

## Within and outside the nation: former colonial subjects in post-war Italy

Valeria Deplano\*

*Department of History and Cultural Heritage, University of Cagliari, Italy*

*(Received 20 January 2018; final version accepted 10 July 2018)*

After Mussolini's regime collapsed, Italy rebuilt itself as a nation and a democracy. The Republican Constitution approved in 1948 rejected the ideologies of both racism and racial discrimination, which had been strengthened and made harsher by Fascism since the mid-1930s. Yet, despite this, racism and racialisation continued in the post-Fascist years. The article analyses how the presence of former colonial subjects in Italy between the 1940s and 1960s was perceived, represented and managed, and demonstrates that the hegemonic discourse of the post-war period still considered Italy to be a white and ethnically homogeneous nation. It considers the stories of people from Libya and Eritrea who applied for Italian citizenship and the life in Italy of some Somali students in the 1960s. From different perspectives, these case studies show how in republican Italy inclusion and exclusion, as well as concepts of identity and otherness, were the consequence of processes of racialisation and ideas inherited from the previous period.

**Keywords:** decolonisation; racism; citizenship; postcolonial migration; mobility

### Introduction

During Italy's two decades of Fascist rule, Mussolini's government developed a series of legal and political measures that aimed to make Italy as white and 'ethnically homogenous' a nation as possible. A large number of these were connected to the colonial policy that the regime was advancing in Africa (Gabrielli 1997; Goglia 1988, 1991–1992). In particular, following the occupation of Ethiopia and Mussolini's declaration of the Italian empire in May 1936, and therefore before the approval of the anti-Jewish laws of 1938, new rules were introduced that sought to avoid any possible 'contamination of the race' by colonial subjects, and to maintain the 'body of the nation' intact. All marriage between Italians and Africans was prohibited, and from 1940 legal recognition of children with African mothers and Italian fathers was also banned (Sorgoni 1998; Barrera 2002, 2003; Gabrielli 1997). Efforts to discourage the movement of colonials towards Italy were strengthened, and the regime worked doggedly to send the few already in the country back to Africa (Gabrielli 1996). And, finally, the extremely limited channels that, until the end of the 1930s, had in exceptional circumstances allowed people from Libya and the Horn of Africa to request Italian citizenship, were closed (Capuzzo 1995; Renucci 2005; Costa 2005; Bascherini 2012; Donati 2013). By the outbreak of the Second World War, colonial racism had contributed to an extremely restricted definition of 'Italianness', and shaped Italian society as a result.

After the fall of the Fascist regime and the loss of the colonies during the conflict, Italy rebuilt itself as a democracy. The new Republican Constitution, which entered into force in 1948, officially rejected any racist ideology or discrimination based on sex, religion or, indeed, race. The

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\*Email: [valeria.deplano@unica.it](mailto:valeria.deplano@unica.it)

inclusion of the word 'race' in article 3 of the Constitutional Charter was at the centre of a debate stirred up by the Union of Italian Israelite Communities, but eventually it was considered the term that best represented the republic's rejection of the 'tragic theories espoused on the matter'.<sup>1</sup> In theory, this approach was meant to herald a new definition of the concept of 'Italianness', with a more inclusive view of national belonging. This article seeks to analyse how the principles of inclusion and exclusion from the national community inherited from the past were debated in the 20 years following the war, and to discover whether the country's racist legacy, and particularly that directly connected with Italy's colonial experience, was reversed in practice. In addition, it investigates whether the racialisation processes developed and enacted in previous decades in terms of the way Africans were considered and described, and the aim to keep Africans and Italians separate, were abandoned following the demise of Fascism and colonialism.

Historiographical interest in racism in republican Italy, and particularly in the decades immediately following the end of the Second World War, is relatively recent.<sup>2</sup> However, the research conducted to date has shown that questioning the relationship between the country and otherness (or that perceived as such) from the immediate aftermath of the war onwards is crucial for our understanding of the present situation (Patriarca 2015, Giuliani 2015). At the same time, connecting these works to research into colonialism and decolonisation also appears worthwhile. Over the last 15 years, the growing focus on the cultural aspects of colonial occupation in research has shown that, as in the rest of Europe, Italy's expansionism was supported and made possible by the spread and entrenchment of a series of ideas and values within the colonising society (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2002; Palumbo 2003; Duncan and Andall 2005).

In addition, it has become clear that the colonial debate played a role in shaping national culture more widely (Deplano and Pes 2014). Cultural materials that suggested the existence of racial hierarchies and promoted homogenising forms of self-representation in terms of ethnic belonging were used to 'forge the nation' as far back as the unification of Italy and throughout the Liberal period (Nani 2006; Gabrielli 2015, Proglia 2016). The same materials were then salvaged by Mussolini's regime to further transform Italy and turn it into a fascist state. While Fascism did not initiate racist discourse in Italy, it did play a crucial role in strengthening it, spreading it and ensuring it infiltrated all levels of society. And colonialism, both in theory and in practice, was an effective tool for convincing the Italians to feel superior to other peoples, particularly non-white and African populations (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2011; Deplano and Pes 2014).

Republican Italy's difficulties in coming to terms with its colonial past are well documented (Rochat 1978; Del Boca 1992, 2005, 2009; Labanca 2002, 2009, 2015). As a result, the impact on the country's history of the lack of debate surrounding not only expansionism and all its military and political implications, but also the colonial culture that accompanied it, therefore warrants discussion. It is important to note that difficulties in assuming full responsibility for colonial actions and a reluctance to recognise the legacy of colonialist culture on postcolonial societies are traits shared by all former colonial powers, and therefore represent a defining element of western Europe, to be considered as a whole as well as for individual nations (Buettner 2016). The uniqueness of the Italian example stems from the fact that particular factors gave rise to the lack of political, public and scientific reflection on these topics, and therefore delayed it for longer than in other countries. These included the absence of any open discussion or rifts between the former colonisers and colonials, which could have stimulated public opinion and at the same time made decolonisation and its implications a political issue. In Italy, the end of colonialism was brought about diplomatically, mediated first by the Allies and then by the United Nations. Direct and violent clashes with former colonial subjects were restricted to a few episodes – like the 1948 massacre in Mogadishu, where 58 Italians were killed in the Somali capital (Calchi Novati 1980,

1994) – and these were downplayed as ‘exceptional’ and excluded from public and more widespread reflection.

Even more importantly, unlike Great Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and, later, Portugal, Italy did not have to manage large numbers of migrants from its former colonies. Elsewhere, such migrants, as well as accelerating the creation of openly multicultural (albeit generally hostile) societies, obliged politicians to tackle the issue of redefining the boundaries of national belonging, beginning with legislation on citizenship. This reappraisal was in many cases painful and strongly opposed, and the results it achieved were dubious (Thompson 2005; Shepard 2006; Blanchard et al. 2013), but it had a public resonance that completely bypassed Italy, and which drew attention and analysis from social scientists. Reflections on the situation in 1970s Great Britain, for example, led to the development of the concept of the empire ‘striking back’, the idea that it influenced its former motherland due both to the presence of former colonial subjects and to the re-emergence, or persistence, of racist mentalities and behaviour (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982).

Although Italy did not have a postcolonial migrant population that could turn the legacy of this past and the connections it forged into the subject of public, political and scientific debate, the country was not as white, homogenous and ‘blemish-free’ as the national self-narrative had long claimed. There were groups of people from the former colonies in Italy after the war, although restricted in number and mostly concentrated in clearly defined geographical areas – predominantly the cities, and Rome and Naples in particular. This article reflects on how the presence of these people led to a redrawing of the boundaries of the nation as defined by pre-1946 governments, both Fascist and Liberal. Specifically, it analyses the theory and practice of the way these groups were described and treated in Italy, which in turn allows us to understand how they were perceived.

Three case studies are examined to answer the questions posed above: whether the racialisation processes were actually called into question, and if so, how, and how the meaning of being Italian was redefined.<sup>3</sup> Firstly, reconstructing the Italian government’s policies towards Eritrean soldiers and the Libyans sent back to Italy by the Allies allows a reflection on how Italy’s political and administrative powers saw the encounters between Italians and former colonial subjects domestically immediately following the war. We then focus on the attitude of the political and legal authorities to citizenship applications made by various former colonial subjects, to see whether the criteria for joining the community changed in the country’s transition to a republic, and if so, how. Finally, the case of Somali students sent to Italy for high school and university education during the period when Somaliland was a trust territory under Italian administration (1950–1960) allows a more general observation to be made of the attitude of Italian society and the Italian press towards people of African origin.<sup>4</sup>

### **A white country: the expulsion of the askaris from post-war Italy**

After the signing of the armistice in 1943 confirming the end of Italy’s relationship with Hitler’s Germany, the Allies sent some of the soldiers and officials they had imprisoned during the conflict to Italy. These included around 300 askaris, servicemen who had been part of the Italian armed forces’ ‘indigenous contingents’: Libyans, Eritreans and Somalis who previously, with very few exceptions, had been carefully kept away from the white ‘motherland’, and who were now assigned to the Mixed Colonial Depot and divided into two units, one based in Naples and one in Rome.

The group were of different ages and levels of seniority but, unlike the very few Libyan and Eritrean students present in Italy in those years, none of them came from prominent families.<sup>5</sup>

Their biographies do not reveal any specific education, which, after all, was not required for recruitment.<sup>6</sup> One thing they did have in common, however, was having belonged to the Italian armed forces for their entire adult lives, and in many cases they came from families where other male members had made the same decision. They were also, if not the first Africans, definitely the first ‘homogenous’ group of people from Africa to arrive in Italy after the war. Although statistics and detailed research into this topic are in short supply, it is clear that the Fascist regime’s policy of ‘whitewashing’ the country enacted in the previous two decades had drastically limited the number of people from the colonies in Italy. Even after 1945, unlike in other European countries, there were no communities of African migrants. The first, the Eritrean community, was only recorded in the early 1960s, and was initially made up predominantly of domestic workers, and therefore was predominantly female, joined later by members of the liberation movement fighting against Ethiopian rule.<sup>7</sup>

As soon became evident, the majority of the servicemen who made up this first, very limited, African community in Italy welcomed the transfer as an opportunity to build a new life in the ‘motherland’. Their wish not to return to their places of origin stemmed in part from the uncertainty of their fate in those countries, which were already on the road to independence, and where having aided the occupying force was a potential reason for social exclusion or violence. In addition, Italy had also been an ever-present force in their lives, and they did not want to lose their personal ties with the nation they had learned to serve. Some, like one askari from Tripoli, had assimilated Fascist thinking and found the new political landscape in the former colonies so unbearable that they arrived in Italy of their own free will: ‘I left my home, my relatives and all things I held most dear in the world’, he wrote, ‘to come to Italy so as not to be governed by the English, who I hate and who have transformed the sweet and industrious Italian Tripolitania into a sorrowful and dead region’ (Morone 2015, 79). They were also undoubtedly convinced that it would be easier to find work and prosper in Italy than in countries with a particularly uncertain future.

Whatever motivated them, their wish to remain in Italy theoretically did not go against the plans of the Italian political establishment. In the immediate aftermath of the war, both before and after the signing of the peace treaty that forced Italy to give up its colonial possessions, the government, headed by Alcide De Gasperi of the Democrazia Cristiana party, used diplomatic means to try to ensure post-Fascist Italy maintained a role in Libya, Eritrea and Somalia (Rossi 1980; Del Boca 1984). One of the elements on which the government’s reasoning was based was the existence of a connection between Italy and the populations of these countries, a tie that De Gasperi and all the leading political forces claimed not only to want to maintain, but indeed to strengthen. In reality, when the chance of keeping this link alive was offered by colonial soldiers’ wish to stay in Italy and join the life of local communities, the government did not actively support them in any way. On the contrary, officials at the Ministry of Italian Africa, which had not yet been dissolved, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately developed a repatriation plan which was enacted gradually, for ‘reasons of political opportuneness’, with the sole aim of not compromising the government’s policy of continuing to make colonial claims.<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, however, a series of initiatives were introduced that sought to discourage the soldiers from integrating into society. The minister responsible for Italian Africa, Giuseppe Brusasca, recommended that marriage between the soldiers and Italian women should be disincentivised;<sup>9</sup> any work activities that took the soldiers outside the protected environment of the barracks and their accommodation, leading to them ‘mixing’ with the Italian population, were discouraged and prevented where possible;<sup>10</sup> and finally the soldiers, who had become foreigners following the official declaration of independence of their countries of origin, were frozen out and left to the mercy of fate, without receiving any financial support.

At this point, in the early 1950s, with the political destiny of the former colonial possessions decided and Italy 'only' awarded the trusteeship of Somalia, the majority of the Libyan and Eritrean soldiers had been sent back to their places of origin, against their will. The Italian parliament, aided by the small number of people affected, had avoided touching on the issue during political discussions on its colonial demands. Only in 1954 did Leonetto Taddei, a member of parliament from the Partito Nazionale Monarchico, first present a parliamentary question to the interior minister, and then fight on the Foreign and Colonial Affairs Committee to approve a law to allow at least the few dozen people who had not yet been sent back to Africa to remain in Italy. The minister agreed with the reasoning put forward first by *Il Giornale d'Italia*, a newspaper with close ties to the neo-Fascist organisation Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI). It was therefore the Right, an area of politics that still explicitly claimed Italy's colonial past as a positive chapter in the country's history, that provided the only voice in defence of the interest of soldiers of African origin. The left-wing and centrist parties, which at least claimed to consider colonialism a thing of the past, while not explicitly opposing the initiatives to protect the former askaris, did not propose any initiative themselves.

As one might expect, neither Taddei's nor the MSI's newspaper's defence of the askaris amounted to a critical reappraisal of colonialism; instead they invoked questions at the heart of right-wing discourse, such as honour and loyalty to the Italian flag. These African soldiers were attached to this flag, and had fought and risked their lives for it, and therefore, in the view of Taddei, the *Giornale d'Italia* and the Association of War Veterans, they had earned a right to live in Italy, and Italy had developed a duty to protect them.<sup>11</sup> Taddei's efforts, which aimed for at least financial recognition of these rights, led in 1957 to the approval of a law that provided a pension to the remaining 51 Libyans and Eritreans left in the country.<sup>12</sup> Taddei saw this provision as a partial and unambitious measure, particularly in terms of the limited number of people that benefited from it, and in substance it did not contradict the general attitude of Italy's various governments and central administration: although they had fought for Italy, often for several generations, and despite having been brought up to recognise Italy as their homeland, ministerial officials judged their presence in the country to be 'neither opportune nor desirable',<sup>13</sup> and that they constituted a foreign and incompatible group they did everything they could to eliminate.

### **A white nation: postcolonial migrants and citizenship**

The veterans' aspiration to remain in Italy was not entirely driven by the combination of convenience, the threat of reprisals and disillusionment with the political result of the decolonisation process. In sharp contrast to the aims of the Fascist regime and the Liberal governments, the colonial experience generated a sense of closeness to the motherland, to which the first 'colonial migrants' now laid claim. It was this feeling of a degree of 'Italianness' that drove some of the former soldiers, as well as some civilians from the former colonies, to request Italian citizenship. In May 1948, in a letter addressed to the minister responsible for Italian Africa from the Le Fraschette detention camp in Alatri, in the province of Frosinone, south-east of Rome, Zagai Zomo, an Eritrean askari, explained why he had chosen to set off for Italy, and why he wanted to stay there: 'I came to this land to enjoy my freedom and therefore to show my patriotism for Italy, which I consider my Homeland'.<sup>14</sup> Four years later, in 1952, the foreign ministry received a letter from a Jewish merchant from Libya, Vittorio Agiman, who was in Milan and requested an Italian passport to allow him to continue trading with North Africa. 'The writer cannot understand why he has not been granted one, either in terms of fairness or his Italianness', he wrote incredulously.<sup>15</sup>

Zomo and Agiman's viewpoint, shared by many people from the former colonies who ended up in Italy following the war, shows how the issue of the former colonial subjects not only involved the country's geographical borders, but also, and perhaps most importantly, the borders of its identity. The wish to remain in the country resulted from a feeling of belonging, albeit hybridised, which in turn resulted from the cultural crossover inherent in all the processes of colonisation, which transformed the society of the colonisers as much as those of the colonials (Young 2005; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Gilroy 1993). In their handling of the askaris, Italy's various governments were forced to tackle the issue of the country's responsibilities towards its former subjects, and at the same time, the right of people of African origin to live in the country. Both issues touched upon the cultural legacy of colonialism and Fascism, since they demanded a reappraisal of the racist actions and ideas that in the preceding decades had been used to justify violence and discrimination towards Africans and their expulsion from Italian soil. But now, when called to decide on whether to include certain Africans within the national community, republican Italy had to tackle head-on the even more troublesome question of the boundaries of national belonging. Could someone of Libyan or Eritrean origin be Italian? And based on which criteria?

In other European countries, the history of citizenship laws developed in relation to migrants from former colonies shows the extent to which the idea of national identity changed after the end of the Second World War and the collapse of the colonial empires (Buettner 2016). The hard-fought attempts to approve a law that included postcolonial migrants in France (Genova 2004; Shepard 2006; Cooper 2014), the approval of the British Nationality Act and its subsequent withdrawal (Paul 1997), and the open and inclusive rules adopted in the Netherlands (Jeronimo and Vink 2011) show in various ways how the different colonial powers were forced to react to the strains imposed by the new postcolonial situation. In Italy, however, the citizenship law in force in the post-war period was the one approved in 1912, the year of the occupation of Libya, and therefore the same law that was in force during the 20 years of Fascism, and the same law, save for a few changes made in the 1970s and 1980s, that would remain in force until 1992. As well as raising some points for reflection on the continuities that run through the various stages of Italy's history, which in some cases were more significant than the presumed caesurae that differentiate them, the persistence of this law demonstrates that a new concept of citizenship was not one of the elements upon which the new ruling class intended to rebuild the country.

As a result, just as in 1945 certain elements underpinning the 1912 law were not discussed, including women's subordination to men, neither were the bond created by 'colonial encounters' or the postcolonial situation taken into consideration. Italian legislation therefore continued to ignore the fact that a small group of former colonials might claim the right to choose their former motherland as their place of belonging. There was only one exception, considered vaguely at the very beginning of the 1950s: the ambassador to Cairo, Renato Prunas, weighed up the idea of allowing access to citizenship to 'our subjects who have carried out military service or served us abroad', but the proposal came to nothing.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, when former soldiers and civilians from the former colonies sent their requests for Italian citizenship they could not rely on any legislative pretext or rule to 'fast track' their application. Ignored by the public and political debate, their applications were managed through the normal administrative process, on a case-by-case basis and, predictably, were rejected.

Later, some of the applicants turned to the courts, with mixed results. The soldiers and their descendants based their cases on a section of the legislation at the time, which aimed to promote relationships of 'moral and cultural affinity' with Italy and to foster, to a certain degree, an idea of a nation not based exclusively on blood ties, stating that foreigners born in Italy who had served in the Italian army could obtain Italian citizenship. However, this regulation could not be applied to

the askaris, as established by a 1989 verdict that rejected a request made by the son of an Eritrean soldier. Regardless of any considerations of cultural and moral affinity, the askaris were colonial subjects, a specific legal status that meant they were neither citizens nor foreigners. Only following Eritrea's independence from Italy could they be considered foreigners, and therefore fall into the category envisaged by the regulation, but at that point they failed the requirement of being born on Italian soil. According to the verdict, it was therefore invalid to apply

the *a fortiori* reasoning that, since foreigners can become Italian citizens by providing military or civil service, this option should be all the more be available for the subjects; on the contrary, the justification for the discrimination was actually the aim of avoiding the subjects being able to achieve a different status (D'Ascia 2009, 484).

Although this interpretation is logical from a purely legal perspective, the affair highlights the post-war governments' inability, or rather lack of will, to tackle and resolve one of the many questions left open by the postcolonial transition affecting people from the former colonies. Furthermore, in this case, maintaining the status quo meant making a distinction, in the colony-free, anti-Fascist Italian Republic, between citizens and colonial subjects, based on a concept of rights and duties connected to a form of racial hierarchy.

This distinction was, however, disputed and rejected by another judge, who was responsible for deciding the fate of a young Libyan, Rashid Kemali. Born in Tripoli but living in Naples, during the colonial period the student held Italian Libyan citizenship, a special status established by the regime in 1939 to grant Muslims from the north African colony superior rights over subjects from the Horn of Africa. In exchange for the possibility to take on various roles in the northern African colony, the new status permanently excluded Libyans from access to citizenship of metropolitan Italy. In 1959, after his application for full Italian citizenship had been rejected twice, the young man turned to the courts. This time the judge declared that the differences between full Italian citizenship and Italian Libyan citizenship no longer existed: in his verdict, he stated that this distinction could not be maintained – not so much because it replicated the discrimination of the colonial period, but mainly because it condemned people like Rashid Kemali to statelessness, which in the post-war period was strongly opposed by the newly founded United Nations (Costanzo 1961).<sup>17</sup>

The 1959 verdict set a precedent that broadened the definition of citizenship slightly. However, only Muslim Libyans could benefit; Jewish Libyans still had two further obstacles to overcome. The first was, once again, legal in nature: the Jewish population, already affected by the racist legislation of 1938, had also been explicitly excluded from Italian Libyan citizenship in 1939, technically the only option that the judge had recognised as equivalent to full Italian citizenship. Here too, the decision to ignore the issue at a technical and legal level suggests a lack of any genuine political will to resolve it. This is backed up by the fact that, even disregarding the legal technicality (declared invalid in a 1967 verdict, the same year in which the exodus of Libyan Jews towards Italy grew in intensity), Libyan Jews had a second hurdle to cross: the Italian state's request for documentation to prove their stateless status and confirm that they had not received Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. Unless they had documents that made this explicitly clear, Libyan Jews had to wait until the 1980s to be legally recognised as Italians.

Their case, as well as being the only example, albeit rather late, of a political intervention rectifying an example of discrimination, poses further grounds for reflection on the complex subject of the concept of 'Italianness' in republican Italy:<sup>18</sup> an 'Italianness' that once again reaffirmed homogeneity, and which the presence of Jews from Libya seemed to challenge. Although a detailed examination of such a wide-ranging issue is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth questioning why the Italian state saw the Jewish community of Libya as being impossible to

assimilate until the 1980s: whether the motives were political, like those evoked by the possibility of ‘dual citizenship’, or whether in some hidden way questions linked to the concept of ‘race’, rejected by the Constitution but not entirely abandoned in reality, were still involved.

### **A white society: otherness by skin colour**

As we have seen, there was a certain degree of continuity in the way identity and otherness were conceived by Italy’s governing bodies and central administration, and this is made clear in the ministerial papers from the time. Exchanges between individual officials and between officials and former colonial subjects, as well as official reports and statements, highlight how in the post-war period inhabitants of the former colonies were mostly judged by the same parameters as the preceding period, and allowing them to stay in Italy was considered at best nonsensical, if not explicitly inappropriate. The hangover of colonial views was also the result of a failure to refresh the administrative staff working at the Ministry of Italian Africa (Giorgi 2012) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: in many cases the same officials who were in post in the 1930s and early 1940s, such as Martino Mario Moreno and Vittorio Zoppi, were also responsible for handling the issues linked to the postcolonial transition.

However, it is less simple to reconstruct how the presence of Libyans, Eritreans and Somalis was perceived by the ordinary people with whom they came into contact: the everyday lives of civilians like Vittorio Agiman, referred to above, only made it into the history books in exceptional circumstances, when bureaucracy or the Italian authorities were involved. The same applied to soldiers: they tended to live in specially dedicated, separate areas, mostly current or former barracks, and their everyday contact with Italians occurred in contexts that are difficult to track. One exception to this was the group of 25 former askaris, mostly Libyan, who were housed by the government in the Acqua Acetosa area of Rome, next to a newly built leisure centre. This accommodation was meant to be temporary, but the men (one of whom was accompanied by his ten-year-old son) remained in the facility from 1951 until 1954, in poor conditions: the building they were given was small and had insufficient toilet facilities. In 1952, the minister responsible for Italian Africa received a letter of complaint from Umberto Fazioli, president of CRAL, the owner of the leisure centre, describing complaints received from visitors to the area. Fazioli accused the soldiers of being ‘promiscuous’ and excelling ‘neither in morality nor in cleanliness’, thus causing the families of officials attending the facility to stay away.<sup>19</sup> References to poor hygiene and accusations of promiscuity were both standard refrains used to describe African subjects in the colonial period. The documentation available does not reveal whether there were any grounds for the reports, or whether those attending the club and the management of CRAL were simply bothered by the sight of poverty-stricken people in a place they visited to enjoy themselves.

Understanding how the presence of people of African origin was perceived by Italians is easier in the case of the Somali students who were in Italy during the 1950s and 1960s. The Italian government obtained trusteeship of its most distant colony from the United Nations between 1950 and 1960, and the rules established when this trusteeship was granted forced Italy to build all the social structures in its former colony that it had not created during its many decades of occupation (Morone 2011). These included a mass education system (in colonial Somalia only a small percentage of the population had access to basic education, which never went beyond the third year of primary school) and a plan to train the elite members of society, who would be entrusted with leading the future independent state. As part of this, between 1952 and 1960, 711 scholarships allowed 531 Somalis to study in Italy, and particularly in Rome, Florence, Padua and Perugia.



Along with the askaris, the Somali students were the first ‘homogenous’ group of immigrants (although they were only in the country temporarily) from the former colonies, and one of the first groups of Africans in Italy in general. The students experienced life alongside Italians in a different way from the former soldiers, because they were in daily contact with local communities, and had the same sort of existence as all students who did not live on campus: they rented apartments and rooms, went to bars, used public transport and attended lectures. Their story therefore allows us to ascertain whether the cultural continuity between Fascist and republican Italy, highlighted by several scholars,<sup>20</sup> as well as influencing the memory of the Italians and their self-representation, may also have had a tangible impact on the life of the Africans in Italy. Furthermore, unlike the servicemen and other civilians, the students allow us to assess any hostility from society towards their presence in the country, because they had a cultural and, in many cases, a political education, and often ended up directly testifying about their experience. The students wrote memoirs, published articles and were sometimes even interviewed by Italian journalists and so, more than 50 years later, we can gain an insight into these first ‘transcultural encounters’ in republican Italy, from a non-Italian viewpoint.

One element on which all the sources agree, both Italian and Somali, is the hostility students faced as soon as they arrived in Italy, due to the colour of their skin. Significantly, the first time this hostility appeared coincided with the arrival of the first group of young people in Rome in 1952, a group of future teachers, the top students from a teacher training course set up in Mogadishu. Initially the Italian foreign minister tried to find space for them in several colleges in the capital, with the dual objective of fostering linguistic and cultural exchanges with Italian students and avoiding accusations of segregating the Somali students. This plan quickly failed because, as an official wrote, ‘the managers of the colleges continually raised objections about the presence of these students’.<sup>21</sup> The minister was therefore forced to rent a building, and a second sometime later, dedicated to housing the African scholarship holders.

Things did not improve in the years that followed, when university students enrolled in various degree courses were invited to look for accommodation on their own. In his biography, Mohamed Aden Sheikh, who first arrived in Italy in the group of teachers, and then returned to Rome to study medicine, described the rigmarole he and his colleagues faced when trying to rent a room:

We always managed to find a place by phone, but when those lovely ladies in the boarding houses saw us in the flesh, there were taken aback and told us they had already rented out the rooms. So we started to explain who we really were – Africans, Somalis, black people – over the phone (Sheikh and Petrucci 1991, 47)

Sheikh opted to call the Italians ‘ignorant’ rather than ‘racist’. In reality it is difficult to make a clear distinction between racism and a generic ‘lack of education on diversity’ that results in discrimination against people based on the colour of their skin. The fact that their skin colour was the issue is confirmed by other sources, and in particular research carried out by several student groups. In 1966 the Catholic Union of Foreign Students, which had already noted that black students, and not just those from the former Italian colonies, tended to live in separate buildings to white students,<sup>22</sup> commissioned a report to publish in its magazine, *Amicizia*. The report aimed to monitor ‘the availability of rooms, the financial conditions imposed and the sanitary conditions, as well as the attitude of landlords towards foreign students in general, and in particular students of colour’. The research showed that in over half of the hostels in Rome and Naples, black students were given anything but a warm welcome. As a second article on the issue reported:

It turned out, however, that 50 per cent of the owners mentioned above refused to welcome students of colour. Generic reasons were given for this refusal, but the most common attitude was a lack of trust in

these students. Here too, prejudice has a dominant influence on the position of the people interviewed; a prejudice that often has no real grounding, because many of them have never had the opportunity to meet people of colour; for others it is rooted in memories of the war or the immediate post-war period, with the resulting fear of being judged negatively for housing people of colour. Others, meanwhile, while saying they had no personal difficulties welcoming people of colour, stated that the main obstacle was the other lodgers who, they said, would be inconvenienced; however, they were unable to explain what this inconvenience would be. Only one person refused on the grounds of having housed a student of colour who disturbed other occupants by always coming home drunk. But they recognise that one cannot generalise.<sup>23</sup>

While race was not mentioned explicitly, it is clear that in 1950s and 1960s Italy a ‘shared anti-black feeling’ was still widespread and deeply rooted, giving rise to unequal treatment and in some cases taking on violent and more openly racist forms. One example of this escalation was the events in Rome one night in September 1959, when eight young Africans (one Sudanese and seven Somali) were involved in a scuffle with two Italians. Initially, the police, eager to calm the altercation, arrested only the eight Africans, accusing them of violence and resisting a public official. When reporting the news the following day, the daily press published a large photo of the students in handcuffs, and in the descriptions made ample use of images deployed to represent the character of Africans during colonial times: the students were described as ‘euphoric’, ‘agitated’, ‘blind drunk’ and solely accountable for a ‘furious’ brawl. The openly right-wing Roman daily paper *Il Tempo* defined the attack as ‘savage’, while *Momento Sera* called it ‘fierce’.<sup>24</sup> These were adjectives and characteristics that recalled the ‘easily excitable nature’, the lack of self-control and violent character and the immoral customs traditionally attributed to colonial subjects, and particularly those from the Horn of Africa.

In the days that followed, however, the barman of the venue where the two groups met testified in favour of the eight Africans, explaining how the two Italians, who turned out to be activists from the MSI, a detail omitted from the original descriptions, had entered the bar with the explicit aim of provoking the students. This included inviting them to sing *Faccetta nera*, the song written in 1935 to accompany the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, which made explicit reference to the submission of Africans to Italians. They then followed the students out of the bar and continued to torment them by referring once again to the colonial period, saying ‘You’ve forgotten what the whip is like’, and ‘We’ll return to Africa, and then you’ll see’. In the end, therefore, the eight students turned out to be the victims, not the aggressors.

The incident was high-profile enough to highlight two things. Firstly, the existence of people in Italy who were not only racist but prepared to publicly and violently display their anti-black prejudice, and who equally explicitly stressed its colonial origins. This is not surprising per se, especially since republican Italy had accepted the existence of the MSI, a party inspired by Fascism, since its foundation in 1946. *Lo Studente*, the monthly publication of the association of Somali students in Italy, highlighted a paradox: while colonialism was fading all over the world (this was only a few months away from 1960, known as the Year of Africa), racism took on a new form in the countries of Europe: intolerance towards groups of foreigners and their culture. As the periodical wrote:

The colonialism experienced by Africa and Asia was one of the most important negative factors in the relationship between black and white people, but now that colonialism has essentially ended, or is on the verge of ending, discussing racism [...] involves talking about intolerance in one’s own country of different ethnic groups or residents of foreign communities therein.<sup>25</sup>

The episode also highlighted the racism present in the Italian press – explicit in the right-wing papers, subtler in the more moderate publications – and espoused by law enforcement officials. Indeed, *Lo Studente* emphasised that the events of that September were only the tip of the iceberg,

because the police constantly monitored and oppressed the Somali students in their everyday lives, acting in a decidedly discriminatory fashion towards them. The newspaper therefore once again proposed ‘protesting loudly and promptly against these events and episodes that undoubtedly reveal symptoms of subtle discrimination’.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the history of colonialism is one of contacts and hybridisation, which inevitably came into conflict with the idea of racial hierarchy shared by all the colonising countries, and, in the case of Italy, with the concepts first of homogeneity and then purity defended by the Fascist regime. The more the chance of ‘contamination’ increased, in particular following the occupation of Ethiopia in 1936 and the reintroduction of the policy of populating the country, the more the regime attempted to avoid it, or at least limit it. This occurred both through more intensive propaganda campaigns, which explained to the Italians that they had the right and duty to consider themselves different and superior to the Africans, and through increasingly extensive racist legislation, which promoted the expulsion of colonial subjects from Italy and imposed rigid separation between Africans and Italians in the colonies.

As the case studies briefly examined above demonstrate, the messages conveyed by both these policies to some extent persisted in democratic, post-Fascist, postcolonial Italy. On the one hand, in the two decades that followed the Second World War, Italy’s politicians and officials continued to see the country as somewhere with no room for people from the former colonies, in both a physical and legal sense. The way Italy distanced itself from and repatriated the former askaris was part of a concept of Italy as an ethnically homogenous land, where assimilating former colonial subjects was considered both unnatural and unwise.

At the same time, the political sphere did not come up with any initiatives to redraw the legal boundaries of the nation devised during the colonial period. The decision not to alter the citizenship laws undoubtedly highlights the lack of interest from anti-Fascist, republican politicians in reflecting on and getting to grips with the postcolonial situation, and so taking on the responsibilities accumulated by the country over the previous decades. It also demonstrates how the Italian authorities continued to maintain a very restrictive and inflexible concept of who could and could not be considered Italian, and who could or could not be granted full rights to live in the country: although it was never made explicit, both having black skin and generic cultural differences (as in the case of the Libyan Jews) were considered incompatible with Italian citizenship. Frederick Cooper writes that, when reflecting on the relationship between citizenship and nationhood, as well as discussing the criteria adopted to define national belonging, one must also ask oneself ‘what sort of state includes or excludes certain categories of people from the status of citizen’ (2014, 4). From this viewpoint, by maintaining the same inclusion and exclusion criteria devised in 1912, with all their racist undercurrents, the nascent Republic of Italy became a state that was still heavily imbued with colonialist culture.

The same conclusion is reached if the focus is shifted from political and administrative staff to society more generally: the story of the Somali students shows widespread ‘anti-black’ sentiment, which influenced – at various levels and with different undertones – the behaviour both of common people and the press and local authorities. In this case the feeling was not directly associated with a fear of ‘contaminating’ the nation, since the students were not migrants planning to put down roots in their former motherland, nor were they seeking citizenship. Instead the hostility and discrimination more simply reveal the persistence of mental images associating black men with various sentiments, all negative: mistrust, fear, disgust and a feeling of superiority.

As historians have already established, similar negative impressions led to the same problems and hostility in the same period against people of African and Asian origin who migrated to the other (former) colonial countries of western Europe, as well as even more clear-cut discrimination and even more serious violence. Rather than explaining or normalising events in Italy, this demonstrates that it was not an exception in the European context, as historians have often claimed (consider, for example, Italy's exclusion from the most recent European work on colonial and postcolonial racism, or the tendency of many pieces of research with an international scope to restrict the history of Italian racism to the period of the racial laws of 1938, e.g. MacMaster 2001). In reality, just like the previous century, in the second half of the twentieth century Italy continued to share a racist culture with the rest of the continent, which reared its head in different ways and forms depending on the various geographical contexts and specific historical conditions.

This means that, like other European nations, the Italian Republic faced, and continues to face, the failure to undergo a real, profound 'decolonisation', where aspects left over from the colonial period are replaced by a system based on different values, the opposite of those espoused in colonial societies. As colonialism involved not only military occupation, political control and economic plundering, but also cultural transformation in both the colonised and colonising society, the end of colonialism cannot be limited to relinquishing administrative, political and military control of the colonies, but must also include a radical rethinking of the values and ideas that underpinned those practices. Failing to do so, and therefore allowing the same ideas to persist, goes beyond creating a 'bad colonial memory', where a country has difficulty recognising its mistakes and compensating victims and tends to build a distorted narrative of its own history. As the three cases analysed show, it enables practices based on similar concepts of identity and otherness to those of the past, and therefore discrimination, to be reproduced in a post-colonial and republican context, albeit in different forms.

*Translated by Ian Mansbridge  
(info@ianmansbridge.co.uk)*

### Notes on contributor

Valeria Deplano (PhD in Modern and Contemporary History, 2010) is a research fellow at the University of Cagliari. Her research interests focus on the history of Italian colonialism, its cultural impact on Italian society and its legacies in republican Italy, with an emphasis on racism. Her publications include: *La Madrepatria è una terra straniera. Libici, eritrei e somali nell'Italia del dopoguerra* (Le Monnier 2017), *L'Africa in casa. La propaganda coloniale durante il fascismo* (Le Monnier 2015); *Quel che resta dell'impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani* (ed. with A. Pes, Mimesis 2014); *Costruire una nazione. Politiche, rappresentazioni e discorsi che hanno fatto l'Italia* (ed. with S. Aru, Ombre Corte 2013).

### Notes

1. Speech by Pietro Nenni on 24 September 1948, Chamber of Deputies, *Discussioni dal 5 agosto al 10 novembre*, p. 2443. Quotations here and throughout translated by Ian Mansbridge.
2. Traditionally, historical research into racism from a long-term viewpoint stopped at the Second World War. See, for example, Burgio 1999.
3. These topics were covered previously, although with a different approach, in Deplano 2014, 2017.
4. For a reconstruction of the discussion surrounding Article 3, see Bontempelli 2015 and Deplano 2017. The value of retaining or removing the text in the Constitutional Charter is currently at the centre of a public and scientific debate. For an outline of the arguments, see Scacchi 2016; Bassi 2016 and Petrovich Njegosh 2016.
5. A few dozen Libyan students from influential families with ties to the regime of the northern African colony were admitted to Italian colleges as part of the 'pro-Muslim' policy; these were joined in the 1940s

by some Eritrean students, again in very limited numbers. The Somalis, meanwhile, arrived in the 1950s, in the context of the Trust Territory of Somaliland, as we will see below.

6. For information on the recruitment of the askaris, see Volterra 2005. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Eritrea in particular had had the main function of providing soldiers to use in Italy's expansionist wars. While the papers do not contain specific details on their education, note that the school system created by Italy for local populations, as well as only reaching a small percentage of the population, was limited to the earliest years of primary school, with the education predominantly focused on discipline, including military discipline, rather than teaching. See also Smith-Simonsen 1997; Negash 2005.
7. The difficulty in obtaining even approximate statistics is due to the fact that immigration was only recorded by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) from 1981 onwards, and records of foreign workers by trade unions like the CGIL only date back to the mid-1970s. This fact in itself, however, indicates the marginal nature of the phenomenon in the first two decades after the war. It is interesting that the first community of a significant size was Eritrean (Maccheroni and Mauri 1989). For information on the recording and distancing of colonial subjects by Mussolini in 1938, see Gabrielli 1999.
8. Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereinafter ACS), Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (hereinafter MAI), b.56, Report dated 28 August 1947.
9. ACS, MAI, b.2096, Report on the mission carried out at the Special Mixed Depot in Naples and the detachments of Capua and Nola on 16–18 October 1951.
10. ACS, MAI, b.2096, Report on the mission carried out at the Special Mixed Depot in Naples and the detachments of Capua and Nola on 16–18 October 1951.
11. Senate of the Republic, 3rd Committee (Foreign and Colonial Affairs), session of 28 September 1955.
12. Law no. 108 of 14 March 1957.
13. ASMAE, AP 1951–1957, b. 864, *Clearing of native servicemen from the Rome unit*, 8 May 1953.
14. ACS, MAI, b. 2041
15. ASMAE, AP 1951–1957, b.867, f.13/2, 28 November 1952.
16. ASMAE AP 1951–1957, b. 906, 21 November 1951.
17. The Kingdom of Libya was founded in 1951, but only those who were located in the north African country on that date automatically acquired citizenship. People like Rashid Kemali, who lived elsewhere, had no right to be Libyan, and if they failed to obtain citizenship for their country of residence they automatically became stateless.
18. Between 1987 and 1988 the interior minister, guided by Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, issued two circulars that, for the first time, allowed possession of Italian citizenship to be recognised at an administrative level 'for all subjects who had formerly held Italian Libyan status and had not acquired Libyan or any other citizenship', including Jewish individuals.
19. ASMAE, AP 1951–1957, b. 864, *Letter from the president of CRAL to the MAI*, 21 October 1952.
20. As well as the works cited above by Palumbo (2003), Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2002) and Duncan and Andall (2005), which investigate the cultural legacies of colonialism, see also the work by Daniela Baratieri (2010), which shows how Italian colonialism, instead of disappearing, continued to play a part in Italian popular culture following the war. In particular, Baratieri highlights the continuity between the discourse in the republican period and that which preceded it: this was the cultural climate in which the Somali students lived.
21. ASMAE, DG AFIS, *Letter to Piero Franca*, 10 March 1952.
22. ACS, MI, DGPS, G Associazioni, b.200, *Report on foreign students in Italy*.
23. 'Inchiesta sugli alloggi degli studenti esteri a Napoli', *AMICIZIA – Notiziario mensile UCSEI per studenti esteri in Italia*, no. 3, March, pp. 91–92.
24. 'Otto giovani africani aggrediscono gli agenti', *Giornale d'Italia*, 12 September 1959; 'Otto somali aggrediscono due italiani e si scagliano contro gli agenti sopraggiunti', *Il Tempo*, 12 September 1959; 'Violenta zuffa notturna provocata da otto somali', *Il Messaggero*, 12 September 1959; 'Il capo dei giovani somali comunisti dette il via alla selvaggia aggressione', *Il Secolo d'Italia*, 12 September 1959; 'A Regina Coeli gli otto somali responsabili della furibonda rissa', *Momento sera*, 12 September 1959; 'Otto giovani somali arrestati dalla Mobile dopo una violenta lotta', *Il Popolo*, 12 September 1959.
25. 'Inni fascisti e studenti somali', *Lo Studente*, 20 September 1959, p. 3.
26. 'Inni fascisti e studenti somali', *Lo Studente*, 20 September 1959, p. 3.

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### Italian summary

Dopo il crollo del regime di Mussolini, l'Italia si ricostruì, come nazione e come democrazia. La Carta Costituzionale che fondava la nuova Repubblica, approvata nel 1948, rifiutava esplicitamente le ideologie razziste e le discriminazioni razziali che invece erano state rafforzate e inasprite dal regime a partire dalla metà degli anni Trenta. In quegli stessi anni del dopoguerra, però, l'idea di razza e i processi di razzizzazione continuarono ad operare. Analizzando il modo in cui tra gli anni Quaranta e Sessanta la presenza di alcuni ex-sudditi coloniali nella Penisola italiana è stata percepita, rappresentata e gestita, l'articolo dimostra come il discorso egemonico elaborato nel periodo postbellico considerasse ancora l'Italia un paese bianco ed etnicamente omogeneo.

In questa prospettiva sono prese in considerazione da una parte le richieste di cittadinanza presentate da persone di origine libica o eritrea nel dopoguerra, e dall'altra l'esperienza degli studenti somali in Italia durante gli anni Sessanta. In questi casi emerge come l'inclusione e l'esclusione dal corpo e dal territorio nazionale, così come i concetti di identità e alterità, fossero definiti nell'Italia post-fascista e Repubblicana secondo idee e processi di razzizzazione ereditati dal passato.