

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Italy: Beyond the Clichés that Obscure Unacceptable Histories

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1w82d5cc>

Journal

Journal of Genocide Research, 24(2)

ISSN

1462-3528

Author

Fuller, Mia

Publication Date

2022-04-03

DOI

10.1080/14623528.2021.1968152

Peer reviewed

FORUM: "PATRIOTIC HISTORY" AND THE (RE)NATIONALIZATION OF
MEMORY





Italy: Beyond the Clichés that Obscure Unacceptable Histories

Mia Fuller

Department of Italian Studies, University of California, 6303 Dwinelle Hall, MC 2620, Berkeley CA 94720-2620, USA

Italy is known for some resilient national stereotypes, and not just regarding *la dolce vita* (the sweet life), quick tempers, and the love of cars and fashion. Italians themselves, like foreigners, mock Italians' reputedly low martial drive and recycle commonplaces minimizing Italian Fascism (1922–43) in comparison to National Socialism, or Stalinist rule. The falsehood that Italians refused to assist their German allies in rounding up Jews for deportation continues to stick. When I spent time in Italy's national archives researching Italian colonial architectural policies, an Italian researcher asked me: "What colonies?" On other occasions I had to justify to Italians my use of the expression "Italian colonialism" (Italy had six colonial holdings, occupations, or annexations between 1890 and 1943: Eritrea, Libya, the Dodecanese Islands, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Albania). In short, Italy is consistently held to be a lesser player vis-à-vis the twentieth century's dictatorial regimes – it is often forgotten that Mussolini's Fascism was the first movement of its kind – and imperialism (despite its genocidal aggressions and unprecedented uses of chemical weapons). One hears about Italy's suffering in World War II, but only seldom about cruelties Italians committed in the War, Italians who caused their Jewish compatriots' deaths, and the thousands of colonized civilians victimized by Italian-perpetrated atrocities.

These national stereotypes are more than falsehoods: they serve a purpose. They are essential to a general whitewashing that began once Italy became a postwar client-state in the orbit of the United States. Consequential confrontations with national history fell away in the course of Italy's about-face from monarchy to Republic, and its rapid switch from fascist vanguard to hotbed of Christian-Democrat capitalist growth. The most obvious sign of this is that Italian Fascists were not brought up on charges like those against Nazis at Nuremberg. Partly as a result of that non-event, Italy has had no public reckoning resembling Germany's renowned *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Rather than struggles over who gets to shape the national narrative about complicity and defeat in World War II, as we see in Poland, in Italy there is no single national narrative to control. Instead, there are at least two ways to tell the story, as Right and Left still fight over power, in part through unreconciled narratives. Add to this mix a third, rough category of populism that draws energy from both ends of that spectrum – but also denies much of Italy's difficult history – and you have a quick sketch of Italy's political landscape.

CONTACT Mia Fuller  miafull@berkeley.edu  Department of Italian Studies, University of California, 6303 Dwinelle Hall, MC 2620, Berkeley CA 94720-2620, USA

© 2021 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Meanwhile, most Italians are underinformed. They know some fragments of the overall story, that have been reinforced ad infinitum by politicians and filmmakers, such as heroic antifascist triumphs; Italians' persecutions by Nazis; and memorable Italian military actions. This fragmentation of historical knowledge explains the acceptability in daily life, the media, and political discourse, of not acknowledging any of Italian colonialism and Fascism's horrors. In this regard Italy resembles the Netherlands perhaps more than France, and Japan rather than Germany.

Outsiders, though, are more keenly aware of media-hyped images of some Italian politicians posing like Mussolini, or otherwise alluding to Fascism – just transgressively enough to get attention, but not so much as to lose their followers. But rather than being swayed by these misdirections, scholars should ask two questions. First, what makes this tolerable for Italians, i.e. what are the conditions for the acceptability of this behaviour? (A useful comparison might be: under what conditions would it be acceptable for a German politician to toy with swastikas and salutes, or to praise Hitler?) Second, what histories are concealed by this behaviour – what are Italian audiences' attention being diverted away *from*, and what are they being reassured they needn't think too hard about?

With respect to the first question, below I discuss how Italian government has promoted the ignorance that has made such antics acceptable, and I describe some of the struggles Italian historians have endured in striving to increase public awareness of Italy's suppressed histories. As for the second question – what is being overlooked – I delineate the horrific chapters in Italy's pre-World War II years that are most impossible to reconcile with Italy's postwar reconfiguration and (self-)image, and are still denounced by "patriotic" denialists as "controversial" (i.e. fake news).

Before doing that, let me underscore the role of Silvio Berlusconi in setting the tone of dismissal and mockery that still surfaces in Italian politics regarding these matters. As prime minister (1994–95; 2001–06; 2008–11), Berlusconi spearheaded the public rehabilitation of the Fascist regime, by minimizing the harm it caused and turning it into an object of "humour." His first election to office hung on his alliance with the still-active, if marginalized, Fascist party (which changed names in 1994, from *Movimento Sociale Italiano* to *Alleanza Nazionale*). Prior to the Soviet Union's dissolution (and with it, the perceived threat of communism), no Italian government could have afforded this alliance. But now, Fascists were not only legitimized; they even seemed dignified in comparison to Berlusconi (Gianfranco Fini in particular).¹

Berlusconi's antics included, for example, the claim that Mussolini never did anything worse than send people to holiday camps. It was not only this cynical behaviour that changed the public tone, though. In his years in office it became unobjectionable to sell fascist-memorabilia trinkets, lighters, calendars, etc. Mussolini's face began to reappear, too, in "playful" advertising as well as through restorations of monumental artworks dating to the dictatorship. Italians' desensitization began, in sum, in the 1990s.

More recently, Matteo Salvini took a page from Berlusconi's playbook by raising the spectre of Mussolini again, although he tended to mimicry more than to minimization.²

¹ Aram Mattioli, « *Viva Mussolini!* » *La guerra della memoria nell'Italia di Berlusconi, Bossi e Fini* (Milan: Garzanti, 2011).

² Stefan Couperus and Pier Domenico Tortola, "Right-wing populism's (ab)use of the past in Italy and the Netherlands," *Debats. Journal on culture, power and society* 4, no. 2 (2019): 105–18.

His stance as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior (2018–19) was defined by his anti-immigrant views, which have profound Italian support and yet bear no relation to Mussolini or Fascism. (Italians in the millions emigrated *from* post-Unification Italy, until they were stopped by a US-Italy accord in the 1920s.) It must be emphasized that here and elsewhere, invoking Mussolini does not correspond necessarily to particular political platforms. References to the *Duce* should be seen instead as a form of calculated prestidigitation, with which to lure Italian voters in any number of directions while keeping the media outraged and distracted. For our part, we should avoid believing them to be intrinsically meaningful, and keep an eye on what this stagecraft helps to obscure.

**

Below, I summarize the most grievous of the histories that continually resurface in historians' publications and in investigative journalism and grassroots movements, while also describing obstacles that have impeded general acceptance of these histories. Let me note that Italian historiography of the disavowed past – which documents anything contradicting the comfortable view of Italians as *italiani brava gente* ("Italians: good, decent people")³ – is not illegal. It has often been attacked, and in a few cases an author has been vilified and even threatened with legal consequences. Rather than silenced, though, it is more often simply unacknowledged, excluded from the mainstream common sense of daily life and (not least) media discussions.

The Italian government, throughout its different political constellations since 1946, has played a key role in fostering the uncertainty many Italians feel regarding problematic aspects of their own national history. It has actively disinformed citizens for generations now, by (for example) allowing archives to slide out of sight for decades, and on occasion, suppressing the distribution of films made elsewhere.⁴ Schoolchildren have not been taught anything "un-patriotic." And Italians have no national museum, or official depiction of Italian misdeeds to turn to for an authoritative position. Questions have been left open purposefully as to who was "right," and what ultimate conclusion(s) to draw from Italy's World War II, Fascist regime, and colonial Empire – leaving a spacious breach in which any interpretation can be advocated for as personal observation, particular family experience, or educated opinion.⁵

But the fact that works of history that acknowledge Italian atrocities and their effects are not forbidden does not mean that those who argue for a clear-eyed assessment of Italy's crimes can work in peace. In universities, it is the historians with secure employment who publish indictments of condemnation-worthy Italian actions. Journalists and independent authors, meanwhile, have published much of the most important work on Fascist and colonial atrocities. Overall, the production of historical knowledge in these

³ An excellent analysis of this term in the context of historical so-called amnesia is Claudio Fogu, "*Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory*," in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 147–76.

⁴ *Lion of the Desert* (Moustafa Akkad, 1981), a feature film depicting Italian aggression in Cyrenaica in painstaking detail; and *Fascist Legacy*, a BBC documentary miniseries aired in 1989.

⁵ Sergio Luzzatto, *The Body of Il Duce: Mussolini's Corpse and the Fortunes of Italy*, trans. Frederika Randall (New York: Metropolitan books, 2005), notes that if the majority of Italians were guilty of upholding the regime, in a sense they were all absolved (53). The original text is *Il corpo del duce: un cadavere tra immaginazione, storia e memoria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998). Regarding museums, see Mia Fuller, "Equivocal Mussolinis (What the Proposed Predappio Museum Can Learn from the Piana delle Orme Collection)," *Passés Futurs* (Politika.io, LabEx Tepsis, France), 2018: <https://www.politika.io/fr/notice/equivocal-mussolinis>

areas has depended on works from both sectors (professional and non-professional historians), usually separately, and sometimes in collaboration.

Italian Colonial Atrocities: Libya

The epitome of Italian academic and independent research projects developing in tandem is the combined scholarship of military historian Giorgio Rochat (University of Turin) and Angelo Del Boca, a prolific journalist and author. I begin with Rochat because he was the first to use the term genocide (in 1973) with respect to Italian atrocities, referring to those perpetrated in Cyrenaica in 1930–31, in an academic journal.⁶ In addition to detailing methods, materiel, and tallies of victims, the article emphasized the control exercised over archival access by former colonial civil servants who occupied positions in the postwar era, guaranteeing a code of silence tantamount to state-sponsored censorship.⁷ One of these functionaries published a rebuttal, prompting Rochat to accentuate his points, regarding both the use of “genocide” and what he called “colonial historiography of national-fascist inspiration.”⁸

Some publications based on non-Italian materials have helped establish the facts of Italian destructions in Libya,⁹ but the question of Italian archival materials has been critical to Italian publications because of the legitimacy they provide to the claims “patriotic” historians want to refute. Rochat’s essay was impossible to discredit, as it was based on the records of Rodolfo Graziani, the main military implementer of the Cyrenaican genocide. Through his “pacifying” actions in Libya (which had already earned him the moniker “Butcher of the Fezzan” in the late 1920s) and his later years in Ethiopia, where he instigated further massacres, Graziani was Italy’s most prominent perpetrator.

Graziani was then under the orders of General Pietro Badoglio, at the time Governor of Italian Libya.¹⁰ If “patriotic” attacks on publications such as Rochat’s begin with attempts to discredit evidence, their second line of deflection typically attempts to separate the perpetrator (Graziani, in this case) from his superiors (Badoglio and Mussolini). In support of Rochat’s claims, though, Badoglio’s written exchanges with Graziani and

⁶ Giorgio Rochat, “La repressione della resistenza araba in Cirenaica nel 1930-31 nei documenti dell’archivio Graziani,” *Il movimento di liberazione in Italia* 110 (1973): 3–39. Estimates of how many died due to Italy’s actions vary immensely, from 100,000 to a million; we can conservatively rely on 100,000 as a minimum.

⁷ The Foreign Affairs Archives were long closed to all but the members of the *Comitato per la documentazione dell’opera dell’Italia in Africa* (Committee for the Documentation of Italy’s Achievements in Africa), which produced *L’Italia in Africa*. 22 vols (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1955–81).

⁸ Enrico De Leone, “Il genocidio delle genti cirenaiche secondo G. Rochat,” *Intervento* 38–39 (July–October 1979): 93–102; Giorgio Rochat, “Il genocidio cirenaico e la storiografia coloniale,” *Belfagor* 35, no. 4 (1980): 449–55. “National-fascist,” as I have translated it here from *nazional-fascista*, points in two directions. It can mean “nationalist-and-fascist” but it also echoes the Italian usage as “Nazi-Fascist.” *Nazifascismo* is a long-standing amalgam, lumping Nazi forces that occupied parts of Italy in 1943–45 together with Fascists. It often – although not here – exculpates Fascists, by laying the blame for their crimes on German forces.

⁹ Beginning with British anthropologist and civil servant E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), which was grounded in field research in Libya. The most recent non-Italian work, which offers new (Libyan) materials and a synthesis of previous studies, is Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya: Shar, A Hidden Colonial History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁰ Pietro Badoglio (1871–1956) was critical to Italy’s change of direction in World War II. When King Victor Emmanuel II removed Mussolini from office as Prime Minister on 25 July 1943, he appointed Badoglio in his place. It was Badoglio who maneuvered Italy’s Armistice with the Allies in September 1943, and accompanied the King to Brindisi – leaving the Italian military without leadership just when Nazi forces turned against them, now that the alliance with Hitler was broken. For “patriotic” historians who uphold his genocidal actions in Libya and Ethiopia, he is nonetheless a traitor who dishonoured Italy later on.

Mussolini made absolutely clear the intent to kill off Cyrenaica's semi-nomadic population as a whole, and the implication of the dictator himself.¹¹

When Italy had first attacked Tripoli in 1911, Italians in the metropole were kept abreast of their country's military successes against Ottoman forces, perhaps even with some exaggeration. The first aerial bombardment in world history was hardly a gigantic affair: Lieutenant Gavotti dropped a half-dozen hand grenades from his plane, on military encampments outside the city. But it was celebrated widely in Italy, as a sure sign of Italian primacy. Poet Giovanni Pascoli's famed pro-expansion speech, "The Great Proletarian Is on the Move," declaimed: "Was not [Italy] the first to beat her wings and rain death upon her enemy's camps?"¹² Such gloating makes it all the more interesting to observe the secrecy in which the government cloaked its growing use of extreme measures, including concentration camps, death by disease and starvation, executions by public hanging and shooting, mass displacements largely resulting in massive death marches, and deportations to penal colonies.¹³

At one level, the government's aim was to secure Cyrenaica's fertile Green Mountain (*Jabal Akhdar*) for the settlement of Italian farmer-colonists by clearing out its pastoralist population, along with its livestock. In addition, as Rochat demonstrated, the semi-nomadic men who survived were destined for exploitation as inexpensive labour for the colonial roads and public works programs. At another level, however, the documentation puts on display another motivation: an urgent need to crush the opponent, namely the "rebel" populations and their leadership, the Sanusiyya religious order. Setting the stage for what was to come in 1930s Ethiopia, Italians used airborne mustard gas – undoubtedly more than was needed in combat against land-bound, horseback-riding, loosely-organized opponents.¹⁴

Italian Colonial Atrocities: Ethiopia

Italy's expanded use of chemical weapons in Ethiopia, once again led by Badoglio and Graziani, has been at the crux of the most vehement denials on the part of "patriotic" historians and other Italians too, including influential journalists and other public figures. The use of these weapons, it must be said, was not a secret at the time. The Ethiopian Empire (i.e. Abyssinia) was a sovereign nation with membership in the League of Nations; the League imposed economic sanctions against Italy shortly after the assault began, in late 1935. In 1936, Emperor Haile Selassie reported to the League on the chemical

¹¹ A complementary Italian source that has not drawn the same level of attack is based on field travel and interviews in Libya: Eric Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia. Le atrocità nascoste dell'avventura coloniale italiana (1911–1931)* (Milan: SugarCo, 1979).

¹² Giovanni Pascoli, "La grande proletaria si è mossa . . .," in Giovanni Pascoli, *Patria e umanità. Raccolta di scritti e discorsi*, 3rd ed. (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1923), 239.

¹³ See Gustavo Ottolenghi, *Gli Italiani e il colonialismo. I campi di detenzione italiani in Africa* (Milan: SugarCo, 1997); Nicola Labanca, "L'internamento coloniale italiano," in *I campi di concentramento in Italia*, ed. Costantino Di Sante (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001), 40–67 (excerpted and translated as "Italian Colonial Internment," in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 27–36; Marco Lenci, *All'inferno e ritorno. Storie di deportati tra Italia ed Eritrea in epoca coloniale* (Pisa: BFS Edizioni, 2004); Francesca di Pasquale, "The 'Other' at Home: Deportation and Transportation of Libyans to Italy During the Colonial Era (1911–1943)," *IRSH* 63 (2018), Special Issue, 211–31. Many Libyans went into exile permanently: Anna Baldinetti, *The Origins of the Libyan Nation: Colonial Legacy, Exile and the Emergence of a New Nation-State* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁴ In violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol, to which Italy was a signatory. While I am simplifying the matter here, different gases were used at different times (arsine, phosgene, and yprite / sulphur mustard).

weapons' use, making them a matter of international record. The Red Cross, whose camp hospitals were sometimes bombed by Italians, took note of aggressions, and foreign journalists did too. Nonetheless, when in 1965 Del Boca documented Graziani and Badoglio's deployment of mustard gas, along with Mussolini's pugnacious backing, it was apparently the first time this news ever appeared in Italian.¹⁵ Thus began the author's thirty-year struggle against deniers and the government (which he has called "a long battle for the truth" in an eponymous essay), in the course of which he was defamed, threatened with legal action, and harassed by other means, such as having his home address publicized.¹⁶

Del Boca's account is a heroic one, and reading it gives the satisfaction of justice winning in the end. His 1969 publication of Mussolini's telegrams unfolds against the backdrop of veterans waging press campaigns against him, and being forbidden access to military archives, neither of these things stopping him from publishing six invaluable historical volumes.¹⁷ Most dramatic is his success in obtaining an acknowledgment in 1980 from Alessandro Lessona, who had been Minister of the Colonies in 1936–37, that the gassing had indeed taken place. In a televised encounter of the two men in 1985, the former Minister refused to confirm his admission publicly, but Del Boca took the opportunity to read aloud from the telegrams anyway, scoring a victory of sorts. The greater challenge in the public sphere came from much-admired journalist Indro Montanelli, the sum of whose objections was that *he* had not witnessed the use of chemical weapons while serving in Ethiopia.¹⁸ In the end, however, Del Boca's work (supported by Rochat and other historians) led to conclusive governmental corroboration in 1996.¹⁹

Notwithstanding Del Boca's ultimate vindication, it is fair to say that by the mid-1990s the damage of multi-generational disinformation and "patriotic" historiography

¹⁵ Angelo Del Boca, *La guerra d'Abissinia 1935–1941* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965), 73–4, drawing on interviews with a surviving Ethiopian military leader. The book also draws on conversations held with Emperor Haile Selassie and travel to the sites of Italy's war on Ethiopia.

¹⁶ Angelo Del Boca, "Una lunga battaglia per la verità," in *I gas di Mussolini. Il fascismo e la guerra d'Etiopia*, ed. Angelo Del Boca (Rome: Riuniti, 1996). Rochat – who had access to military documentation, while Del Boca worked mostly in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive – published further materials in 1988, adding information on ecocidal destruction caused by the gases: Giorgio Rochat, "L'impiego dei gas nella guerra d'Etiopia. 1935–1936," *Rivista di storia contemporanea* 17, no. 1 (1988): 74–109. This article is included in Del Boca's 1996 book; a related one of Rochat's appears in English as "The Italian Air Force in the Ethiopian War," in Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, *Italian Colonialism*, 37–46.

The charge Del Boca was threatened with is *vilipendio delle forze armate*, slander of the Italian Armed Forces. I am aware of only one other such case, in which the authors were successfully charged and endured prison sentences. Anyone who has watched *Mediterraneo* (Gabriele Salvatores, 1991) might be surprised to learn that the first attempt at this film depicting harmless Italian servicemen stranded on a Greek island during World War II was a screenplay treatment (*L'armata s'Agapò*) of 1953 (adapting the 1949 novel *Sagapò* by Renzo Biasion), for which the authors, Renzo Renzi and Guido Aristarco, were prosecuted.

¹⁷ Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale: dall'unità alla marcia su Roma* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1976); *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale: la conquista dell'impero* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1979); *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale: la caduta dell'impero* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1982); *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale: nostalgia delle colonie* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1984); *Gli Italiani in Libia: Tripoli bel suol d'amore, 1860–1922* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1986); *Gli Italiani in Libia: dal fascismo a Gheddafi* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1986). A rare Italian book based on Libyan textual materials is Angelo Del Boca, *A un passo della forca. Atrocità e infamie dell'occupazione italiana della Libia nelle memorie del patriota Mohammed Fekini* (Milan: Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 2007), which has been translated: Angelo Del Boca, *Mohamed Fekini and the Fight to Free Libya* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁸ Montanelli (1909–2001) made the news in 2020 because a statue of him was defaced (with pink paint) in the course of Italy's George Floyd / Black Lives Matter protests, due to his unapologetic boasts of the twelve-year-old Ethiopian girl he was "given" and "married."

¹⁹ Not all historians, of course. Del Boca recounts his attempt to gain a university post at Turin in 1984–86, which he knew would be unsuccessful once he learned the names of the historians on the hiring committee: Angelo Del Boca, *Il mio novecento* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2008), 416–9. The same university granted him an honorary degree in 2000.

celebrating purportedly benign rule in the colonies had been done (and the ascendancy of Italy's far-Right beginning in the 1990s did not help matters).²⁰ It has remained acceptable for Italians to deny their chemical war on Ethiopia, all while some historians continue to demonstrate the facts. For instance: Matteo Dominioni added a significant new chapter to the historiography through his oral-historical collecting and (successful) search for human remains and other evidence of Italian bombing in Ethiopia's Zeret area, published in 2008.²¹ But that same year, I met an Italian politician (formerly of the neo-Fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, and by then a Green Party member) who, at the mention of Italian atrocities in Ethiopia, erupted ferociously that they were "all inventions of Del Boca!"

I suspect that outbursts like this may sometimes be disingenuous, but even so, they sustain the widespread illusion that there is lingering doubt over Italian atrocities in Ethiopia, whereas there is none. Beyond the bombings, two other well-known events dating to the first half of 1937 stand out. Graziani, by now Viceroy of (Italian) Ethiopia, was injured in an attack in Addis Ababa. With his blessing, Italians went on a three-day rampage of reprisals throughout the city, slaughtering and raping thousands of the colonized. Not long after that, Italian forces massacred hundreds of Ethiopian Orthodox monks in their enclave at Debre Libanos.²²

This unbridgeable divide regarding Italian-perpetrated horrors in Ethiopia has important ramifications, even beyond Italian historiography. For one thing, the Italians' war on Ethiopia was the largest such assault conducted in the modern colonial age, in military terms of materiel and troops; to some historians, furthermore, it was a precipitating phase leading up to World War II. Also, part of Italy's commitment to victory at any cost was a spirit of revenge, for the defeat of Italians at Adwa in 1896 (at the time, the largest-ever colonial defeat of Europeans in Africa). As in Libya, we find in the documents a pointed tone of wishing – needing – to overpower, destroy, crush. This is yet another respect in which Italy's gratuitous, voluminous use of forbidden chemical weapons in Ethiopia challenges the national self-image mentioned above, of *italiani brava gente*.

Although brief, Italy's occupation of Ethiopia holds important discussion points for historians of Italian attitudes regarding race (whether during Fascism or not) and segregationist practices. The anti-miscegenation laws created in 1937 for Italian East Africa were the precedent – temporally and administratively – to Italy's better-known "racial laws" of 1938, the Antisemitic laws that made way for Italy's assistance in implementing the Holocaust.²³ Moreover, the laws regulating a new set of sexual and domestic segregations in East Africa preceded South Africa's own adoption of apartheid regulations in

²⁰ This is when colonial-era memoirs and dubious travelogues began to be reprinted, and new works celebrating colonial "heroes" started appearing, e.g. Vittorio Dan Segre, *La guerra privata del tenente Guillet: la resistenza italiana in Eritrea durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Milan: Corbaccio, 1993).

²¹ Matteo Dominioni, *Lo sfascio dell'Impero. Gli Italiani in Etiopia 1936–1941* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2008). Despite his advanced university work (with Rochat), Dominioni does not hold university employment in Italy. His oral-historical work was preceded by the ground-breaking works of Irma Taddia (professor at the University of Bologna): Irma Taddia, *La memoria dell'Impero. Autobiografie d'Africa Orientale* (Manduria and Bari: Lacaita, 1988), and *Autobiografie Africane: il colonialismo nelle memorie orali* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1996).

²² Paolo Borruso, a professor at the Catholic University of Milan, calls this the "worst war crime committed by Italy," and focuses particularly on the fact of Roman Catholics killing other Christians: Paolo Borruso, *Debre Libanos 1937. Il più grave crimine di guerra dell'Italia* (Bari: Laterza, 2020). Also see his study of deportations of Ethiopians: Paolo Borruso, *L'Africa al confino. La deportazione etiopica in Italia (1937–1939)* (Manduria: Lacaita, 2003).

²³ A fundamental and still-debated question regards the depth of Italian Antisemitism before 1938. See Francesco Cassata, *"La difesa della razza": Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008).

1948, by a decade.²⁴ From this vantage point too, it is impossible to claim (although many still do) that Italians are “not racist, by nature,” “have never been racist,” or were “kinder colonizers” than other Europeans.

Italy’s World War II

While “patriotic” historians avoid depicting Italians in the colonies as perpetrators, on balance they would find it difficult to persuade anyone that Italians were victims there, even taking into consideration deadly acts of rebellion by the colonized. This differs from World War II, in which many Italians were certainly victimized. Yet historical questions of responsibility and agency remain partly unanswered, having been muddied by countless disavowals and mutual recriminations among Italians. This topic is often summarized under the title of “divided memory” (*memoria divisa*) (meaning, principally, split between Left and Right),²⁵ but we could also describe it as a system of competing historical reconstructions, that show no promise of reconciling.

Historian Claudio Pavone established the use of “civil war” to describe the following internecine conflicts of 1943–45.²⁶ Some Italians joined forces with Mussolini’s second regime, based in the northern town of Salò (the Salò Republic, or *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*). They fought against Italians who sided with the official Italian state, which still had a King. German forces, in alliance with Salò but at war against Italy, persecuted Italian civilians in the course of their northward retreat from the advance of the Allies. War crimes committed by Allied forces (e.g. mass rape of women in the Ciociaria region) and the Nazis (in Marzabotto and Sant’Anna di Stazzema, for instance) are not much debated, at least in comparison with the ongoing heated back-and-forths over Italian-on-Italian attacks. “Partisans,” a congeries of small groups (often, but not always, Communist-leaning) that fought against Nazis and Salò loyalists in small guerrilla formations, committed their own damages and often come up for reproaches still – principally from the “patriotic” end of the political spectrum.

The greatest impediment to historiographic resolution is that nothing came to an enduring conclusion after the War. While Italy had no equivalent to the Nuremberg trials,²⁷ a few trials were imposed by the government on Italians, but the Amnesty of 1946 pardoning Fascists and Partisans in general left room for a spotty approach to the hard work of documenting, recognizing, and putting mutually inflicted harm in the past. A further severe problem lay in the archival domain. One infamous case of obscured evidence is the “cabinet of shame” (*armadio della vergogna*), discovered in 1994: an armoire in a government building, containing hundreds of files detailing atrocities

²⁴ Debates over “how racist” Italians were (or are) in comparison to other Europeans, or to Americans, tend to dominate many discussions. Nicola Labanca, the most important Italian historian of Italian colonialism in the next generation after Rochat and Del Boca, has published the only single-volume overview of Italian colonialism in Italian: Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), in which he concludes that Italians were actually “more racist” than other colonizers (e.g., 413).

²⁵ As in Giovanni Contini, *La memoria divisa* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1997).

²⁶ Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

²⁷ Michele Battini, *Peccati di memoria: La mancata Norimberga italiana* (Rome: Laterza, 2003), published in English as *The Missing Italian Nuremberg: Cultural Amnesia and Postwar Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). For the trials that did take place, see Andrea Martini, *Dopo Mussolini. I processi ai fascisti e ai collaborazionisti (1944–1943)* (Rome: Viella, 2019).

committed by Fascists and Nazis, that had been turned to face a wall, standing unnoticed since the 1940s.²⁸

In addition to what Italians did to Italians, the other continuing research that meets with dogged push-back concerns Italian war crimes in World War II, both before the Italian Armistice of 1943 and after. A few historians have tenaciously documented Italian occupations (and abuses) in Greece and the western Balkans.²⁹ Especially close to home is the extreme bitterness still manifested over conflicts between Yugoslav forces and settler Italians in the area of Trieste, the Istrian peninsula, and parts of Slovenia, emblemized by the killings of Italians thrown into *foibe* to die.³⁰

Historiography, overall, consists in the mainstream publications found in most bookstores and libraries, plus the parallel production of loyalists, conspiracy theorists, and diehard contrarians. Shops in Mussolini's hometown of Predappio offer a vast selection, as well as copies of Graziani's self-aggrandizing memoirs and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (in Italian). More interesting than these, in the end, are the in-between publications, such as oral-historical interviews with Italians who in their youth had served Salò,³¹ and the memoir of Roberto Vivarelli, a distinguished historian of Fascism who late in life, published a retrospective analysis of his time as a Salò fighter.³²

The complexities of establishing respective levels of perpetrator status – vs. victimhood – are the area in which the most provocative work is being done currently, by a younger generation that brings to its publications a lively polemical stance. In many ways building on work by academic historians on Italian disavowals and memory wars,³³ these authors are publishing accessible books taking on old clichés about “good” Mussolini and “bad” partisans, challenging time-worn demonizations maintained in the name of “patriotism.” Interestingly, some of these authors (none of whom are university professors) lead tours for Italian high-school students, to Auschwitz and other sites of memory. The tone of their books reflects plain speaking with students: their positions are clear, their arguments straightforward, and their approach unambiguous as they take apart long-standing commonplaces.³⁴ One group is crowdfunding a tour (scheduled for summer 2022) of Rab, the

²⁸ The standard historian's account is Mimmo Franzinelli, *Le stragi nascoste. L'armadio della vergogna: impunità e rimozione dei crimini di guerra nazifascisti 1943–2001* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), while the more journalistic rendering is Franco Giustolisi, *L'armadio della vergogna* (Rome: Nutrimenti, 2004).

²⁹ See Elena Aga Rossi and Maria Teresa Giusti, *Una guerra a parte. I militari italiani nei Balcani 1940–1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011); Vincenzo Sinapi, *Domenikon 1943. Quando ad ammazzare sono gli Italiani* (Milan: Mursia, 2021). A slightly different approach is to add Italian combat in France and the USSR to form an even larger picture: see Paolo Fonzi, *Oltre i confini. Le occupazioni italiane durante la seconda guerra mondiale (1939–1943)* (Milan: Mondadori, 2020).

³⁰ *Foibe* are deep sinkholes in the region's natural karst.

³¹ Such as Sergio Tau, *La repubblica dei vinti. Storie di italiani a Salò* (Venice: Marsilio, 2018). This is not a critical work regarding what oral history can and cannot do, especially in comparison to ground-breaking works by Luisa Passerini (starting with *Torino operaia e fascismo. Una storia orale* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 1984), published in English as *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Alessandro Portelli, in particular his *L'ordine è già stato eseguito. Roma, le Fosse Ardeatine, la memoria* (Rome: Donzelli, 1999), published in English as *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Pgrave Macmillan, 2003).

³² Roberto Vivarelli, *La fine di una stagione. Memoria 1943–1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000).

³³ I am referring above all to works by Filippo Focardi, University of Padova professor, on Italy's internal memory conflicts: *La guerra della memoria. La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2005); *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2013); and *Nel cantiere della memoria. Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe* (Rome: Viella, 2020).

³⁴ Francesco Filippi, *Mussolini ha fatto anche cose buone. Le idiozie che continuano a circolare sul fascismo* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2019); Francesco Filippi, *Ma perché siamo ancora fascisti? Un conto rimasto aperto* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2020); Carlo Greppi, *L'antifascismo non serve più a niente* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2020); Eric Gobetti, *E allora le foibe?*

notorious Italian camp where Slovenian and Croatian civilians were interned.³⁵ In short, current Italian historiography suggests that non-academic voices may continue to be essential in bringing disputed Italian histories out of the shadows.

Italy's Holocaust

New work on Italy's Shoah is adopting a more accessible tone as well.³⁶ For decades, Italians (historians included) blamed the Nazis for the deportations and killings of Italy's Jews, exonerating Mussolini and themselves in one efficient move, relative silence on the matter being the hardest form of denial to contest. Through recent research, along with the recognition of sites that were once camps (starting with Italy's single extermination and cremation camp, the Risiera di San Sabba), Italy has been catching up – gradually – to a more general grappling with complicities in the Holocaust that resonates with reckonings elsewhere in Europe; no concentrated push-back has (yet) been forthcoming. Work remains to be done, including in the still-obscure domain of how Italian authorities enforced the “racial laws” in the colonies, especially once the War began (the single relatively documented instance being the internment of Libyan Jews at Jado).³⁷

Notes on contributor

Mia Fuller is Gladyce Arata Terrill Distinguished Associate Professor of Italian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She writes on Italian colonial and fascist architectural and urban history, and the legacies of Italian colonialism and Fascism (*Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, Italian Imperialism*, 2007, International Planning History Society book prize winner; section editor for the *Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture*, ed. Jones and Pilat, 2020; co-editor of *Italian Colonialism*, ed. Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2005). She is completing an ethnographic-historical book on vestiges of Fascism in Italy's Pontine Marshes area (*Monuments to Mussolini: A Cultural History of Fascist Memory*, forthcoming with Bloomsbury Academic).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

(Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2020); Chiara Colombini, *Anche i partigiani però ...* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2021); and Francesco Filippi, *Prima gli italiani! (sì, ma quali?)* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2021). Also see Michela Murgia, *Istruzioni per diventare fascisti* (Turin: Einaudi, 2018).

³⁵ <https://www.produzionidalbasso.com/project/il-campo-di-concentramento-di-arbe-una-storia-italiana/>. This is apart from the Italian Public History Association, the *Associazione Italiana di Public History*.

³⁶ In particular, Simon Levis Sullam, *I carnefici italiani. Scene dal genocidio degli ebrei, 1943–1945* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2015); published in English as *The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). Also see Amedeo Osti Guerazzi, *Gli specialisti dell'odio. Delazioni, arresti, deportazioni di ebrei italiani* (Florence: Giuntina, 2020). The long-standing authoritative volume by non-Mussolini-condemning historian and biographer Renzo de Felice, was *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972). Here too, I will note an influential non-academic publication: Rosetta Loy, *La parola ebreo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997) published in English as *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000).

³⁷ Eric Salerno, *Uccideteli tutti: Libia 1943: gli ebrei nel campo di concentramento fascista di Giado. Una storia italiana* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2008).