

THE COLONIAL CAMP AND “POPULATION POLICY” IN LIBYA(1923-1931)

(by Leonardo Paggi)

Far from Hanna Arendt’s post-World War II contention that concentration camps were a feature of totalitarian regimes, they are an institution that traverses, in diverse forms, the entire history of the 20th-century. The decisive factor for their recurrence in quite different political and institutional contexts, is the use of war as a tool for regulating international relationships. Concentration camp violence, as such, is always the same, finding its specific character only if located within the strategic project of which it is part. In my opinion, the barbed-wire policy that the Italian Fascist government implemented on a massive scale in Libya, between 1929 and 1931, can be understood only if located on a more complete trajectory. This started with the rise of Fascism to power and ended twenty years later in October 1942, with the total defeat of the Italian army at El Alamein, which marked the end of Italian colonialism in Libya and the beginning of the Fascist regime’s collapse.

I

For Libya, the formation of the first Mussolini government meant the immediate renouncing of any idea of liberal constitution reform, dating to the Wilsonian era, and a sharp rise in repression levels. Nationalist culture played an important role in this, directly represented by Luigi Federzoni in the Ministry of the Colonies. Federzoni was the first to clearly enunciate the objective of effective, total sovereignty over the colony's territory, which would become the common thread connecting all aspects of the escalation of violence that led to the concentration camps of Cyrenaica.

The urgency with which the Fascist government addressed the problem of reconquering Libya in 1923 can be explained chiefly by the fact that the Mediterranean political balance had undergone profound changes since 1911-12. The application of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which in 1916 planned the future splitting off of the Asian part of the Ottoman Empire, led to what the historian Albert Hourani termed the "apogee of the empire", a near complete Anglo-French control of the

Mediterranean, making the Italian presence there even more insignificant and marginal than it had been before 1914. The interweaving of weakness and violence, that defines the entire history of Italian Fascism, is on very clear display here.

Moreover, the return of peace in 1919 marked the first major explosion of the anti-colonial movement around the world, that also characterized the history of the Mediterranean in the twenties, including Abdel Krim's armed insurrection in Morocco in 1925, the anti-French revolt in Syria, also in 1925, the 1929 explosion of what has been termed "the first intifada", the first large Palestinian protest against the growing Jewish occupation, and the English mandatory policy in Palestine. This is to say that the Libyan people's resistance to the Fascist plan for total sovereignty was set in a context of endemic rebellions spread throughout the African and Asian coasts of the Mediterranean.

The Italian effort to reconquer the colony (which proceeded with enormous difficulty due in part to an often lamented scarcity of financial means in the state budget) can be easily distinguished in three phases: the first phase, from 1923 to

1926, primarily entailed counter-guerrilla actions; the second, from 1927 to 1928, under the leadership of governor Attilio Teruzzi, pursued the objective of controlling the territory up to the 29th parallel ; and the third, from 1929 to 1931, mainly focused on Cyrenaica. Here Badoglio and Graziani adopted a policy of "absolute control of the populations" in which the concentration camp appeared basically as a tool of mass deportation.

I

Documents in the Northern Africa collection of the historic archive of the *Carabinieri* [Italian military police] are of great importance, particularly for the first period from 1923 to 1926. The archive does not have separate collections. The material is inventoried by subject, and the documents are progressively numbered. The documents were all produced by the General Command, by the Divisions and the local commands of the stations. The complete series of weekly and bi-weekly reports sent to Rome from Tripoli and Bengasi are of particular interest, providing a quite detailed view of the new Italian offensive. They form an elaborate portrait of how military

considerations interweave with wider political assessments.

In the realm of military action, the most surprising fact is perhaps the systematic, regular use of aerial bombing in response to Libyan guerilla warfare. There was an effort to hit caravans of rebels in transit, but there was even more bombing of wells, camels and sheep. Could this be the early influence of Giulio Douhet's "Command of the Air", which came out in 1921, recommending aerial attacks on civilian populations? It is at any rate certain that long before the well-known case of the use of aerial mustard gas in Ethiopia, the Fascist government had started to see the colony as a place to experiment with new war methods. However, it was not alone in this. In 1925, the French bombed Damascus in response to the insurrection spreading in Syria. At the 1932 conference in Geneva, in which aerial disarmament was discussed, some proposed legalizing "police bombings" as an appropriate method for restoring order in the colonies.

During these years, military action was already backed by an infrastructure policy that was redesigning the territory following principles that overturned all prior ways of life. New traffic systems altered pre-existent connections, and buildings

were built that embodied the logic of the new power that was seeking to transplant itself, including government palaces, railway stations, schools, hospitals and *Carabinieri* stations. A folder in the Ministry of Italian Africa's archive gives detailed documentation of the 1929 financial and political effort that built a large cathedral in the center of Tripoli, an explicit expression of the desire to impose Italy's religious culture. Of course, in the post-colonial area, this cathedral became the most important mosque in Tripoli.

The *Carabinieri's* archives express constant apprehension about international developments. Libya borders Tunisia and Egypt, which were in the midst of significant political processes during this period. In 1920, Destour was founded, a party that explicitly set in its program the objective of Tunisia's liberation from French colonial control. At the same time, a substantial minority of 150,000 Italians in Tunisia made the Italian fascist government very sensitive to any French attempt to adopt denationalization policies. Moreover, political refugees from Tripolitania came to Tunisia. Starting mainly in the twenties, the voices of Italian anti-fascist opposition came to Tunisia through a relatively advanced press system. They came from opposition members who had emigrated to Paris, especially

socialists and communists, who considered the colonies fertile ground for political agitation.

Even more complex and threatening for Italian Fascism were the political processes taking place in the large country of Egypt, which was aiming to play a leading role in the entire Arab world. The February 1922 British recognition of some independence, which was largely only formal, opened a new era of political struggle in Egypt. Sa'd Zaghlul's Wafd party became the main voice of rising nationalism in a head-on battle against both the monarchy's authoritarianism and the still pervasive British influence.

Throughout the twenties, documents continued to affirm that there was no rise in Arab nationalism in Libya like that forming deep roots in the two bordering countries, and which would develop further in the 1930s. The Libyan revolt was driven by Senussi, a religious order that called for an anti-Italian struggle in the name of reestablishing Islam's original principles threatened by the penetration of Western culture. This was an Islamic revolt with a highly archaic message. Rashid Khalidi and Lisa Anderson have spoken about the presence of

Ottomanism in Libya, a pan-Islam ideology that differs from Arab nationalism in seeing the tradition of the old empire as the source of an identity to be preserved against the intrusion of Western powers. Omar El Muktar , requested by Graziani just before his execution to tell the reasons of his long anti-Italian commitment responded: I fought for my religion, I intended serving Good.

II

The 29th parallel was conquered in 1927 and 1928 under Attilio Teruzzi's command. It entailed going beyond what were called "pivotal maneuver points"(perni di manovra"), a system of supply bases to allow the troops' to move more rapidly over the territory. The control of the territory was meant to extend without interruption for a width of 300 km, from Gadamesh, on the Algerian border, to Giarabub, on the Egyptian border. The greatest effort was focused on Cyrenaica, which was outside of any stable control. Battles were fought particularly over Gebel. An effort was made to reach the oases of Augila and Gialo in the desert, and the greatest resistance was met in completing what was termed the "stitching together of the colony". Tripolitania and Cyrenaica are vastly different regions in terms

of geography, ethnicity and history. They are separated by the vast rocky desert Sirte, at the time inhabited by the Berber people of the Mugarbe, who set up a particularly strong resistance to Italian penetration.

Federzoni, back in the Ministry of the Colonies, wrote to the military commanders of the operations, again proposing the old nationalist theme of the "proletarian nation". Accordingly the reconquest of Lybia was meant to resolve the problem of Italy's "demographic exuberance". Libya was to be a "population colony" in which Cyrenaica's nomadic peoples would be replaced by the settlement of Italian farmers, whose hard work would recreate the ancient splendors of the Greek-Roman era in the region. This argument in itself suggested the future escalation of violence. Once again, foreign policy considerations were important in enacting this escalation.

In 1928, Teruzzi wrote the preface to a book by Egidio Moleti di S. Andrea with the telling title, *"Dallo Stretto di Gibilterra al Canale di Suez. L'Italia e gli Altri nel Mediterraneo e nelle Colonie* ["From the Strait of Gibraltar to the Suez Canal: Italy and Other Powers in the Mediterranean and the Colonies"].

This piece of Fascist literature is an accurate record of how the control of Libya had come to be felt as an essential step in a more ambitious plan for a wider presence in what was now being referred to as, "*Mare nostrum*" ["our sea"]. In contrast with its conciliatory tones towards France, the book continually attacked the English presence, seen as the main obstacle to Italian expansion.

The year 1929 was important in the history of Fascism. The successes in the domestic field (the plebiscite, the concordat with the Vatican) ushered in intensified action in foreign policy. Significantly, it was in 1929 that the third, most brutal phase of the reconquest began, marked by the mass deportation of the nomadic tribes of Cyrenaica.

III

A *Carabinieri* report lists the key points of the motive that Badoglio, who had been recently named governor of Libya, gave for the need for a new phase: "We need to occupy the entire colony if we wish to pacify it. This is for our national dignity, as well as to give us the right to have our voice heard

in the European arena and to achieve colonial mandates". The determination with which Graziani moved in this political direction was born less of motives within the life of the colony, and more of from the maturation of a new phase in the Fascist government's foreign policy , which was choosing war as the way to affirm its international presence: from Ethiopia, to Spain to World War II.

From the military response to guerilla warfare, the move was towards what Graziani called a "clear population policy based on terms of absolute rule over the population". The events are well known: approximately 80,000 Bedouins were evacuated. The Bedouins, who are pastoralists, from the wooded hills of Gebel, were confined in concentration camps in the Sirte deserts. Graziani also wrote, "All the camps were surrounded by barbed wire; food was rationed; the pastures were reduced and controlled, outside circulation was allowed only by special permits. All the relatives of rebels were concentrated in the special camp of El Agheila to prevent them from helping the rebels".

Here, we can see with great clarity the specific character of the

camp that took shape in Libya, compared to those that the II World War would bring throughout Italy. Individual Italian and foreign citizens in Italy were repressed on the base of their nationality, their religion, or their political opinions. The prisoners were subject to careful record-keeping that included their identity information and often their biographies. In this context, concentration camp violence involves depriving individuals of their rights of citizenship. In Cyrenaica, the violence of the colonial camp was applied to entire tribes and ethnicities, which were moved *en masse* with their livestock, to deprive the armed resistance of any support. Here, the camps were like a large forced tent compounds in which entire communities were grouped. The battle against Libyan resistance now meant implementing a profound change in the territory's demographic composition.

With the *General Plan Ost* the Nazis adopted a similar approach on a vastly wider and more horrific scale in Western Europe, after its attack of the Soviet Union in June 1941. For Libya, there are no statistics to attest to the hypothesis of genocide that has been advanced by scholars, but it is clear that an entire people, rather than separate individuals, was

subject to a policy of confinement.

In June 1930, the effort to break up what was called “the Bedouin-rebel conglomeration” involved suppressing all the *zawias* (religious organizations) of the Senussi, and confiscating their assets, carefully inventoried beforehand. These *zawias* were defined as “propaganda cells” and “uncontrollable centers of rebel supplies”. The decision sparked a wave of protest throughout the Islamic world, evidenced by ample documentation in the Ministry of Italian Africa’s archive. The intent was to break up and destroy an entire society, as it had developed throughout its history.

In conclusion, the colonial camp in Libya was part of a wider strategy aimed to separate, to “free”, a territory from its population. The exhibition organized by Costantino di Sante succeeds in making this fact intelligible through images.

“Cyrenaica, green with plants, but red with blood, “ Mussolini wrote in 1931, aptly summing up the entire operation that had been recently completed. Italo Balbo gave a positive sense of reconstruction to the pacification achieved with fire and iron. The founding of the *“Ente per la colonizzazione della Libia”*

[Agency for the colonization of Libya] was an interesting version of the state capitalism with which Fascism acted in this period, including in the most neglected areas of Italy. In 1938, 20,000 colonists arrived in Libya to replace the nomads' tents with the small white houses of farmers. However, it is elsewhere that we should look for the true legacy of the barbed-wire policy implemented in Cyrenaica.

Concentration camps reappeared in Danane, in Ethiopia in 1935, in Gialo in 1941, to segregate Libyan Jews, and in Ljubljana, also in 1941, to break up the armed resistance of Slovenians. The war against civilians that was tested in the colony was transferred to the heart of Europe and advanced, though always ending, ultimately, in military defeats. For example, Augusto Graziani, the victor in the Sennussi revolt, seemed in World War II to have no idea what a modern mechanized mass war in the desert meant. The rout that the 10th Army met in October 1940 would be compared in one of the *Carabinieri's* reports to a flooding river bursting dykes. In his autobiographical novel, *Il Deserto della Libia* [The Desert of Libya], published in 1961, Mario Tobino describes this situation, writing of "soldiers under no flag"(soldati senza

bandiera).

It is precisely this interweaving of violence and weakness that makes the history of Libya in the colonial era a significant piece of Italy's own national history, a piece on which we should continue to work, by remembering and through historic research.