were shot as hostages and at least 1,569 were shot without formal judgment, not including those reportedly killed in combat.<sup>543</sup> Tens of thousands more were interned. This targeting of civilians was justified and reinforced by racist assumptions about their Balkan mentality and affinity for communism. The army's propaganda sought to spread fear of Italian military might along with reverence for Italy's superior level of civilization. Military operations sought the encirclement and annihilation of Partisan formations using a combination of conventional means and light irregular forces, both of which multiplied the level of violence and devastation in Italian *rastrellamenti*.

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<sup>543</sup> Ferenc, *There is Not Enough Killing*, 14, 19, 28.

## Conclusion

During the last months of the Fascist empire, Italian generals struggled in vain against the pressure of circumstances. Indeed, this pressure had always exerted itself to greater or lesser extent on the Italian military occupations in East Africa and the Balkans. In both case studies examined here, the influence of local conditions on Italian decision-making was powerful, and often decisive. This is to be expected in any colonial or military occupation of large diverse territories. The pressure of circumstances becomes even greater when uncontrolled insurgency is added to political chaos. The anarchic environment he encountered in Croatia and Slovenia in 1942 led Mario Casanuova to liken the campaign in Yugoslavia to a film Western.<sup>1</sup> Given the disorder, fratricidal violence, racism, and reliance on firepower that characterized both occupations, the analogy to the Wild West is appropriate. Chaotic circumstances resulted in nuanced and varied responses from Italian military authorities in different geographic locations and at different levels in the chain of command.

The relatively benign occupation of Harar stands out as an example where individual personalities and unique political and topographic circumstances produced behaviour that contrasted markedly with that of Italian authorities in other zones of Ethiopia, especially war-torn Amhara. For three years, Guglielmo Nasi governed Harar according to a well-formulated programme based on previous experience that recognized the value of attracting locals through wide-ranging political means. Italian success in Harar, permitting the appointment of a civilian as governor in 1939, has been credited to Nasi's benevolent approach.<sup>2</sup> But, Nasi also benefitted from a number of fortuitous local and political circumstances. The population largely comprised previously marginalized ethnic and religious groups whose legal status did not worsen, and in some respects improved, under Italian rule. Mussolini's pro-Muslim and anti-Amhara declarations — both of which primarily served purposes of international propaganda — enabled Nasi to

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<sup>1</sup> Casanuova, *I°51*, 7. Gobetti argues that the Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now* provides the best metaphor for unmotivated Italian soldiers conducting immoral and ineffective repression against guerrilla opponents in Yugoslavia. Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra*, 190, 193.

<sup>2</sup> Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, 3:12.

take full advantage of these characteristics and adopt a tolerant attitude in Harar. Militarily, Nasi was helped by terrain that was somewhat less hospitable for guerrillas than in the Amhara region, and by good communications lines in the north along the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railroad. Even in this case, the success of the Italian occupation was limited by failures elsewhere and by the structural weaknesses of the Fascist regime. Schemes for the economic exploitation and colonization of Harar fared little better than elsewhere.

The Italian-occupied area of Yugoslavia was made up almost entirely of wooded mountainous terrain that favoured guerrilla activity. Nonetheless, political circumstances led to great variation in policy and behaviour across sectors and unit commands. The direct annexation of Slovenia and Dalmatia by Italy and the creation of an Independent State of Croatia under the unpopular and murderous Ustaša regime had profound implications on the subsequent occupation and insurgency. The Italians encountered the most consistently hostile public opinion in the annexed territories but faced the largest insurgent formations in Croatia. Italian military authorities had different objectives, responsibilities, and levels of autonomy depending upon which zone they operated in. The Italian army arguably was most violent in Slovenia, annexed territory where Italian prestige was at stake and where military authorities enjoyed a great deal of control over the repression of a particularly frustrating guerrilla opponent.

In Croatia, the civil war between Ustaše, Četniks, and Partisans complicated matters for Second Army politically and militarily. While Italian generals were consistently anti-Partisan, the level of cooperation of division and corps commands with Croatian authorities and Četnik leaders varied by region and changed over time. Whereas the Sassari Division enthusiastically embraced a policy of attraction towards Serbs from the beginning of the occupation, the Cacciatori delle Alpi Division's initial experience with hostile Četniks made its command more cautious in this regard. The Sassari Division's pro-Serb orientation resulted in relatively moderate behaviour towards the largely Serb population of its sector through 1941, while neighbouring divisions grew more violent. The division shifted towards a harsher approach to repression because of orders from above but also as a response to increasing casualties suffered in Communist Partisan attacks. After this shift, the Sassari Division terrorized some Serb villages while

continuing to spearhead efforts to collaborate militarily with Serb bands from other areas. This too reflected variations within the division's sector of occupation, which included hotbeds of Communist and Četnik activity that sometimes reflected pre-existing regional rivalries — the examples of Partisan Drvar and pro-Četnik Bosansko Grahovo are cases in point.<sup>3</sup>

Inconsistency and variation in behaviour was not unique to the Italian armed forces. Studies of German conduct in occupied eastern and southeastern Europe have emphasized the nuanced application of policy at the middle level. Individual units and commanders interpreted and applied policy in different ways. While most German commanders reflected the Nazi reliance on terror as a means to cow local populations, others recognized the good sense of adopting a balanced approach to occupation policy.<sup>4</sup> As in the German case, it is important to acknowledge and account for variation in order to fully understand Italian behaviour. Personal proclivities undoubtedly had an impact on policy — the replacement of Graziani, Cavallero, and Mezzetti with the likes of Amedeo di Savoia, Nasi, and Frusci accompanied a real change in approach to repression in Ethiopia; likewise, the character of occupation in Slovenia shifted after Robotti's replacement with Gambaro. However, the present study has emphasized the considerable degree of consistency and continuity in the Italian approach to occupation, especially at the middle level. Nasi and the Duke of Aosta struggled to transform the attitudes of their subordinates in Ethiopia. In Yugoslavia, the turning point in repression usually attributed to Roatta in fact built upon precedent set by Ambrosio. The sacking of Armellini and his replacement with Spigo brought virtually no change to civil-military relations or counterinsurgency strategy in Dalmatia. At the helm of the Sassari and Cacciatori delle Alpi divisions, Berardi and Ruggero inherited the command staffs of their predecessors, Monticelli and Pivano, and generally built upon their policies. While the Sassari Division behaved somewhat leniently through 1941, by the second year of the occupation its policies had conformed to those of neighbouring divisions.

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<sup>3</sup> Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance*, 248.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the case studies in Shepherd and Pattinson, *War in a Twilight World*.

The broad consistency among Italian commands in attitudes and approaches towards occupation and counterinsurgency reflected institutionally conditioned responses to similar sets of perceived circumstances. This study has explored the relationship between the *Regio Esercito* and Fascist imperialism in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia through three levels of analysis: political-legal; ideological-cultural; and, military-strategic. At each level, the objective has been to distinguish between patterns of behaviour or mentality on one hand and ad hoc responses to contingent circumstances on the other. It is now possible to summarize the conditions confronted by Italian commands on occupation duty in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia, as well as the decisions, behaviour, and preferences of Italian senior officers through each of these three lenses.

## The Politics of the Italian Army

Political conditions imposed by Mussolini's Fascist regime had a crucial impact on the nature of occupation in both Ethiopia and Yugoslavia. Both occupations were the result of imperial conquests driven by Fascism's inclination towards open-ended expansionism, its drive to obtain global leadership status by establishing a "third Rome," and its domestic pursuit of cultural revolution via war and dominion. However, the regime's vision of empire — the way it expected its colonial administration and Imperial Community to function — was defined only in general terms, leaving many of the details up to hasty improvisation. Moreover, this vision differed markedly as it pertained to Africa and Europe. In Ethiopia, Mussolini immediately imposed irrational and self-consciously "fascist" policies in Ethiopia based on violent terror, racial segregation, and super direct rule that rejected co-opting existing political structures. But after 1938 he repudiated part of this framework as a failure, permitting functionaries in the field to operate with greater autonomy and to employ a broader range of political means. The result was an equivocal policy that set an ambiguous precedent for future behaviour. Italian rule in the Balkans was not intended to duplicate the failed systems imposed in East Africa. The regime aimed to incorporate partitioned Yugoslavia into its imperial sphere through a combination of direct annexations to the metropole and indirect rule by means of protectorates.

The political organization of the two theatres of occupation thus differed considerably, with implications for the expected roles of the Italian army and the level of autonomy granted to military authorities on the spot. In East Africa, officers of the *Regio Esercito* were seconded to the Colonial Ministry or Ministry of Italian Africa and thus subordinated to a political command structure headed by Mussolini and administered by Fascist ideologues like Lessona and Teruzzi. In Yugoslavia, the annexed territories of Dalmatia and Slovenia came under direct Fascist civil administration. Although the Province of Ljubljana initially received special status in an effort to differentiate between the Fascist and Nazi new orders — thereby demonstrating Mussolini's tolerance for significant tactical deviation and variation after 1938 — civil authorities subjected the annexed zones to policies of Fascistization and Italianization. Meanwhile, a Croatian puppet state was established at Mussolini's behest under the quasi-fascist rule of the Ustaše. Second Army's role was intended to be strictly military; its traditional command structure remained in effect.

Neither in Ethiopia nor in Yugoslavia was the Italian officer corps the regime's first choice to implement Fascist policy. However, Rome's unpreparedness and the rise of local resistance ensured that the military played a key, often pre-eminent, role in the politics of occupation. In Ethiopia, the lack of trained colonial personnel left political and administrative positions at various levels in the hands of army officers. In Yugoslavia, the inability of the Italian and Croatian civil regimes to maintain public order ensured that military and political matters overlapped. Given these circumstances, Italian military authorities in both theatres sought to increase their freedom of action, necessarily at the expense of Fascist ministries and local civilian functionaries. The conflicts that arose between civil and military authorities must be understood primarily as manifestations of the institutional and jurisdictional rivalries so typical of colonial administration and occupation regimes. Anti-Fascism or incompatibility with fascist principles was not the principle motivator of these disputes, which sometimes led to crippling dysfunction thanks to the personality traits of the individuals involved. The conflict in Dalmatia between the genuinely dissident Armellini and the Fascist hierarch Bastianini was fundamentally similar to that in East Africa between Graziani and Lessona, two devoted Fascists. Both disputes hinged on jurisdictional control over forces of repression —

Graziani objected to the formation of an autonomous Fascist police force (the PAI); Armellini countered Bastianini's efforts to assemble a "gubernatorial army" and conduct an independent counterinsurgency strategy.

Italian generals at times questioned Rome's directives or policies, but not the overall objectives of the regime, which often were defined only vaguely and thus were open to a degree of interpretation. Criticism and debate focused on practical rather than ideological matters. When central policies were clearly defined, as at the beginning of the occupation in Ethiopia, Italian commands dutifully adhered to them. Graziani complained that Mussolini's blanket prohibition against collaboration with indigenous elites needlessly tied his hands and rendered nearly impossible the pacification of Amhara and Shewa. But, in practice, Graziani pursued the policy of exclusion rigorously and, once the uprising he predicted became a reality, he did so enthusiastically. A lack of competent organizations and the presence of revolt compelled military governors in Ethiopia to curb Mussolini's colonization schemes, yet they largely conformed to Fascist racial policies, so critical to the regime's palingenetic aim of creating racially conscious "new men."

In Yugoslavia, Mussolini took a much more hands-off approach without ever defining an official line to follow in the complex dealings of local and coalition politics. The army's repudiation of the alliance with the Ustaše, its controversial negotiations with the Četniks, and its protection of Jews appeared at certain points to contrast with Rome's intentions. In fact, the army was but one group among several that proffered policy alternatives aimed to achieve the regime's broad objectives in the context of what was from the beginning an improvised and fluid political situation. While they provoked the ire of the Axis allies, rival institutions, and some influential Fascists, the army's policies found support among other groups connected to the regime. Armellini and Bastianini hated each other but agreed on the pointlessness of the Ustaša alliance. Second Army struggled with the Foreign Ministry over its approach towards Zagreb, but the two were in agreement on the treatment of Jews. Mussolini was kept abreast of the army's course of action, which he generally approved either explicitly or implicitly until German pressure became too great in 1943.

There is little evidence that the military leadership consciously conspired to undermine Fascist policies or objectives. Rather, the army's decision-making represented



improvised responses to circumstances, conditioned by short-term strategic considerations but also by interpretations of Rome's long-term political goals. Thus, Robotti's mass internment of Slovenes coupled with the regime's policy of Italianization. Likewise, the army's schemes to extend its presence in Bosnia and to defend Italy's *spazio vitale* against German and Croatian pressure by courting the Serb population were fully compatible with the regime's open-ended expansionism and its concept that the entire Balkan region fell within the Italian sphere of interest. The politics of the Italian army largely reflected and conformed to the regime's broadly defined aims and values.

### The Army's Propaganda

Corresponding to variations in the political framework of occupation in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia, the army's involvement in the indoctrination of junior officers and troops with ideological and morale-boosting material differed between the two case studies. The regime exercised rigid control over propaganda during the invasion of Ethiopia and the months immediately following its declaration of empire. Aside from speeches and circulars, army officers in East Africa had little role in the production of propaganda. Conversely, the army's propaganda activity was greatly enhanced in Yugoslavia. Mobilizing for total war on multiple fronts, Fascist leaders recognized the need to delegate or offload the duties of military propaganda to the armed forces themselves. Propaganda sections at the army, corps, and division level closely monitored the distribution of print, radio, and film propaganda to the troops. Some commands developed content for the field newspapers that saw a resurgence at this time.

In Ethiopia, Fascist control over propaganda ensured that the message that reached Italian troops was the same as that promoted by the regime. In Yugoslavia, the army's greater level of autonomy in the field of propaganda complicated matters. Elsewhere, it has been argued that army commanders tended to appeal more to traditional military values of *esprit du corps* and comradeship than to Fascism and its goals of conquest or "civilizing mission."<sup>5</sup> However, the military propaganda examined here was

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<sup>5</sup> Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 368–69.

largely consistent with that of the regime. While it is true that Italian generals did not typically employ overtly Fascist rhetoric in addressing their troops, their messages broadly reflected Fascist motifs, especially *romanità* and anti-communism. Expansionistic themes based either on irredentism or concepts of an Imperial Community were not lacking in the army's propaganda. This consistency reflects the relatively high degree of Fascistization among the propaganda officers attached to Second Army, but also the existence of shared values between senior officers and the regime.

In both Ethiopia and Yugoslavia, the regime and army employed ideologically charged themes to indoctrinate and brutalize Italian troops. The regime's long-term programme to transform Italians into hardened "new men" coalesced with short-term military imperatives of maintaining fighting spirit to produce propaganda that highlighted the Italian soldier's role as superior conqueror while demoting insurgents and occupied civilian populations to an inferior status. Propagandists presented the soldier's mission and presence in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia in imperial terms, drawing especially on the imagery of ancient Rome. Both conflicts promised Italians greater prosperity by raising Italy to a position of equal status with other imperial powers. Aggressive expansionism and occupation of foreign lands were further justified by attributing Italian combatants with positive humanitarian characteristics. In both cases, Italian propaganda claimed to liberate formerly oppressed populations who stood to benefit from the introduction of Latin "civilization." Like the Roman legionary, the Italian soldier was supposed to be both the virtuous representative of Fascist discipline or order and the ruthless practitioner of justice against the enemies of progress.

Italian propaganda thus encouraged an attitude of patronizing sympathy for backwards Africans and Slavs who suffered under cruel socioeconomic conditions. But, simultaneously, the army and regime actively sought to inculcate hatred for members of the population that took up arms against the invading or occupying forces. In Yugoslavia, the role of communism in the Partisan movement bequeathed an extra ideological component to the army's propaganda, which served to further delegitimize resistance while transforming the Italian occupation into a defensive campaign to protect Europe from the scourge of Bolshevism. In his study of the Spanish Army of Africa, Sebastian Balfour has noted a similar tendency to create "simple dichotomies of identity" in

military propaganda, both in the colonial setting of the Rif War and in the Spanish Civil War, where the army labelled diverse groups uniformly as “Communists.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the most effective ways of spreading hatred of the enemy was through atrocity propaganda. Whether based on myth or reality, propaganda on the brutality of an opponent — and, in the case of guerrilla insurgency, of the population that supported it — serves to transform an army’s victims into imagined enemies, thereby legitimizing military violence against prisoners and non-combatants.<sup>7</sup> Italian authorities presented their opponents in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia as barbarians or savages accustomed to irregular and illegitimate forms of warfare that could only be countered with similarly brutal and immoral methods. Furthermore, by attributing guerrilla resistance to racial characteristics, Italian propagandists blurred the boundaries between insurgents and the general population. Although Italian propaganda always maintained some distinction between enemy combatants and civilian non-combatants, the tendency to conflate the two groups increased as resistance became more widespread. This potentially had serious ramifications on the behaviour of Italian troops towards local civilians. The Italian army intentionally fostered a mental environment in which victims of Italian repression could be constructed as enemies.

## Italian Counterinsurgency Strategies

In Ethiopia and Yugoslavia, Italian generals confronted genuine resistance movements whose strength, organization, and characteristics developed gradually in response to occupation policies, foreign aid or events, and favourable topography. Insurgency was better-equipped in Yugoslavia, where the Partisans tended towards semi-conventional tactics in times of success. In both cases, Italian generals credited resistance movements for adopting effective guerrilla techniques. In neither case was total victory over the insurgents likely. The damage and disruption caused by early policies — the exclusion of the *rases* in Ethiopia; unpopular Italian annexations and Ustaša mass violence in

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<sup>6</sup> Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, 283–86.

<sup>7</sup> On the legitimizing role of German atrocity propaganda in occupied French and Belgian territories in the First World War, see Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 94–113.

Yugoslavia — was too great. The occupied territories were too large and the terrain too rugged. Italian resources and capabilities were too meagre.<sup>8</sup> These factors prevented a swift and immediate Italian military victory in either theatre. Long-term failure was the result of Italy's defeat in the Second World War.

The effectiveness of Italian counterinsurgency strategies is of secondary importance to this study, to the extent that success or failure contributed to decision-making processes. The more important objective here is charting trends in policy decisions and analyzing the motivations behind them and their connection to fascist violence. Like its propaganda, the Italian army's methods in counterinsurgency idealized violence and expected the absolute submission of the occupied populations. As a practical phenomenon, Italian military violence in the cases of Ethiopia and Yugoslavia developed in different ways and at different paces. In Ethiopia, Mussolini from the outset gave repression a distinctly Fascist character by prohibiting negotiation or clemency and instead issuing blanket statements that all "rebels" were to be shot. Because Italian forces quickly encountered resistance from the remnants of Ethiopia's standing army, Mussolini's directives found immediate purchase. In Yugoslavia, the application of violent forms of repression developed more gradually and in closer but disproportionate correlation to the growth of insurgency. Although Ambrosio's earliest directives called for the summary execution of "*francs-tireurs*," Second Army's initial behaviour was restrained by the complex political situation in the Independent State of Croatia and the lack of serious resistance faced by Italian forces. Mussolini did not intervene until his "put to the wall" statement at the end of 1941, by which time the army's approach had already hardened in response to heightened guerrilla activity. But the escalation in the army's repressive activity anticipated and was disproportionate to the actual level of resistance it faced. Nor was this escalation the result of purely military factors; the equation of resistance with communism helped to loosen earlier restraints on violence.

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<sup>8</sup> Klaus Schmider emphasizes the predominant role played by political and topographic factors in undermining the German army's counterinsurgency strategy in Yugoslavia. Schmider, foreword to "Yugoslavia," part 3 in Shepherd and Pattinson, *War in a Twilight World*. See also Klaus Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg in Jugoslawien 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Mittler, 2002).

Military violence peaked in the middle phases of both occupations: 1937–39 in Ethiopia and 1942 in Yugoslavia. These were the stages in which Italian commanders were the least constrained by political factors or civilian oversight, but still had the military capacity to take the initiative and adopt strategies of their choosing. Given this freedom to follow institutional doctrine, Italian officers — with some exceptions — gravitated towards policies based on terror. These included the widespread use of summary executions of captured insurgents and their supposed accomplices, hostage-taking, internment, and the confiscation or destruction of property. The army's uncompromising treatment of "rebels" was behind most of its excesses, because it was difficult to differentiate between genuine insurgents, partisan helpers, and innocent bystanders. Although justified by the Roman model of severe but fair justice, Italian punishment did not always appear fair. Instead, violence often was collective, arbitrary, and undignified. The majority of victims labelled "rebels" or "communists" almost certainly were non-combatants, targeted because they belonged to social groups whose political loyalties were suspect or held accountable for the alleged actions, or unexplained absence, of family members and neighbours. Although Italian generals paid lip service to the danger of counterproductive excesses, their directives provided loopholes to justify most lower-level activity, they rarely punished subordinates for criminal behaviour against prisoners or local civilians, and the tone of their orders favoured harshness over mildness. There is little indication that Italian commanders were greatly concerned about establishing proof of individual guilt. Collective reprisals were meant primarily to terrorize populations into submission. Terror became the principal element of Italian counterinsurgency strategy.

Terror not only guided Italian policies of repression, it fuelled the army's tactical use of force as well as the propaganda that it directed towards the occupied populations. Italian operational plans typically relied on unrealistic encircling movements by large powerful formations. These *rastrellamenti* frequently involved frustrated officers and troops sifting through unarmed inhabitants in operational areas, subject to the full rigour of martial law. Italian generals sought to exploit the technological advantage they enjoyed over their enemies not only to crush the opponent in battle but to impress civilian populations of the army's destructive power. Commanders made liberal use of artillery,

air power, and — well into the occupation of Ethiopia — chemical weapons, displaying scant regard for their inaccuracy and tendency to inflict collateral damage. Indeed, they targeted villages and civilian infrastructure with the expressed purpose of spreading fear. The use of heavy weapons was meant to convince the occupied populations of the futility of resistance against a great power like Fascist Italy. This also was the primary aim of Italian propaganda, based on countering rumours of Italian weakness and threatening the further application of force. In both Ethiopia and Yugoslavia, the centrality of terror to the army's strategy was justified by the intelligence gathered and interpreted by Italian commands. While intelligence staff appreciated the complex nature of local affairs, their overall interpretation of resistance reflected the same racial characterizations that suffused Italian propaganda. Initially anticipating that the populations would welcome Italian troops as liberators and civilizers, commands interpreted resistance as a sign of racial or cultural backwardness and concluded that supposedly primitive African and Balkan populations — increasingly considered uniformly hostile and in league with the insurgents — only appreciated force.

Although they lacked the same level of “ideological blinkers” that often prevented their German allies from recognizing the importance of securing hearts and minds, Italian generals did not display a strong inclination towards a population-centric approach to counterinsurgency.<sup>9</sup> The limited political means employed by Italian occupying authorities conformed to the basic framework provided by Mussolini and Fascist ideology. The regime's desire to present the new Rome as an ably governed secular and inclusive empire fostered an emphasis on religious freedom and the provision of welfare. Here, Italian military commands followed the lead of civil authorities. However, the army's own strategy of deployment undermined the depth and success of these policies. The army could not guarantee protection or distribute welfare to populations that it had no contact with. While in both occupations military commanders initially dispersed their forces throughout numerous garrisons in the interest of political penetration, they quickly responded to resistance by withdrawing troops from small or isolated locales and consolidating their forces for mobile operations in which terror predominated. Military

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<sup>9</sup> Shepherd and Pattinson, “Illuminating a Twilight World,” 13.

principles of concentration and the desire to avoid casualties trumped the political benefits of maintaining boots on the ground.

Italian officers generally were willing to negotiate with local leaders to obtain cooperation and ease the burden of occupation, so long as that cooperation came on Italian terms. In Ethiopia, this option was for some time rejected by Mussolini. In Yugoslavia, where the regime's concept of a European Imperial Community permitted greater elasticity, negotiations with armed Serb bands transformed into an Italo-Četnik alliance. If misguided, Second Army's dealings with the Četniks represented a willingness to adopt constructive engagement that its German allies generally lacked.<sup>10</sup> Neither in Ethiopia nor in Yugoslavia did Italian military authorities initially intend to rely on irregular forces in garrisons or counterinsurgency operations. The increased use of indigenous personnel came in response to Italian manpower shortages. Italian generals were aware that their auxiliary personnel sometimes were driven by ethnic or tribal rivalries, or even by ideological hatred. However, while Italian commanders complained that their irregular forces were ineffective and undisciplined, they nonetheless permitted them to operate without sufficient oversight in defensive and offensive roles where uncontrolled excesses virtually were guaranteed. Irregular units became integral parts of the Italian army's apparatus of terror.

### A Fascist Mentality?

The thesis that Italian functionaries in occupied Europe “worked towards the *Duce*” — proposed by Davide Rodogno more than a decade ago — has come under criticism in two major respects. Bosworth has countered that Italian Fascism lacked the consistency or clarity for Kershaw's model of “working towards the *Führer*” to be applicable in the Italian context.<sup>11</sup> Burgwyn has argued that Italian generals too frequently developed policies that directly countered Fascist principles and were governed by pragmatic

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<sup>10</sup> Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 155, 217.

<sup>11</sup> Bosworth, “War, Totalitarianism and ‘Deep Belief,’” 497–98.

rationale.<sup>12</sup> Yet, allowing for the lack of clear direction, coherent political objectives, or ideological motivation, a strong argument can be made that the Italian case fits with Kershaw's concept. For Kershaw, the Third Reich was characterized by "governmental disorder." Policies developed haphazardly in relation to "Hitler's known broad aims." Kershaw allowed for an "indirect" interpretation of "working towards the *Führer*," applicable to conservative groups like the army who functioned in pursuit of Hitler's goals despite the absence or secondary importance of ideological motives.<sup>13</sup>

Nor was Nazi ideology without contradictions, especially when applied in occupied territory. As David Furber and Wendy Lower have shown, "working towards the *Führer*" did not always and irrevocably result in a linear radicalization of policy. In occupied Poland (the General Government), Nazi authorities found common ground on the annihilation of Jews, but the civil administration and SS bickered over the treatment of Poles. Whereas Himmler's SS pursued a policy of Germanization that entailed ethnic cleansing, Hans Frank's civil administration sought to transform the General Government into a "labor reserve" for the Reich. Although Frank's vision contrasted with Hitler's demographic concept of *Lebensraum*, it conformed to the "colonial character" of Nazi objectives in the east. His more pragmatic view prevailed through much of the war.<sup>14</sup> Tactical variation, institutional squabbling, and competing ideological visions were not unique to the Fascist system of rule in Italy and its occupied territories.

Despite the differing goals and end results of Fascist and Nazi imperialism, they operated according to similar bureaucratic phenomena. Chaos and improvisation were the order of the day in the occupied territories. Although the party played a less decisive or influential role in the Italian case, the lack of clear jurisdictional boundaries between the army, state ministries, governors, and lower-level administrators — all representing various stages of Fascistization after more than a decade of dictatorship — created a similar atmosphere of infighting for personal and institutional aggrandizement. None of

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<sup>12</sup> Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, 280, 311.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Kershaw, "'Working Towards the Führer': Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship," *Contemporary European History* 2, no. 2 (1993): 116–18.

<sup>14</sup> Furber and Lower, "Colonialism and Genocide," 376–81.



these groups, including the army, consciously adopted anti-Fascist goals or policies. Italian generals certainly did not work against the *Duce*.

Comparing the Italian occupations of Ethiopia and Yugoslavia through the three lenses employed here, we can conclude that Italian senior officers largely conformed to what effectively were Fascist objectives. Politically, they were a key part of establishing a unique form of super direct rule and *apartheid* in Ethiopia, even if their participation initially came with reservations. In Yugoslavia, where the Fascist regime could not claim total conquest or annexation, the generals actively worked on their own initiative towards objectives of imperial consolidation and expansion. Ideologically, they publicly portrayed their mission in terms that echoed the key themes of Fascist propaganda, attempting to motivate their soldiers by comparing them to the legionaries of ancient Rome. Militarily, Italian commanders either conformed to or anticipated central directives that advocated harshness and terror. In Yugoslavia, they adopted the greatest severity in the annexed territories where the stakes for the regime and the Italian state were the highest.

More generically, the Italian occupations conformed in style to what Alan Kramer has defined as “fascist warfare.” Kramer argues that fascist warfare — ushered in by Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 and taken to its extreme by Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 — was truly total because it combined the technology of mass slaughter with a racial and ideological drive towards genocide, thereby completely eliminating the distinction between combatant and non-combatant.<sup>15</sup> Although Fascist Italian policies did not intentionally aim to eradicate targeted groups, they did aim to establish a new order defined by racial hierarchies. The combination of technologically and racially or ideologically driven mass violence can be found in both cases examined here. This dynamic was most evident in Ethiopia, where the Fascist racial hierarchy and Italy’s complete technological superiority — without any risk of retaliation by enemy powers equipped with long-range bomber aircraft or large stockpiles of chemical weapons — permitted unrestricted warfare. In Yugoslavia, too, the army worked within an essentially racist political framework that ultimately contributed to mass violence between Serbs and Croats, it used anti-communism to interpret and justify its mission,

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 329.

and it employed heavy weaponry against soft targets. In both cases, military policies ultimately treated civilians as enemies, culminating in Slovenia with the mass internment of much of the population.

There was no significant or measurable difference between Fascist and military violence in Italian-occupied territories. In Ethiopia, where Fascist leaders advocated radicalism, the military readily obliged. Despite episodes of uncontrolled squadrist violence in Addis Ababa, military policies were responsible for the majority of victims in the country. In Yugoslavia, civil and military authorities at times competed to prove their harshness; typically, the army proved more extreme. Complaints of undisciplined Blackshirt units — lodged, for example, by Armellini against the “Toscano” Battalion and by Robotti against the “Nizza” — were always connected to power conflicts.<sup>16</sup> If, as Giacomo Scotti has argued, Fascist militia carried out atrocities more enthusiastically than did army conscripts, this contrast did not extend to the level of commands.<sup>17</sup> The Italian occupations provided nothing akin to the resignation of the German Military Commander in France, Otto von Stülpnagel, in pragmatic and principled protest of Nazi security policy in 1942.<sup>18</sup>

Was the army’s conformity to Fascist objectives and fascist methods the result of a consciously “fascist” mentality among Italian military authorities? To what extent did Italian generals actively work towards the *Duce* out of ideological conviction? Mussolini does not appear to have played a significant role in motivating or inspiring the army’s decision-making. This is where the concept of “working towards the *Duce*” seems least convincing, at least insofar as the Italian army is concerned. In the Nazi case, Kershaw emphasizes Hitler’s “charismatic” role “of unifier, of activator, and of enabler.” Hitler’s direct intervention in policy decisions rarely was necessary, but the “Hitler myth” played

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<sup>16</sup> For a comparison between army and militia violence in Slovenia, see Osti Guerrazzi, *L'Esercito italiano in Slovenia*, 98–100. On the “Nizza” Battalion, see “Situazione in Lubiana,” 26 October 1942, and “Raggruppamento XXI aprile,” 31 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati.

<sup>17</sup> Scotti, *Bono italiano*, 99–100.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas J. Laub, *After the Fall: German Policy in Occupied France, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 163.

a vital symbolic purpose as motivator.<sup>19</sup> Conservative generals like Edmund Glaise von Horstenaus were personally drawn towards Hitler in ways that are not evident in the relationship between Italian senior officers and Mussolini.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas Hitler was central to the *Wehrmacht's* propaganda, which “made a concerted effort to associate Hitler with God,” Italian military propagandists relied less frequently on the symbolism of the *Duce* to inspire their men.<sup>21</sup> After the early defeats of the Second World War, the regime reduced the centrality of Mussolini in its own propaganda, which increasingly preferred to emphasize the masses and common man.<sup>22</sup> Although the *Wehrmacht's* counterinsurgency directives in southeastern Europe referred to the need to perform “the task entrusted to us by the *Führer*,” Italian generals rarely justified their actions by appealing to the will of the *Duce*.<sup>23</sup> Only Robotti seems to have had a penchant for quoting Mussolini. On more than one occasion, he repeated Mussolini’s description of Slovene Partisans as a “communist ‘bubo’” that needed to be eradicated.<sup>24</sup>

The findings of this study tend to reinforce the emerging historiographic consensus that career officers of the Italian army shared much with Fascist ideology and values, and that they willingly adopted many of the external trappings of Fascism without necessarily identifying themselves or their institution with Fascism or Mussolini’s regime. In mundane and symbolic ways, Italian military authorities in the occupied

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<sup>19</sup> Kershaw, “Working Towards the Führer,” 113–14. Ian Kershaw, *The ‘Hitler Myth’: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Georg Christoph Berger Waldenegg, “‘From my point of view, I never ceased being a good Austrian’: The Ideology and Career of Edmund Glaise von Horstenaus,” in Haynes and Rady, *In the Shadow of Hitler*, 323. The devotion of German generals to Hitler was reinforced by ideological consensus, status, and rewards. Wette, *The Wehrmacht*, 150–56. It has been argued elsewhere that the links between Italian officers and Mussolini never were particularly strong. Minniti, “Gli ufficiali di carriera,” 96.

<sup>21</sup> Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, 120–25.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Gundle, “Mussolini’s Appearances in the Regions,” in Gundle, Duggan, and Pieri, *The Cult of the Duce*, 119.

<sup>23</sup> “Direttive germaniche per le operazioni contro le bande,” December 1942, DSCS, 8/II:135–36.

<sup>24</sup> “Situazione in Slovenia,” 16 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1059, DS XI Corps, October 1942, allegati. “Direttive per l’attività invernale,” 30 November 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1189, DS 22nd “Cacciatori delle Alpi” Division, November–December 1942, allegati.

territories assimilated the customs and rituals of the Fascist Party. This included the adoption of the *appello fascista* in funeral ceremonies for fallen Italian soldiers. The use of the Fascist calendar year in roman numerals alongside Gregorian dates was standard in internal correspondence through both campaigns. Occasionally, staff officers forgot to change the date following the Fascist new year in October, but this was no more frequent than the typos that followed 1 January. At least one staff typist in Second Army's Civil Affairs Office continued to include the Fascist date after Mussolini's fall on 25 July 1943; this was apparently out of habit, since the typist corrected his mistake by crossing out the roman numerals.<sup>25</sup> Unlike in ordinary Italian society, in military staff writing the convention of adding the Fascist date became second nature.<sup>26</sup>

There is some evidence that Italian generals considered 28 October, the date of the Fascist March on Rome, significant. In 1942, Berardi hosted Croatian civil and military authorities in Knin at a dinner celebrating the *ventennale*, the regime's twentieth anniversary.<sup>27</sup> More intriguing is the ideological tone of an after-action report signed by General Spigo, who boasted that "five-hundred dead enemies testify to the valour of the garrison of Bos[ansko] Grahovo that — on 28 October — worthily celebrated in the field the *Ventennale* of the Revolution, against blind communist rage."<sup>28</sup> Spigo's report was addressed only to Roatta's command and it had no propagandistic motive. It suggests that the army's anti-communism could be connected to pride in the Fascist revolution.

The personalities examined here run the gamut from enthusiastic self-proclaimed Fascists like Graziani to skeptical dissidents like Armellini. But the impact of political identity on their policies or their attitudes towards higher-level directives was negligible or complicated by the existence of other motivating factors. In their jurisdictional disputes with Fascist authorities, both generals adopted Fascist rhetoric to bolster their cases. Private sentiments towards Fascism did not necessarily alter an officer's conduct

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<sup>25</sup> "Posto germanico di vigilanza ferroviaria," 3 August 1943, NARA T-821/294/0126.

<sup>26</sup> On the Fascist calendar and dating system, see Ferris, *Everyday Life in Fascist Venice*, 172–73.

<sup>27</sup> "Relazione sulle operazioni dei giorni 27 e 28 ottobre 1942 nel territorio della 'Sassari'," 29 October 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1004, DS 12th "Sassari" Division, November–December 1942, allegati.

<sup>28</sup> "Operazione 'Beta'," 2 November 1942, NARA T-821/63/0063.

as administrator or military commander. Although Ettore Formento — who reached the rank of lieutenant general in the postwar army — was a subaltern of a younger generation in occupied Ethiopia, his remarkably frank memoirs illustrate how “patriotism, nationalism and enthusiasm” could override scorn for the “clownish and empty rhetoric” of Mussolini, Starace, and Teruzzi: “We did not question Fascism; we were Fascists. [...] We still believed that ‘Fascism had made Italy great’.”<sup>29</sup> The equation of Fascism with the Italian state and great power status proved a powerful source of allegiance. Italian generals were perfectly amenable to concepts of racial prestige, *romanità*, national rebirth, and *spazio vitale*; all of these terms found their way into military propaganda and internal reports. Traditional nationalist values ensured the continued adhesion of the officer corps to the Fascist imperial programme well into 1943. Even when facing inevitable defeat, Italian commands unrealistically spoke of maintaining Italy’s dominant status in its imperial territories.

Ultimately, Italian staff officers and field commanders in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia were functionally complicit perpetrators of Fascist policy and of Mussolini’s imperial agenda. If they often were unimpressed by the *Duce*’s demagogic rhetoric and resentful of the influence of bombastic party elites, the generals nonetheless worked towards what they interpreted to be the objectives of the Fascist regime. Their response to their mission was less reluctant, more enthusiastic, and more active than some historians have allowed for. They agreed with the vague but well-known long-term Fascist objectives of national rebirth and imperial expansion. For the most part, they agreed with Fascist methods too, especially relating to the application of violent repressive measures.

## A Colonial Mentality?

To what extent did the army’s functional participation in Fascist policies and violence stem from a distinctly “colonial” mindset? Did knowledge, experience, and attitudes learned in Africa contribute to Italian military decision-making in Yugoslavia? Exporting a colonial mentality from Africa to Europe was a key component of Fascism’s revolutionary project of remaking Italians. In its imperial phase, Fascism aimed to

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<sup>29</sup> Formento, *Kai Bandera*, 91, 161.

accelerate its revolutionary process of cultural transformation and national rebirth by inculcating Italians with a colonial consciousness. Ethiopia provided a unique “world without moral limits” where Fascism could “impose its core beliefs of hierarchy and absolute obedience.”<sup>30</sup> The colonies were treated as “testing grounds” for strategies, policies, and behaviour that could later be adopted in metropolitan Italy.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, it must again be stressed that Mussolini did not necessarily envision imposing colonial systems of political organization on the European territories that made up the Roman Imperial Community. Referring to his initially liberal treatment of the Province of Ljubljana, Mussolini told Alberto Pirelli that “it is not possible to treat European countries like colonies.” As Mazower notes, this statement reflects the differences between Fascist and Nazi concepts of empire and racial hierarchy.<sup>32</sup> It also suggests that, although Fascist literature typically used the two terms interchangeably, Mussolini perceived a difference between imperialism and colonialism.

Whereas imperialism can be defined broadly as the process by which one society acquires domination over another, colonialism refers to a specific form of rule in which the occupier transforms indigenous structures and societies according to its own needs and interests. Some scholars argue that colonialism must involve colonization by settlers.<sup>33</sup> Adopting these definitions, Fascist rule in Ethiopia represented a genuine colonial project — East Africa was intended to become a settler-colony with very limited capacity for indigenous self-administration. However, the Fascist vision for the Balkans was largely restricted to the exercise of political and economic hegemony over foreign societies. Although Fascist policy assumed colonial characteristics in the annexed territories — where the distinct citizenship status of non-Italians somewhat resembled that of colonial subjects and where the regime envisioned “internal colonization” of what

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<sup>30</sup> De Grand, “Mussolini’s Follies,” 139–42.

<sup>31</sup> Ben-Ghiat, “Modernity is Just over There,” 383.

<sup>32</sup> Pirelli, *Taccuini*, 300. Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire*, 586.

<sup>33</sup> Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide,” 22.

technically became a new metropolitan periphery — the regime’s plans in Yugoslavia may better be defined as imperial rather than colonial.<sup>34</sup>

If the Italian army in Yugoslavia did not necessarily operate within a colonial political or legal framework, strictly speaking, its commanders nevertheless approached their mission with a colonial-imperial psychology that they shared with Mussolini and Fascism. In the German case, it has been argued that “Nazi ideology transferred the principles of social Darwinism to a European setting.”<sup>35</sup> The *Wehrmacht* willingly adopted these principles in eastern Europe thanks in part to the traditional “faith in the sword” [*Schwertglauben*] of Prussian-German militarism.<sup>36</sup> A similar, if not absolutely equivalent, phenomenon is evident in the Italian example. To be sure, Fascist ideologues and Italian generals maintained aspects of a Christian worldview. Monticelli’s sympathy for persecuted Serbs — and his calls for their chivalrous protection — in 1941 were at least partially inspired by humanitarian sentiments. Italy’s image as a protector of the weak and source of charity became an important aspect of Fascist imperial ideology and propaganda in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia.

Nonetheless, the language of the military reports and correspondence examined in this study suggests that the senior officer corps of the *Regio Esercito* shared a social Darwinian mentality with Mussolini. As Bruce Strang has argued, social Darwinism was the most important element of Mussolini’s ultranationalist “*mentalité*.” Like Hitler, Mussolini believed that strong nations had the natural right to conquer others. He was obsessed with demographics and considered territorial expansion necessary to accommodate the population growth that would ensure the nation’s long-term survival.<sup>37</sup> Through their own efforts to expand the territory under their occupation in 1941 and 1942 — and through their reluctance to admit defeat and abandon the annexed provinces in

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<sup>34</sup> On citizenship rights in the annexed territories, see Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire*, 273–76. On the internal colonization of frontier areas for security and economic reasons, see Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide,” 23.

<sup>35</sup> Shepherd and Pattinson, “Illuminating a Twilight World,” 8.

<sup>36</sup> Wette, *The Wehrmacht*, 139–50.

<sup>37</sup> Strang, *On the Fiery March*, 26–30. Bosworth agrees that Mussolini’s Darwinism “dominated his understanding of the world.” Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 385.

1943 — Italian generals demonstrated that they too measured national strength, health, and prestige in terms of territorial control and expansion. Their preferred means of enforcing Italian hegemony were based on the impression of might and displays of force.

Closely connected to its Darwinism, the army's deeply rooted racism also gave its behaviour in Yugoslavia a colonial character. Arguments on the weakness of radical racism in modern Italy, usually attributed to the country's ethnic and religious homogeneity, do not seem applicable to the Italian military leadership.<sup>38</sup> The army's propaganda included examples of the various forms of racism espoused by Fascist ideologues, from biological and mystical to national. Like Mussolini, the Italian officer corps most commonly expressed the latter type, equating race with nation, ideally defined by core social values such as hierarchy and discipline.<sup>39</sup> But there is little evidence that the army's racism was guided directly by Fascist ideology. The language and policies of Italian generals are replete with racist assumptions and sentiments that reflected views of Western superiority broadly held by Italian elites as well as several decades of institutional experience governing and combating revolt against African and Slavic populations. As Laura Ricci has demonstrated, Fascism's "language of empire" largely built upon the motifs and stereotypes of nineteenth-century Italian and European imperialism.<sup>40</sup> Typical of imperial dynamics, imperialist practices rather than ideologies were most decisive in transforming "vague, insubstantial race thinking" into more malignant forms of racism that justified "limitless violence."<sup>41</sup>

Like security forces in other Western empires, the Italian army in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia undertook the role of establishing and preserving a new racial hierarchy. This

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<sup>38</sup> On the supposed lack of "racism or racist sentiment among the general public," see De Felice, *Jews in Fascist Italy*, 21–23, and Andrew M. Canepa, "Cattolici ed ebrei nell'Italia liberale (1870–1915)," *Comunità* 32, no. 179 (1978): 51.

<sup>39</sup> On Fascist types of racism, including a definition of "national racism," see Raspanti, "I razzismi del fascismo," 73–90. On Mussolini's concept of racism, see Strang, *On the Fiery March*, 24–26.

<sup>40</sup> Ricci, *La lingua dell'impero*, 17, 33–34.

<sup>41</sup> Isabel V. Hull, "Military Culture and the Production of 'Final Solutions' in the Colonies: The Example of Wilhelminian Germany," in *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, ed. Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 141, 160. Hull rehabilitates arguments from Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 183–86.



was a defining characteristic of colonial violence.<sup>42</sup> The invention and application of martial race theories by the officer corps — evident in the army’s preference for Amhara and Serb auxiliary bands — was typical of Western, especially British, imperialism.<sup>43</sup> The legitimizing role of the Italian army’s “civilizing mission” also functioned in essentially the same way as it had at the height of Western imperialism in Africa and Asia. This included a tendency, shared by all colonial powers of the late nineteenth century, to respond in a massively disproportionate way to resistance from supposedly inferior natives that were expected to be grateful and obedient.<sup>44</sup> This way of thinking epitomizes the Italian response to the assassination attempt on Graziani in 1937 as well as Second Army’s escalation of repression in 1942. When it became clear that Slovenes had rejected Italian rule, Fascist Party secretary Aldo Vidussoni advocated the “need to act like the *askari* and exterminate them all.”<sup>45</sup> The XI Corps’s response fell short of that, but the grand operations, mass round ups, and reprisals that followed resembled a similarly disproportionate and irrational reaction to a perceived slight against the new regime.

The most direct evidence of a colonial mentality linking the Ethiopian and Yugoslavian campaigns can be found in the Italian army’s response to resistance and the methods of repression it employed. There were, of course, important military differences between the conduct of each campaign. As Rochat points out, the Partisans in Yugoslavia treated their struggle as a modern national or class war and were better organized and equipped than their Ethiopian counterparts. Secondly, whereas in Ethiopia the *askari* took the main role in combat and repression, in Yugoslavia this was left to poorly trained and immobile Italian conscripts; the undisciplined collaborationist bands proved no substitute

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<sup>42</sup> Martin Thomas, “The Gendarmerie, Information Collection, and Colonial Violence in French North Africa between the Wars,” *Historical Reflections* 36, no. 2 (2010): 82.

<sup>43</sup> See Douglas M. Peers, “Martial Races and the Indian Army,” in *A Military History of India and South Asia: From the East India Company to the Nuclear Era*, ed. Daniel P. Marston and Chandar S. Sundaram (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 34–52; Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); and, Kaushik Roy, *The Army in British India: From Colonial Warfare to Total War, 1857–1947* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 77–82.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Levene, “Empires, Native Peoples, and Genocide,” in Moses, *Empire, Colony, Genocide*, 193–94.

<sup>45</sup> Ciano diary, 5 January 1942.

for the *askari*.<sup>46</sup> As a result, Angelo Del Boca has argued that the crimes committed directly by Italian personnel in the Balkans “certainly were greater, in number and ferocity, than those in Libya and Ethiopia.”<sup>47</sup> Regardless of whether mass killing was carried out by Italian conscripts, Blackshirt volunteers, colonial troops, or local auxiliaries, Italian commands and senior officers were responsible for the orders and directives that guided military violence in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia.

An accurate calculation and comparison of the human cost of Italian repression in the two theatres likely is impossible. Estimates of war-related deaths in both cases are unreliable and vary widely. In six years of war and occupation, anywhere between 350,000 and 760,000 Ethiopians lost their lives.<sup>48</sup> The Yugoslavian government’s initial claim of 1.7 million total war dead has since been revised to 1 million.<sup>49</sup> Of these, as many as 400,000 perished in territories annexed to Italy or occupied by Italian forces.<sup>50</sup> However, it is not clear how many of these deaths occurred during the two and a half years of Italian occupation, or how many were the result of violence committed independently by Ustaša, Četnik, or Partisan forces. One study holds Italian troops directly responsible for the deaths of 15,000 Serb civilians in the Independent State of Croatia.<sup>51</sup> A Slovenian inquest calculated a total of 12,807 dead in the Province of Ljubljana.<sup>52</sup> Quantitatively, Italian commands likely were responsible for more deaths in

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<sup>46</sup> Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 367–68.

<sup>47</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani brava gente? Un mito duro a morire* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005), 233.

<sup>48</sup> Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, 329. The latter figure includes an estimated 300,000 Ethiopians that died from hunger, disease, or injuries sustained as the result of war or Italian policies. Mattioli, *Experimentierfeld der Gewalt*, 13n1. After 1945, the Ethiopian government calculated the loss of 831,300 soldiers and civilians between 1935 and 1941. Alberto Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935–1941* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997), 91.

<sup>49</sup> David Bruce Macdonald, *Balkan Holocausts? Serbian and Croatian Victim-Centered Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 161–62. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 722–38.

<sup>50</sup> Scotti, *Bono italiano*, 212–13.

<sup>51</sup> Philip J. Cohen, *Serbia’s Secret War: Propaganda and the Deceit of History* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 110; citing Vladimir Žerjavić, *Opsesije i megalomanije oko Jasenovca i Bleiburga: Gubici stanovništva Jugoslavije u drugom svjetskom ratu* (Zagreb: Globus, 1992), 70–72.

<sup>52</sup> Del Boca, *Italiani brava gente*, 235.

Ethiopia than in Yugoslavia. Qualitatively, military violence in Ethiopia appears to have been more lethal, unlimited, and frenzied than in Yugoslavia, where internment was more likely than summary execution. These differences stemmed from the more isolated position of Ethiopia, the technical superiority enjoyed by Italian commands in that theatre, and the assumption of Italian officers that South Slavs were racially superior and somewhat more civilized than Ethiopian populations.

This would have been of little comfort to the European victims of Italian firing squads in villages like Zapotok. The contrasting levels of violence in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia reflected differences of degree rather than kind. The Italian army employed the same tactics and modes of repression in both theatres for the same rationale. Sometimes — but perhaps less frequently than might be expected, given the importance and currency of the Ethiopian venture — Italian generals defined their rationale in explicitly colonial terms, using personal or institutional experience in Africa as a point of reference. Armellini found the political-military “environment” in Dalmatia and Croatia “strangely similar” to that encountered in his “long colonial life.”<sup>53</sup> In his 3C circular, Roatta advised column commanders to adopt security measures “as in Africa” and to employ disproportionate levels of force “comparable to colonial warfare.”<sup>54</sup> Despite the enhanced strength of the Yugoslavian Partisans towards the end of the Italian occupation, Spigo reiterated Roatta’s advice well into 1943.<sup>55</sup> As Sala has noted, these direct references to colonial experience were reinforced with a shared vocabulary.<sup>56</sup> Italian propaganda and internal correspondence in Yugoslavia adopted language similar to that used in Ethiopia. The Balkan peoples were considered “primitives” and “savages.” Those who rejected Italian offers of “protection” in return for “submission” were labelled “rebels,” “brigands,” or “raiders.”

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<sup>53</sup> “Organizzazioni militari in Dalmazia,” 2 July 1942, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 782, DS XVIII Corps, July 1942, allegati.

<sup>54</sup> Legnani, “Il ‘ginger’ del generale Roatta,” 170.

<sup>55</sup> “Potenza di reazione e sicurezza,” 9 March 1943, AUSSME, N1–11, b. 1188, DS XVIII Corps, March–April 1943, allegati.

<sup>56</sup> Sala, *Fascismo italiano e Slavi del sud*, 303.

The shared language and patterns of behaviour between the two campaigns indicates that the Italian military leadership in Yugoslavia, including officers with little or no personal experience in Africa, assimilated colonial doctrine and adapted it to conduct counterinsurgency in the Balkans. Ambrosio prefaced his October 1942 guidelines for combating “guerrilla actions” by pointing out that the task “does not represent anything new for armies that have been engaged in colonial campaigns and even less for our own, that gained ample experience in Libya and East Africa.”<sup>57</sup> This direct connection between colonial and guerrilla warfare reflected Ambrosio’s conclusion that an institutional counterinsurgency doctrine existed within the Italian army, and that techniques from the African colonies could successfully be imported to Europe. But these techniques, like most of the references to Africa summarized above, provided vague guidelines rather than prescribing specific actions. The parallels in military behaviour between Ethiopia and Yugoslavia did not reflect the conscious direct application of policies from one context to another as much as the existence of a set of basic assumptions shared within Italian military culture. Italian generals espoused broad concepts based partly on their worldview and partly on learned experiences, but these doctrines took effect only “in combination with structural factors on the spot.” The Italian case thus provides further confirmation that the process of knowledge transfer among imperial or military elites, whether considered across or within borders and timeframes, is “creative” and “hardly linear.”<sup>58</sup>

This raises a chicken-and-egg question: were the links between the army’s approach to warfare in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia the result of a distinctly colonial mentality; or, were they more indicative of a common approach to counterinsurgency as a technical phenomenon? Did Italian officers draw upon what Gerwath and Malinowski have termed a “colonial archive” — a bank of common knowledge shared by Western colonial powers on the treatment, exploitation, and extermination of subject peoples,

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<sup>57</sup> *Combattimenti episodici ed azioni di guerriglia*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Knowledge transfer in the Italian case functioned in much the same way as Jonas Kreienbaum describes in his examination of the concept of concentration camps adopted by Spanish, British, and German colonial forces — through both inter- and intra-imperial learning processes — at the turn of the century. Kreienbaum, “Deadly Learning,” 228–30.

applicable to different geographic areas — to inform their methods in the Balkans, or were the similarities between Ethiopia and Yugoslavia more indicative of a strictly military *counterinsurgency* archive?<sup>59</sup>

Italian generals of the interwar period discerned little difference between counterinsurgency warfare and colonial operations. This overlap was typical of high imperialist thinking, which assessed the level of civilization of extra-European peoples through their ability to adopt Western political systems and military doctrine.<sup>60</sup> The “colonial worldview” blurred distinctions between combatants and non-combatants. As Douglas Porch explains, “‘civilized’ standards of warfare [...] were considered superfluous by Europeans in non-Western settings against an enemy viewed as culturally, racially, and morally inferior.”<sup>61</sup> Discussion of low intensity warfare among Italian military theorists of the Fascist era solely involved the extra-European colonial context. But even outside of that context, Italian officers deemed combatants that adopted guerrilla tactics to be uncivilized, akin to colonial enemies. This is evident in Yugoslavia in 1941–43, where the army’s propaganda and directives sought to undermine the legitimacy of its opponents. But the equation of guerrilla warfare with barbarism and of counterinsurgency with state-building and civilizing missions was deeply embedded in the Italian military psyche, extending back to the Brigands’ War of the 1860s. As Aliza Wong has demonstrated, perceptions of savage brigandage prompted post-Unification political and military elites to view southern Italy “as a colony” inhabited by barbaric and inferior peoples or races.<sup>62</sup> As scholars of colonial genocides have found, it can be difficult to distinguish between colonial violence inspired by politics or racism and

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<sup>59</sup> Gerwath and Malinowski, “Hannah Arendt’s Ghosts,” 287. The authors draw upon Veracini’s concept of a “settler archive.” See Lorenzo Veracini, “Colonialism and Genocides: Notes for the Analysis of the Settler Archive,” in Moses, *Empire, Colony, Genocide*, 148–61.

<sup>60</sup> Susanne Kuss, “Co-operation between German and French Troops during the Boxer War in China, 1900/1901: The Punitive Expedition to Baoding,” in Barth and Cvetkovski, *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer*, 202.

<sup>61</sup> Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 76.

<sup>62</sup> Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy*, 16–22. For a similar argument, see Petraccone, *Le due civiltà*, 62–64. Angelo Del Boca has defined the Brigands’ War as a “colonial-style war” that anticipated the violence of later campaigns in Africa. Del Boca, *Italiani brava gente*, 57.

military violence fuelled by the “security syndrome” that afflicts many counterinsurgents.<sup>63</sup>

In Yugoslavia, where Second Army’s repression policies developed gradually, Italian violence was guided by a “strategic logic,” a calculated response to guerrilla warfare.<sup>64</sup> The army’s military policies and decisions — and therefore, the large part of its violence — stemmed first and foremost from its doctrine and military culture. Like that of the German army, Italian military culture evinced a radical contempt for irregular or popular warfare that had nineteenth-century European roots in the establishment of a professionally officered conscript army as “school of the nation” and in the bitter experience of the Brigands’ War, which paralleled the German experience against *francs-tireurs* in 1870–71.<sup>65</sup> Italian military culture by no means was equivalent in every respect to the Prussian-German model described by Isabel Hull. The Italian officer corps was far more pessimistic and risk averse, far less reliant on lower-level initiative, and less blinded to its own defeat or self-destruction than the German.<sup>66</sup> But, the Italian army’s hatred of guerrilla warfare prompted it to lash out against real or perceived resistance by targeting civilians and giving no quarter to suspected insurgents. At the height of both counterinsurgency campaigns in Ethiopia and Yugoslavia, the Italian army sought final or total solutions to the problem of resistance in the form of large-scale offensive military operations and collective reprisal measures.

The singularity of the German trend towards “absolute destruction” has been questioned elsewhere.<sup>67</sup> Hull agrees that the Imperial German army’s “institutional

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<sup>63</sup> Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide,” 26–29.

<sup>64</sup> The term is from Benjamin A. Valentino, “The Strategic Logic of Mass Killing,” chap. 3 in *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); cited in Moses, “Empire, Colony, Genocide,” 29.

<sup>65</sup> On the formative impact of the Franco-Prussian War on German military culture, especially in relation to guerrilla warfare and attitudes towards occupied civilian populations, see Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 140–53, and Isabel V. Hull, “Lessons of 1870–71: Institutions and Law,” chap. 5 in *Absolute Destruction*.

<sup>66</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 2–4. For a comparative analysis that highlights the profound differences between the Italian and German military traditions, see Knox, *Common Destiny*, especially chaps. 4 and 5.

<sup>67</sup> Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, 329. Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 77.

extremism” was typical of other Western armies of the late nineteenth century, but she argues that civilian governments and public opinion in those countries more consistently exercised a moderating influence over military leaders.<sup>68</sup> During the interwar period, these moderating forces became stronger in the European empires, which struggled against economic depression, increasingly sophisticated resistance movements, and growing colonial weariness or anti-colonial protest among their metropolitan populations.<sup>69</sup> Italian Fascism was somewhat unique among interwar colonial powers in continuing to project classic nineteenth-century notions of expansionist imperialism.<sup>70</sup> However, these political differences did not reflect radically different military approaches in responding to colonial resistance or insurgency. While mass killing was “mercifully rare” in the established imperial territories of most Western colonial powers during the interwar years, there were nonetheless episodes of military intervention accompanied by disproportionately high death tolls.<sup>71</sup>

Elements of what would later become known as a hearts-and-minds approach to counterinsurgency — emphasizing negotiation, compromise, political and social concessions, and the limited or proportionate use of violence — had been widely accepted within most Western armed forces prior to the Second World War.<sup>72</sup> However, during the 1920s and 1930s, all militaries displayed a propensity for extreme violence when confronted by large-scale insurrection in border regions or recently acquired mandates. Operations conducted by the British along India’s North-West Frontier relied on increasingly heavy columns and frequently involved reprisals, the destruction of

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<sup>68</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 1–2, 102–103. Hull, “Military Culture,” 161.

<sup>69</sup> Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 99.

<sup>70</sup> Labanca, *Oltremare*, 129–30.

<sup>71</sup> Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers, and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 38–41, 157–60, 307–308. Thomas discusses disproportionate responses to riots or revolt in French Indochina and the Belgian Congo.

<sup>72</sup> Shepherd and Pattinson, “Illuminating a Twilight World,” 12. Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 51–60.

villages, and the execution of prisoners.<sup>73</sup> British political and military leaders justified the heavy use of aerial bombing in Iraq, Aden, and Somaliland on the basis of its relatively low cost compared to ground warfare and its supposed humanitarian benefits, since villagers could be warned of punitive raids beforehand by the dropping of leaflets.<sup>74</sup> The French in Morocco and Syria and the British in Palestine crushed major insurrections by resorting to offensive strategies conducted by sizable conventional forces. These operations involved village destruction, summary executions, exemplary hangings, hostage taking, population transfers, indiscriminate artillery and aerial bombardments, and the co-option of politicized auxiliary forces to divide, isolate, and terrorize the local populations.<sup>75</sup> In a campaign whose brutality may well have carried over to the Spanish Civil War, the Spanish Army of Africa used chemical weapons “in vast quantities” against the Rif tribes of northern Morocco between 1921 and 1927.<sup>76</sup>

Whether understood as colonial warfare or as counterinsurgency doctrine, the Italian army’s approach to asymmetrical conflict was not unique. Although its aversion to irregular warfare may well have come close to German levels, the *Regio Esercito* was hardly an exceptional institution. Its methods were not particularly innovative. Nor did they differ greatly from those of other Western colonial powers. Italian commanders easily overcame any taboo against applying broadly equivalent “colonial” methods to their repression policies in Europe because they perceived similar patterns of resistance that, according to their doctrine and military culture, permitted and necessitated harsh responses. Racist views of the savage Balkan “other,” reinforced by their equation with

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<sup>73</sup> Tim Moreman, “‘The Greatest Training Ground in the World’: The Army in India and the North-West Frontier, 1901–1947,” in Marston and Sundaram, *Military History of India*, 61–72. Roy, *The Army in British India*, 116–17. Boot, *Invisible Armies*, 172–76.

<sup>74</sup> Harold Balfour, “In Praise of Aerial Bombing,” *Saturday Review*, 22 July 1933, 89; cited in Patrick Zander, “(Right) Wings over Everest: High Adventure, High Technology and High Nationalism on the Roof of the World, 1932–1934,” *Twentieth Century British History* 21, no. 3 (2010): 310. See also David Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Priya Satia, “The Defence of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia,” *American Historical Review*, no. 111 (2006): 15–51; and, Sebastian Ritchie, *The RAF, Small Wars and Insurgencies in the Middle East, 1919–1939* (Shrivenham: Centre for Air Power Studies, 2011).

<sup>75</sup> Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 99–100, 102–106, 133.

<sup>76</sup> Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, 128.



communism, further legitimized Italian policy in Yugoslavia and bequeathed to it a colonial character.

Italian military culture did not need special or unique characteristics in order to conform to Fascist objectives. Nor did Italian generals, as traditional imperial elites, need to be Fascistized to participate enthusiastically in Fascist wars of conquest characterized by “fascist” violence. In the context of Mussolini’s pursuit of empire, the Royal Army’s conventional approach to counterinsurgency merged quite naturally with the aims and style of the Fascist regime. Italian generals accepted Fascism’s political and ideological goals of aggressive expansionism and a racially constructed new order as legitimate and, when unimpeded by legal restraints or circumstances, they actively pursued them. Their military measures reflected Fascism’s exaltation of violence, brutality, and terror, and its equation of national prestige with armed force. Given its development out of the First World War and its objective of militarizing society, Fascism did not represent a completely foreign moral universe to career army officers. Their ethos and way of thinking coalesced with the modes of behaviour desired by the regime in conquered territories. When Armellini, a general of unquestionable devotion to his institution, claimed to “have served [...] as the perfect Fascist even before Fascism existed,” he was not far off the mark.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Armellini to Bastianini, 19 July 1942, NARA T-821/64/0447-49.

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- MCP            Ministero della Cultura Popolare
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- AISS            Ambasciata italiana presso la Santa Sede
- MAI            Ministero dell’Africa Italiana
- Gab-AS        Gabinetto – Archivio Segreto
- AUSSME      Archivio dell’Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito, Rome
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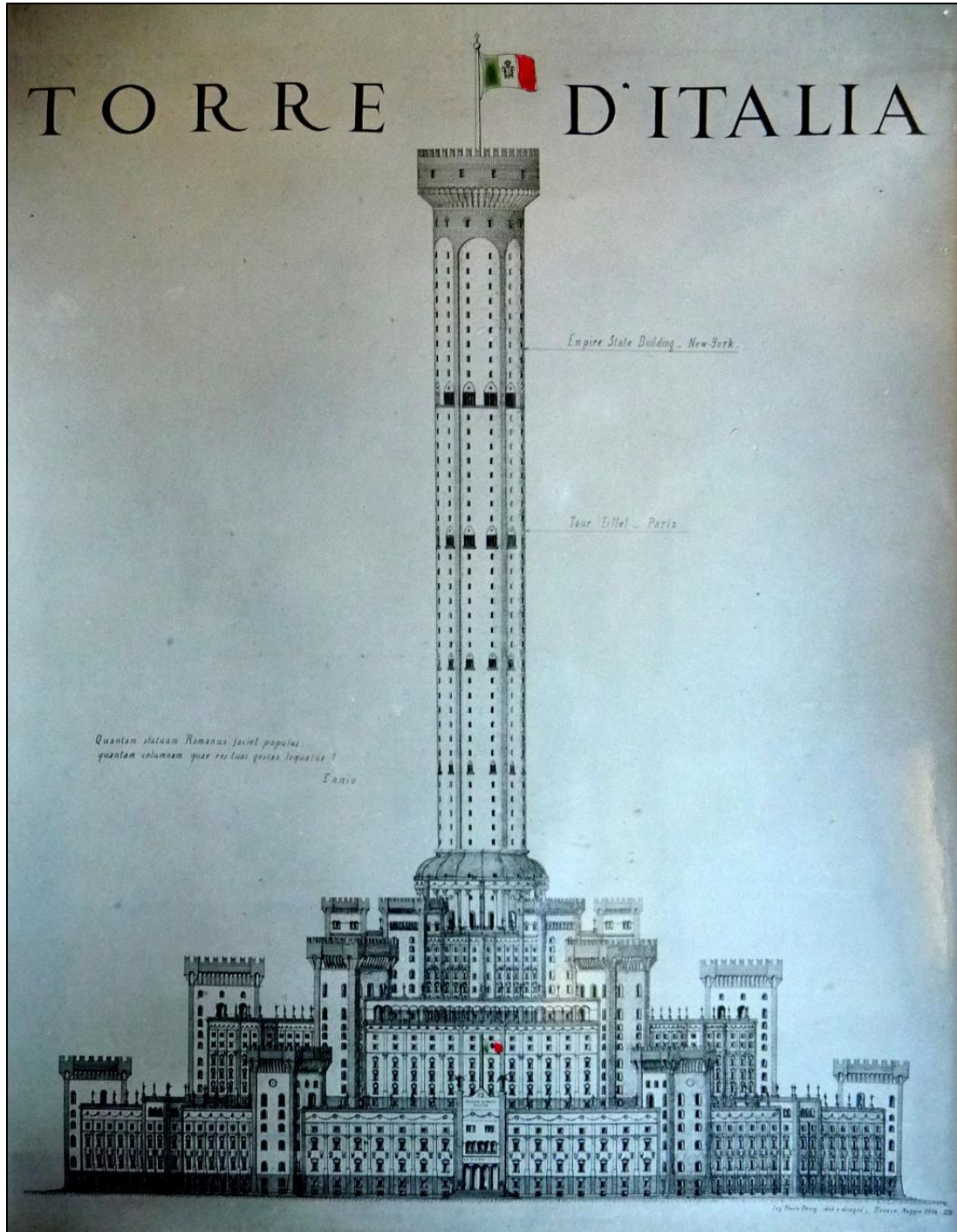
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## Appendices

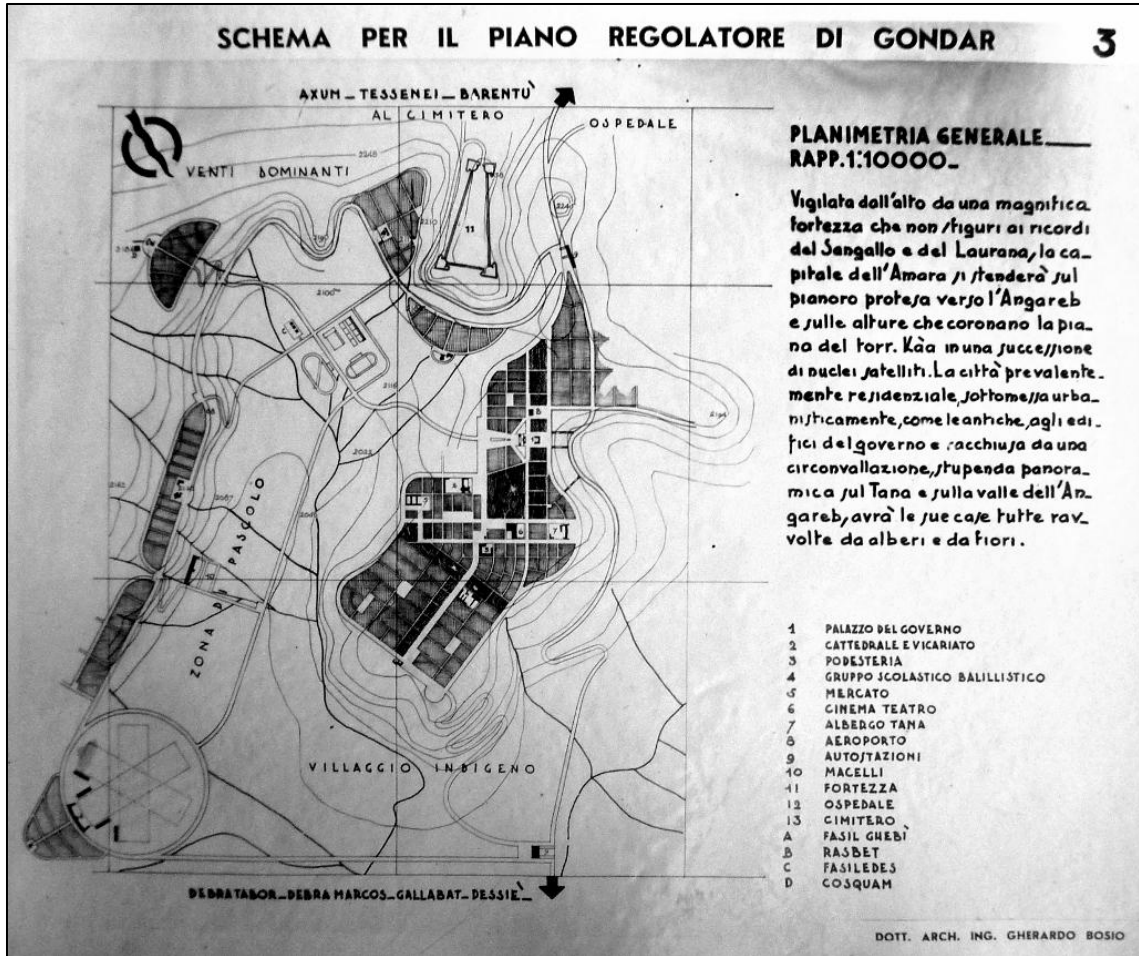
### Appendix A: The *Torre d'Italia*

Source: ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 40, sf. 3.



## Appendix B: Urban planning: Gondar

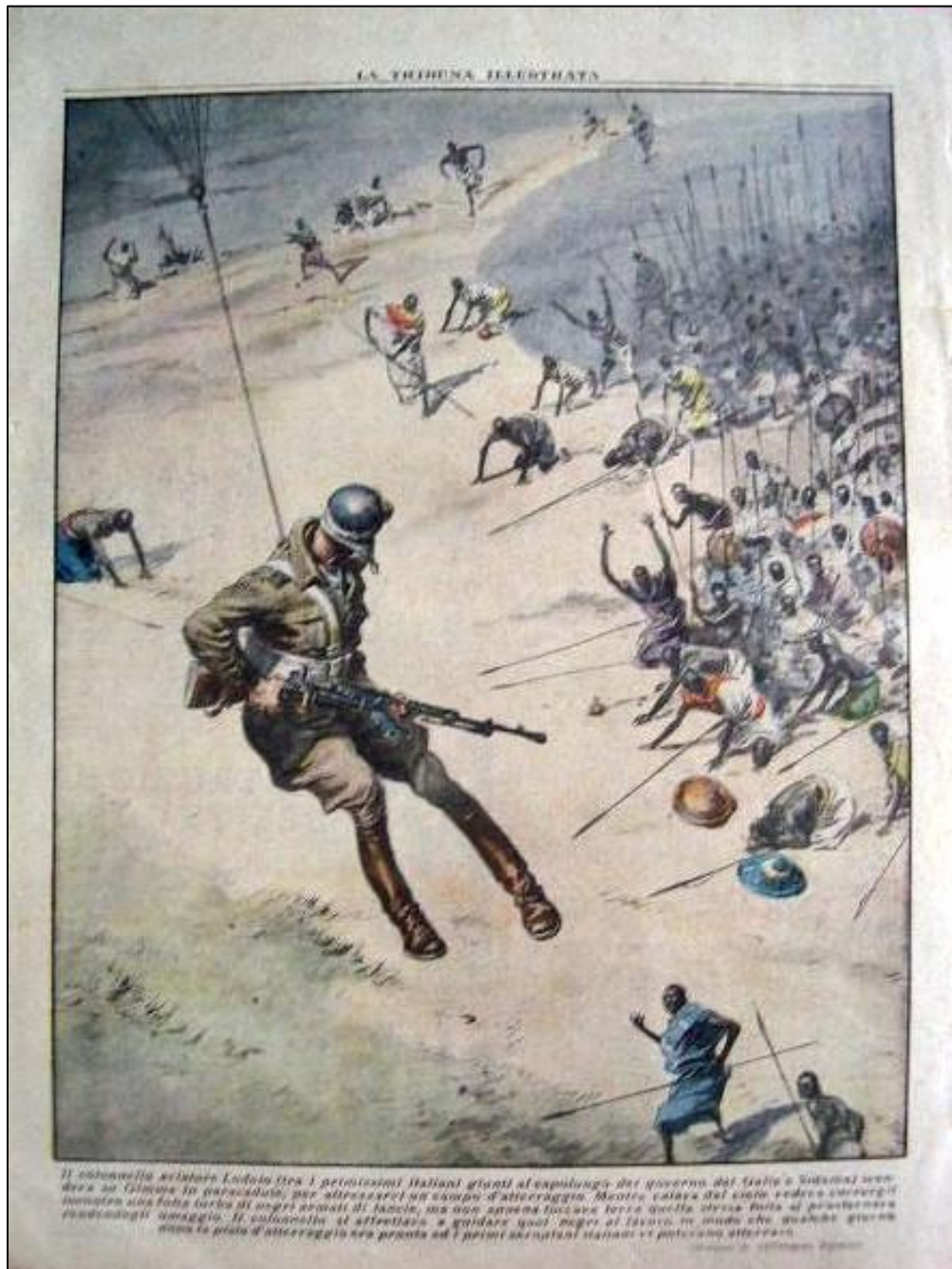
Source: ACS, FG, b. 45, fasc. 41, sf. 6.



### Appendix C: *La Tribuna Illustrata*, 7 February 1937

Caption: "Colonel Lodolo (among the first Italians to reach the capital of Galla Sidamo) descended upon Jimma by parachute, to prepare a landing strip. While he dropped from the sky he saw a large mob of spear-wielding blacks running to meet him, but he had not even touched down when the same rabble prostrated themselves to pay him homage. The colonel quickly put the blacks to work so that after just a few days the runway was ready and the first Italian aircraft could land there."

Source: <http://www.collezione-online.it/tribuna%20illustrata%2020%20retro.jpg> (accessed 26 August 2016)



**Appendix D: La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio, 1 November 1942, 4.**

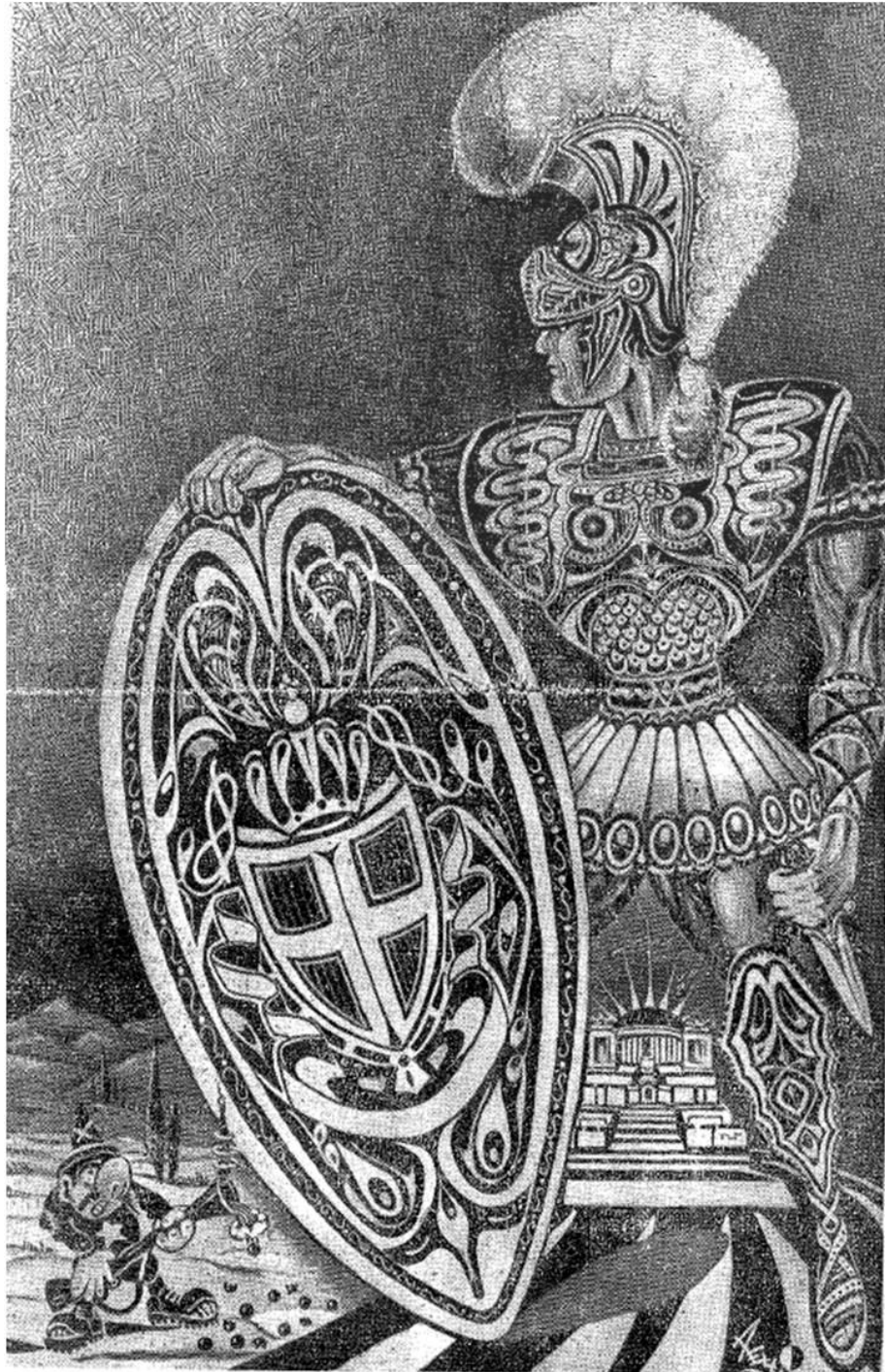
Translation: Typists. "The typist wrote by mistake: 'Every driver must inspect the skirts [goNNe; whereas the Italian word for tires is goMMe] and repair any tears.'"

Source: Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, Emeroteca, Trento.



**Appendix E: *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 25 October 1942, 1.**

Source: Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, Emeroteca, Trento.



ROMA DOMA

Opera di Felici

**Appendix F: *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 29 November 1942, 1.**

Source: Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, Emeroteca, Trento.



**IL FANTE ITALIANO IN BALCANIA**

(dis. di Avenda)



**Appendix G: *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 10 January 1943, 1.**

Source: Biblioteca delle civiche raccolte storiche, Milan.



**Appendix H: *La Tradotta del Fronte Giulio*, 29 November 1942, 4.**

Translation: When the 'colonel' is 'good'. "Crucca recruit: 'Comrade colonel, I would like to enter your corps...'" The Colonel: No can do, kid; you're not big enough..."

Source: Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, Emeroteca, Trento.

**QUANDO LA «COLONNELLA» E' «DOBRA»**



LA RECLUTA CRUCCA: «Compagna colonnello, desidererei tanto entrare nel vostro Corpo...»

LA «COLONNELLA»: Niente da fare, ragazzo; non sei di misura...  
(dis. di Avondo)

## Curriculum Vitae

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