

Introduction

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The articles in this special issue were first presented at the 2001 ASMI conference on 'Italian Colonialism and Post-Colonial Legacies'. This collection of papers is the first in a series of publications planned on different aspects of Italian colonialism. A second collection, offering new historical interpretations of Italian colonialism, will be published in the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* later this year. A third group of essays on the legacy and memory of Italian colonialism will be published by Peter Lang in early 2004.

In the view of most historians and cultural critics working on Italian colonialism, the importance of issues relating to Italy's expansion overseas has not received adequate consideration.¹ The colonial experience is still regarded by many as an incidental aspect of Italy's past while studies of both Liberal Italy and even Fascism have tended to underplay the significance of the state's colonial ambition. In the post-war period even less attention has been paid to how Italy's colonial legacy impacts not only on modern Italy but on the countries that it occupied and colonized. The peripheral status conferred on Italian colonialism has certainly permeated the field of British Italian Studies, where it is not widely studied in the university syllabus. We hope that this and forthcoming publications will contribute to changing this state of affairs. This new research, alongside the recent publications in English—most notably Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller's *Italian Colonialism*, Palgrave, New York, 2003—will also facilitate comparative work by scholars working on colonialism in other national contexts. For not only has colonialism been marginalized within Italian social, historical and political discourse but Italian colonialism also inhabits a marginal position within wider comparative studies of European colonialism. Linked to this is an important question implicit in much of the research on Italian colonialism—the extent to which it was different from or similar to other forms of European colonialism. For example, how significant is the fact that Italy was dispossessed of its colonies, rather than experiencing the bitter decolonization wars of other European colonial powers, with regard to the silence about Italian colonialism in post-war Italy?

The excellent response to the call for papers for the ASMI conference is testament to the new and innovative research currently being conducted in the field of Italian colonialism. Our objective of organizing an interdisciplinary conference was fully realized with conference papers spanning History, Politics, Geography, Cultural Studies, Film Studies and Sociology. The special issue of

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Modern Italy seeks to reflect this approach by presenting articles on various aspects of Italian colonialism from different disciplinary perspectives. In terms of periodization, the articles span from the 1860s to the contemporary period; they additionally cover a wide range of geographical locations. The papers do not address a specific sub-theme, rather they should be read as presenting new research on various understudied aspects of Italian colonialism from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. Nevertheless, several themes pertinent to the general study of colonialism can be identified across a range of the contributions: the establishment of hierarchies between colonizers and colonized; resistance to colonialism; racism; racist representations of colonial subjects; the development of a colonial consciousness. Moreover, certain issues seem specific to Italian colonialism and, in some cases, reflect enduring tensions for the Italian nation-state: North–South differences within Italy; migration and colonialism; ethnic Italian colonies abroad; Italy’s relationship to other European powers.

The different disciplinary perspectives demonstrate how disparate schools of thought collectively contributed to the Italian colonial enterprise. Thus, David Atkinson’s article analyses the role of geography and geographical sciences in creating a public conception of foreign countries as ‘different’ and in need of ‘civilizing’ European intervention. The discipline of geography also contributed to debates on ‘race’—a critical issue for the colonial project—maintaining, as it did, that racial difference was a result of different physical environments. Atkinson also demonstrates the important role of cartography in defining and demarcating colonial territories. The development of a colonial consciousness in Italy was an important objective of the colonial project and geography certainly had a role to play in this. The theme can similarly be found in Loredana Polezzi’s article, written from a Cultural Studies perspective, which addresses the circulation of different types of colonial images. Focusing principally on the genre of travel writing as an important intersection of the colonial imagination, she highlights how maps were a central image in the representation of empire and demonstrates the important symbology of the Italian flag as a sign of conquest and possession. Ruth Ben-Ghiat’s article examines what visual culture conveys about the experiential dimension of Italian colonialism. On a theme relevant to other instances of Italian colonialism, she highlights the three audiences that colonial film sought to address—Italian, African and international. She additionally demonstrates how resistance to colonialism was manifest in a variety of ways, including the manner in which African audiences subverted the intended meaning of colonial films

The demographic aspect of Italian colonialism, whereby Italy’s surplus population was encouraged to settle in the colonies, is a widely recognized feature of Italian colonialism. One element of demographic colonialism that has received rather less attention is the role envisaged for Italian migrant communities in both North and South America in relation to the colonial project. Mark Choate’s historical contribution is centred on this question. He charts how, albeit for a brief period, these ethnic colonies of Italians abroad were viewed as akin to the colonies under direct rule. It was, however, the desire for imperial and international glory which led Italy to return to a more traditional form of imperialism in Africa. The theme of migration is also a feature of Nicola Mai’s chapter in his examination of the relationship between Italy and Albania. Mai’s contribution straddles both the colonial and the post-colonial period by moving from an

examination of Albania as a 'denied' colonial subject to an analysis of the contemporary relationship between Italy and Albania as two nation-states and, importantly, given current socio-political trends in Italy, the situation of Albanian migrants currently living in Italy. Alessandro Triulzi's essay also addresses both the colonial period and its legacy. His focus on the Italian defeat at Adowa² in 1896, the revival of the 'shame' of the memory of Adowa under Fascism and the manner in which the centenary of Adowa was 'celebrated' in Ethiopia and Italy traces a nationalist reading of the battle in Italy from a historical perspective.

Collectively these articles provide important new approaches to a reading of Italian colonialism and its legacy. From their respective vantage points the contributors also point to a number of areas where further primary research is needed. We hope that this collection will be a useful addition to the body of work already produced on Italian colonialism and that, within the broad field of Italian Studies, it will contribute to moving this subject area from margin to centre.

Notes

1. See, for example, Irma Taddia, *La memoria dell'Impero. Autobiografie d'Africa Orientale*, Piero Lacaita Editore, Manduria, 1988, p. 17; Angelo Del Boca, *L'Africa nella coscienza degli italiani: miti, memorie, errori, sconfitte*, Laterza, Rome—Bari, 1992, p. 113; Alessandro Triulzi, 'Italia e Africa: una memoria rimossa', *Africa e Mediterraneo*, 1, March 1996, pp. 4–6, p. 6.
2. This special issue retains the different names for the Battle of Adowa.