Italian POWs in Africa, 1940–3

The road to Kenya

The first few months of 1941 saw the British authorities establish the pattern for accommodating their Italian prisoners across the Empire. The immense numbers captured in Italian East Africa were eventually despatched by rail and by sea to camps in Kenya. As had been the case in Libya and Egypt, it was deemed urgent for strategic reasons to evacuate the prisoners from Abyssinia as soon as possible. However, the transfer of prisoners to Kenya was far from easy. Logistical problems combined with the now familiar delays due to a shortage of shipping prevented British military authorities from sending large numbers to Kenya after the completion in April 1941 of the first stage of operations in Italian East Africa. Nevertheless, the delay proved to be a small blessing for it allowed time for the Kenyan authorities to build twelve permanent camps that would house 50,000 European captives.¹ In the Sudan a similar system of twelve semi-permanent camps was built to accommodate a population which had grown to 79,000 POWs by July 1941. The camps were divided into three administrative regions located along the Nile valley between Khartoum and Atbara, in the Red Sea hills near Port Sudan and in Eritrea outside the port of Massawa. Once at the Sudanese and Eritrean coasts, the POWs were transported to India, Kenya and South Africa when shipping could be found.² However gratifying the capture of tens of thousands of Italian and colonial troops, it was self-evident that the sheer weight of numbers was putting enormous pressures on British resources.

The use of POW labour in Kenya, as opposed to the United Kingdom, was in some ways much more controversial for two distinct but associated reasons; and the ensuing debate over the use of this labour also

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highlighted the strong differences of opinion held by officials in London and Nairobi. The shortage of white troops to guard European captives meant that black soldiers would have to be employed for garrison duties. Metropolitan administrators feared that this would be resented by some POWs and initiate stern protests from the Fascist authorities in Rome, while others felt that ‘there [might] be some objection under the terms of the Convention to employing white Italians on work in East Africa which Europeans are not ordinarily called upon to do’. This in turn might spark threats of reprisals against British and Commonwealth POWs held by the Italian government.3

Protests were indeed made by some hard-line Fascists about the racial origin of their guards. As one Middle Eastern POW censorship summary noted in August 1941, ‘[n]ot for the first time [did Italian POWs] express their dislike of Indian and Egyptian guards’.4 Similar findings were recorded in the Sudan where several Italian officers considered that they had been ‘insulted’ by the fact that their guards were Sudanese. ‘This they consider the final touch of humiliation added to their lot.’5 Again, in East Africa, there were strongly worded complaints about the skin pigmentation of the camp guards. In part, some of these claims reflected the deep-seated racism and genuine contempt with which some Italian