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*Mussolini's Nation-Empire: Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy's Borderlands, 1922-1943.* By Roberta Pergher (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018) 286 pp. \$104 cloth \$29.05 paper.

Ettore Tolomei, a Fascist Senator whose lifelong goal was to “Italianize” the Alto Adige or South Tyrol region around Bolzano that was incorporated into Italy after the First World War, provides the leitmotif for this book and its innovative questioning of the typical rendition of state sovereignty as the simple and easy matching of nation with state. In 1938 Tolomei framed the Italian settlement of Libya in terms remarkably similar to that of its new northern territories as being a legitimation of their essential Italian character. He thus argued for a similar effort in moving Italians northwards to that expended in planting Italian settlers in coastal Libya. A classically territorial claim to a previously unredeemed portion of the “homeland” was thus conjoined with a colonial claim to rule at some distance from anything conceivably Italian by conventional naming. It would be the bordering of a Greater Italy in terms of ethnic Italian settlement that would ground the sovereignty of the expanded enterprise as legitimate in the eyes of Italians and the world.

Roberta Pergher develops this conjoined focus on sovereignty and settlement into a book that questions both conventional wisdom about Italian colonial settlement policy, that it was about relieving “overpopulation,” and the simple opposition between national and colonial bordering that has long bedeviled not just Italian but all understandings of sovereignty down until recently. In drawing from writers such as Frederick Cooper, Ann Laura Stoler, and Charles Maier, the author exposes the clear but misleading distinction between national and colonial sovereignties that nationalist historiography has posited as fundamental to modern political history. The contested character of a key set of borders is the terrain that the argument first encounters and then exploits to make its case.

Pergher proceeds by showing for the case of Fascist Italy that “Population settlement emerged as the obvious answer to a perceived crisis of sovereignty in the borderlands” (70) irrespective of whether this was a nominal province of Italy proper or a colony beyond its immediate confines. The historical logic in both South Tyrol/NE Italy and Libya was that of claims from empires past: “Nationalists ... used empires past to

lay claim to foreign territories in the name of the nation. But in integrating others into what was supposedly a homogeneous nation-state, they also inevitably became imperialists against the new citizens ‘ own nationalist assertions’ (58). The tenor of the times played a role in making ethnic settlement the method of legitimation. Planting the flag was no longer enough in the post-Versailles world. Settlers were central to both establishing a renewed Italian nationhood and potentially expanding its scope, thus conjoining the national with the imperial dimensions of statehood. In exploring the tensions between the two political formations the book shows in the end that “in Mussolini’s nation-empire citizenship itself became diluted and hierarchical, a means to smuggle back imperial distinctions in an era that prized minority rights and colonial emancipation” (253).

The book proceeds in a clear path from an Introduction that provides an overview of the argument to a set of chapters organized thematically and not chronologically. This thematic organization is a real strength of the book from a methodological viewpoint. Chapter 1 considers the entire question of sovereignty in borderlands and how Fascist Italy came to use ethnic settlement as a bordering strategy. Chapter 2 examines the demographic “escape valve” claim often associated with Italian colonialism and suggests that it was more by way of an expedient for planting co-nationals in contested places. Perhaps the best parts of the book empirically are Chapters 3 and 4, where Pergher examines in sequence the ways settlers were selected and how their and functionaries’ visions of what they were doing overlapped and differed and the perceptions of the natives and the extent to which they could be turned into “Italians” or not. Chapter 5 offers a critical review of the 1939 Option agreement between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in which the South Tyrol was to be more or less ceded to Italy but with German-speakers being encouraged if they desired to move to Germany. The Conclusion shows how much in the end these efforts were undermined by the onset and outcome of the Second World War.

Rather than consolidating the nation, and there are lessons here well beyond Italian shores in, for example, Spain and the UK, “Fascist policies of national transformation in the borderlands began to eat away at the foundations of the nation

itself” (22). This brilliant book is well worth reading by anyone who wants to understand why we should never take the world political map as self-evident and unproblematic.

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