An Historical Perspective on Italian Colonialism

THE DEBATE ON ITALIAN COLONIALISM

Any analysis, albeit a solely historical one, of Italian colonialism cannot be undertaken without considering the controversial debate that has characterised studies in this field in recent decades. Indeed, Martin Clark’s complaint about the limited research in this area is not an isolated one. An increasing number of scholars have engaged in the study of Italian colonialism and have often voiced their regret that, from the 1950s, very little attention has been given in Italy to such an important field of study. In addition, many have emphasised that research into Italian commitment in Africa promoted by the Foreign Ministry, particularly in its initial stages, was undermined by a neocolonialist approach.

On 11 January 1952, Giuseppe Brusasca, the Foreign Minister’s Under-Secretary, set up a research committee, based at the Ministry of Italian Africa (MAI Ministero dell’Africa Italiana; now defunct), to investigate and publish research on the government’s activities in the African territories under Italian jurisdiction. This was called the Comitato per la Documentazione dell’Opera dell’Italia in Africa. The initiative was an excellent opportunity to start productive research and open a debate based on the important primary sources of the MAI and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE Ministero Affari Esteri) on Italian colonialism. Francesco Caroselli, who was representative of colonial bureaucracy, was appointed chairman of the committee.1 Angelo Del Boca, one of the most prolific and controversial scholars of the Italian presence in Africa, stressed that 15 out of the 24 members of the committee were former colonial governors or high ranking officers whilst the others, with the exception of Mario Toscano, were Africanists of ‘colonial faith’.2 As a consequence, according to Del Boca, most of the work produced by the committee, which stressed the positive achievements of Italian colonialism, lacked a serious scientific approach.3

In the first three decades after the end of the Second World War and Italy’s ruinous defeat, research on Italian colonialism was entirely...
characterised by a nationalistic approach and very little was published in this area. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s historical output on Africa remained poor and in voluntary isolation from the intense international debate on colonialism. In order to emphasise this point Umberto Triulzi drew attention to the fact that several major studies published during the 1960s in English had never been translated into Italian, including the prodigious output of work on Somalia of the anthropologist Ioan Lewis and the American historian Robert Hess’s *Italian Colonialism in Somalia*.4 Triulzi’s concern has a stronger impact if we consider that the first specialist study, by Fabio Grassi, published in the postwar period on the Italian presence in Somalia appeared only in 1980, even though Del Boca had started his monumental research on Italy in the Horn of Africa in the early 1970s.

It should also be noted that Pietro Pastorelli’s contribution, ‘Gli studi sulla politica coloniale italiana dalle origini alla decolonizzazione’, presented at the 1989 conference at Taormina on ‘Sources and Issues of Italian Colonial Polities’ (*Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana*) ignored Del Boca’s significant output.5

In the 1990s Del Boca has often stressed the sterility of the debate generated by the study of Italian colonialism. In the introduction to *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo* he states that the book was intended as a contribution to the historical debate that has been overlooked so far.6 Two years later he devoted a chapter, ‘Il mancato dibattito sul colonialismo’ (The Missing Debate on Colonialism), to highlighting that colonialism was riddled with crimes and genocide but that these had been effectively removed from ‘our country’s culture’.7 More recently in an edited book on Adwa he emphasised the fact that in March 1996 the Italian media ‘forgot’ the important anniversary of the defeat of the Italian troops in Adwa in 1896. The fact that Italy avoided a serious and constructive debate on colonialism in the postwar period had caused a sort of collective amnesia and an unwillingness to face this most delicate of issues of national history.8

The striking fact is that, throughout its recent production, Del Boca ignored the Taormina conference and its importance in promoting research and a more academic and exhaustive approach to colonial studies. The 1989 conference was a turning point in the study of Italian colonialism as it was the first time in the postwar period that a large number of scholars had focused on this topic. It represented an opportunity to investigate the shortcomings, but also the positive aspects of past investigations in this area and at the same time an opportunity to look at the future of research. Contributions to the