

# **Eurafrica. Vital Space, Demographic Planning and the Division of Labour in the Italian Empire: The Legacy of Fascist Autarky**

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## ABSTRACT

The division of labour and the economic and social organisation of Italian Africa were established before the Second World War: Eritrea and the Addis Ababa area were destined to become the industrial regions of Italian East Africa and its main hubs for services, while the other regions of Ethiopia would have an agricultural economy comprising both small farms and large-scale production for the market. The latter type of agriculture become predominant in Somalia, where foodstuffs were produced for the imperial market, and where banana cultivation had been developed for the Italian market and for export elsewhere. In Tripolitania, demographic colonisation would be supplemented by manufacturing and service activities in the capital, while in Cyrenaica it was to be largely prevalent. Yet, investigation of the construction of the Fascist empire, directly planned by Mussolini, must always proceed on two different planes: myth and reality. The two continually intersected, though the former was certainly predominant, since Mussolini's aims were far more political and ideological than economic.

## **Prologue: Eurafrica and Vital Space**

During the winter of 1943, Raffaele Guariglia, a senior Italian diplomat, wrote an article on subject of Eurafrica.<sup>1</sup> At the time,

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<sup>1</sup> R. Guariglia, "L'Eurafrica nella guerra e nel dopoguerra" (Eurafrica during the war and the post-war period), in *Gli Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, no. 1, 1943, pp. 6-15. A typescript can be found in the Historical and Diplomatic Archives of the Italian Foreign

Guariglia was Italy's ambassador to the Vatican, though his transfer to Turkey was imminent. Previously he had been the Foreign Ministry's director general and had represented Italy in Madrid, Buenos Aires and Paris. After Mussolini's removal from power on 25 July 1943, he was named foreign minister in the new Badoglio government. These were difficult times indeed. After the Allied landings in North Africa, the Axis powers were organising last-ditch resistance in Tunisia. Despite his formal expressions of faith in ultimate victory, in his article Guariglia predicted that Italy would soon be thrown out of Africa, its eviction severing a crucial link in the consolidation of Italy's economic power. Guariglia contended that Eurafica had signified an indissoluble union of the two continents, and that Italians, like the French and the Spanish, were necessarily drawn to Africa. That continent still offered "vast prospects" for colonisation, production, trade and exploration for raw materials. In his opinion, the lasting pre-eminence of the "New Europe" would only be possible through the union of the two continents, which should become one of the fundamental tenets of the "New Order". Instead, the penetration of the United States into Algeria and Morocco heralded America's informal hegemony, which the local population greeted as an opportunity to get rid of European colonialism, ushering in the "American Century". These developments had an echo in the policies adopted by the government of South Africa, which aimed at supplanting British and French imperialism and proclaimed that Africa should be left to Africans. Guariglia criticised Germany for focussing almost entirely on the East and neglecting the Mediterranean. (He forgot, however, that Mussolini had sent an army corps to Russia, equipped with up-to-date weapons that could have been put to better use on the Libyan front.) For Guariglia, the Mediterranean, far from separating Europe and Africa, united the two continents, and the concept of Eurafica was of essential importance for the destiny of Italy, which boasted that "work" was its "rule

Ministry (hereafter ASDMAE), Ministry for Italian Africa (hereafter ASMAI), *Africa V, Materials recovered in the North*, b. 11.

of life”, personified by its “soldier-colonists and colonist-soldiers”. Eurafrika could represent the harmonic junction of Italian, Japanese and German vital spaces: with Germany in the Balkans and in the Caucasus, because Italy intended to expand eastwards beyond the Suez Canal, and with Japan along the westernmost reaches of the Japanese co-prosperity sphere. The plan for an Italian trans-Saharan road was revived: it was supposed to link Libya to Somalia, passing through Egypt and the Sudan, from Tripoli to Mogadishu, where a large port would be built to project the Italian empire towards the Indian Ocean.

Italian war aims were very ambitious, though it is doubtful they could ever have been realised in practice, owing to Germany’s reluctance to grant Italy real political and economic supremacy in Croatia and other areas of the Balkans (Rodogno, 2003).

Demographic colonisation ideally represented the noblest objective, because the birth of the new Italian Africa consecrated Fascism’s universal mission. Libya and Ethiopia, in particular, were going to be widely settled by Italian colonists. In the latter, it was believed that the “decadent” African population would be quickly overtaken by the more prolific and vital Italian race, providing ample scope for demographic colonisation.

The creation of the Fascist empire also represented what Corrado Gini considered a fundamental necessity for young nations upon reaching a certain stage in their development: an irresistible drive to assert their spirit and impose their dominant will (Gini, 1941). For Gini, this specific phase was characteristic of young and vital nations such as Italy, Germany and Japan, which necessarily strove to reproduce and affirm their life abroad, in order to transmit their universal beliefs to other peoples. Eurafrika represented the most important “instrument” for promoting these principles (Piccioli, 1942). As a consequence, demographic colonisation was deemed not only an excellent means of relieving population pressure at home, but also a factor of spiritual and vital growth for the nation, endowing Italians at last, Mussolini hoped, with a more deeply felt racial awareness. In Africa, Fascist settlers would rediscover and develop the tradi-

tional virtues of rural society, which urban development had compromised in Italy. Eurafrica was also a “laboratory” where the Duce intended to mould the character of the new Fascist Italians, far from the influences that survived in the mother country (Pannunzio, 1938), consecrating the mission of the Fascist totalitarian State. We see this in the psychological, physical and ideological criteria used for selecting prospective settlers and in their mass recruitment into Fascist organisations. The Fascist Party’s role in society and the economy, its racial policies and the regime’s rigid control on all economic activities also point in the same direction. Fascist racism in Africa foreshadowed the introduction of racial laws against Italian Jews.

In Libya, the coastal regions were divided into four provinces, which were annexed to the mother country. The regime’s pro-Islamic policies favoured the recognition of a special kind of citizenship for Libyan subjects, although the latter remained subordinate to Italians; a plan was also conceived to extend compulsory military service to all young men belonging to the Fascist Arab Youth Organisation (Gioventu’ Araba del Littorio – GAL – created especially for Libyan youths).

The division of labour and the economic and social organisation of Italian Africa were established before the Second World War: Eritrea and the Addis Ababa area were destined to become industrial regions of Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana – AOI) and its main hubs for services, while the other Ethiopian regions would have an agriculture economy made up of both smallholdings and capitalist farming. (Podestà, 2004). The latter type of agriculture became predominant in Somalia, where foodstuffs were to be produced for the imperial market, and where banana cultivation had been especially developed both for the Italian market and for export (Stangio, 2010). In Tripolitania, demographic colonisation was to be supplemented by manufacturing and service activities in the capital, while in Cyrenaica it was to be largely prevalent (Cresti, 1996). However, the construction of the Fascist empire, directly planned by Mussolini, must always be investigated on two different planes: myth and reality. The two continually intersect, though the former was

certainly predominant, since Mussolini's aims were far more political and ideological than economic.

### **The Empire as a Myth: Fascist Universalism and New Urban Lifestyles in the Italian Colonial Towns**

The conquest of Ethiopia radically modified Italian colonial policy, transferring it to the level of empire. The empire, for Mussolini, was above all a spiritual goal towards which Italians should strive in order to avoid the fate of decadent Western peoples. The meaning attributed to the word "empire" transcended the mere increase in the area of conquered territories and assumed an almost metaphysical quality. Fascism's idea of empire engendered a new totalitarian colonial policy, which included some common guidelines for the colonies (e.g., the racial hierarchy and school curricula and programmes), thus overcoming the historical, political and cultural heterogeneity of the various dominions, and also reflected the regime's objective of creating large Italian communities overseas. To highlight the differences between the Fascist model and the classic colonialism of the other European powers, and underline the former's communitarian outlook, jurists defined the Fascist empire as a *corpus mysticum* made up of several parts, which, "although they all contributed to reaching the same common goals and though each obtained its own advantage" (Ambrosini, 1940), were not on the same level: first came Italy and Albania, followed by Libya and the Italian islands in the Aegean Sea; AOI came last.

Of course, the elements determining the hierarchy of dominions were mainly racial and cultural. The administration of the territories was also differentiated: the Aegean islands and Albania, which was part of the imperial community as an autonomous and independent entity associated with Italy, came under the Foreign Ministry, while Libya and AOI came under the Ministry for Italian Africa (Ministry of Colonies until 1937), whose rechristening underlined the new conception of the relationship between the colonies and the mother

country. Between 1936 and 1940, in all its overseas possessions, including Albania and Rhodes, the Fascist regime elaborated plans for the transfer of Italian colonists. The emigration of select Italian families was a cornerstone of Fascist policy. The common traits, which bore witness to the universal vocation of imperial policy (whose chief objectives were to forge new Italian colonists and increase the “Italianness” of indigenous populations), concerned the creation of schools both for Italian and autochthonous students; archaeological research; the diffusion of newspapers and magazines (including some in the local languages), the cinema, theatres and the radio; the spreading of Western and/or typically Italian lifestyles and pastimes; the designing of an overseas Italian architecture; and the founding of cultural and sports institutions.

The new Italian settlers enjoyed substantially higher incomes than Italians back home. This altered their lifestyle, increasing the popularity of cultural activities and sports, including some, like tennis and equestrian sports, which marked a rise in social status. The same phenomenon also touched those Africans who were in direct contact with Italians. Schools and the Fascist Party (PNF) were the institutions responsible for the dissemination of culture and sports. All tourist and sports facilities were built either by the government or by the PNF.

The Party looked after Italians’ leisure time through auxiliary bodies. The Institute of Fascist Culture, Fascist University Groups (GUF) and Italian Lictorian Youth (GIL) mainly dealt with political and cultural indoctrination as well as physical education, while the National Workingmen’s Recreational Association (Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro) organized events and leisure-time activities that brought large numbers of people together and strengthened the sentiment of “Italianness”. The creation of the Arab Lictorian Youth (GAL) in Libya and the Indigenous Lictorian Youth (GIL) in East Africa also allowed the Fascist Party to organise and train the younger natives (Goglia, 1988). The diffusion of football and other Western sports in African schools or among the members of the GAL and GIL complemented classroom education.

The Italian Touring Club also played an important role in the empire's cultural and tourist promotion, by organising trips and events and, above all, through its own publications. Alongside Fascist institutions, a remarkable number of sports, cultural and military associations helped to manage the colonists' leisure time.

Imperial publications were generally published by the government or by the Fascist Party and therefore had an official character, but there were also some Catholic magazines and a growing number of cinemas and theatres. The cinema was a formidable political and cultural tool for the assimilation of subject peoples, as Under-secretary for Foreign Affairs Zenone Benini pointed out in a report to Mussolini on Italian cultural penetration in Albania. His remarks can be applied to all the other dominions:

For the purpose of spiritual elevation, educational activities are and will be more and more supported [...] by the action of those technical means, such as cinema and the radio, which are especially apt to take the educating voice of Italian civilisation to the most isolated outposts [...] To this end [...] several travelling cinemas have been sent which, besides showing everywhere the beauty of Italian sights, provide the first recreational opportunities for the masses (Santoro, 2005).

**TABLE 1**  
Cultural institutions in the main urban centres of the Italian empire (1940)

	Tirana	Rhodes	Tripoli	Benghazi	Asmara	Addis Ababa	Mogadishu
Cinemas and theatres	4	6	9	5	9	5	3
Newspapers and magazines	3	2	20	5	6	21	5
Cultural, sports and tourist associations	3	7	47	33	13	11	11

Source: G. L. Podestà, "I luoghi della cultura nell'Impero fascista", in S. Luzzatto and G. Pedullà (eds.), *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, III, D. Scarpa (ed.), *Dal Romanticismo a oggi*, Turin, 2012, pp. 655-670.

## The Empire as Myth: Schools

Until the mid-1930s the Fascist regime had shown little interest in education, delegating it to the Catholic missions. The creation of the empire and the growth in the number of Italian colonists in Libya (119,139 in 1939) and in AOI (165,267 in 1939) represented a turning point in the organisation of schools in the colonies. New primary and secondary schools were founded and reserved for Italian pupils, while the “Italianisation” of subject populations was stepped up with the creation of a new educational system aimed at assimilation.

The school systems in the different territories were designed according to racial hierarchies, although special attention was paid to Muslim culture and traditions (in line with Mussolini’s pro-Islamic policy). Everywhere the State gradually assumed direct responsibility for both Italian and native students’ education, replacing the Catholic missions, not only to exert more political control over the curricula (especially as regards subjects such as physical education), but also to avoid offending Muslim sensibilities.

In July 1937, at the start of the implementation in the school sector of what Cesare Maria de Vecchi, the governor, called the beginning of a necessary “totalitarian clean-up” (Podestà, 2012), all the schools in the Aegean (including the Orthodox and Muslim ones) were placed under government supervision and management. Italian became the only language of instruction, while regulations, curricula and textbooks were the same as those used in the Kingdom of Italy. Starting from the 1940-41 school year, Italian also became compulsory in the last two forms of Albanian primary school.

In Libya and AOI, alongside schools for Italians, state schools for indigenous students were established and organised under special rules drawn up by the Ministry for Italian Africa, which took into account the specific racial, cultural, religious and economic features of each territory. Nursery and primary schools were free. Compulsory education, which for Italians was the same as in the mother country, was imposed on natives only for the first three years of primary school (Mondaini, 1941). Metropolitan schools could be en-

trusted to Italian religious congregations, which thus became officially recognised institutions, provided they employed teachers who had acquired the requisite qualifications in Italy and agreed to carry out activities and programmes in accordance with government directives and control. In AOI, however, the Fascist Party was determined to limit the missionaries' involvement in education to a few areas of the former Ethiopian empire.

The creation of Italo-Arabic State schools in Libya, in competition with Islamic schools, and of schools for natives in AOI (including in the most remote areas), all equipped with a kit prepared by the Paravia publishing house, which included portraits of Mussolini and of the Emperor King, are evidence of the regime's effort to create a new imperial pedagogy. The purpose was no longer simply to overcome the conquered peoples with the image of Italy's power, to subjugate them in the manner of traditional paternalism. The Fascist goal was far more ambitious: to mould them, i.e. to train a generation of young subjects who would acquire a superior political awareness and could guide and control the indigenous masses. In the words of Italo Balbo, addressing the Royal Academy's Volta Conference of 1938:

Paternalistic policies, especially suited to Southern people should necessarily be integrated, for the Arabs of coastal territories, by a system of provisions aiming at their moral elevation and civil evolution, such as to create spiritual harmony between the conquering power and its subjects. [...] The Fascist government's work [...] is therefore so politically and morally charged that it will be able to transform the population's social structure; it could indeed create the necessary conditions for greater participation in our civil life on the part of this same population (Balbo, 1938).

Mass literacy – access to higher education was to be rigidly regulated – would allow the regime to deploy all the tools of communication at its disposal, notably newspapers, radio and the cinema. In Libya and in the Muslim regions of Italian East Africa, education policy, by integrating Italian programmes and Koranic studies, ap-

peared to seek to preserve traditional culture, but it was obvious that the ambition was ultimately to “channel” Islam, too, into the bosom of Fascist totalitarianism. In 1935, Italo Balbo founded a Higher Institute of Islamic Culture (Contini, 1953), in competition with Tunis and Cairo universities, to train civil servants and teachers. In 1936, he created a girls’ boarding school to train nurses. This was the first institution that gave Arab girls access to specialised training in a modern profession, unlike the other women’s training schools, which only taught home economics or the art of traditional weaving. In AOI, too, secondary schools of Islamic studies were founded at Gimma, Harar and Mogadishu. The cultural opening towards Islam was intended to represent a tangible, highly significant sign of Fascism’s universal mission, as conceived by the Duce, though, of course, it also had political and diplomatic aims. In any event, this step was implicitly meant to attract and integrate Muslims, by showing them that the spiritual conception at the core of Fascist imperialism offered them the necessary tools to escape backwardness, by reconciling modernity with tradition and offering them an opportunity for redemption.

**TABLE 2**  
The population of the Italian empire in 1939 (estimates)

	Population	Italians
Libya	893,774	119,139
Italian East Africa (AOI)	12,100,000	165,267
Aegean Islands	140,848	16,711 <sup>1</sup>
Albania	1,037,856 <sup>2</sup>	–
Tien-Tsin (China)	9,017	–
Total	14,181,495	301,117

Source: *Annuario dell’Africa Italiana e delle Isole Italiane dell’Egeo 1940*, Rome, 1940.

<sup>1</sup> Includes soldiers. <sup>2</sup> At 31 December 1937.

## Demographic Planning and the Division of Labour: Italian East Africa (AOI) 1936-1941

In Italian East Africa, the Duce intended to create a new organic social system combining demographic colonisation with other forms of valorisation, by transferring from Italy “the whole machinery of its own civilisation.”<sup>2</sup> Fascist colonisation entailed, that is, “the settlement and empowerment of a people”, the transposition to the colonies of all the productive elements of the mother country, such as farmers, workers, artisans, clerks, traders, small entrepreneurs and intellectuals, thus shunning the loathsome model of capitalistic colonisation exclusively designed to benefit a restricted class of privileged individuals. This conception dovetailed with three crucial objectives: preserving and increasing Italy’s numerical power, cementing Italians’ racial cohesion in the empire and in Italy itself, and promoting the social advancement of popular masses. Mussolini wanted the Fascist regime to be a social experiment, in which the new Italian colonists, strengthened by war and by the enterprise of colonisation, would show the world that they represented the new type of Italian forged by the Fascist regime: sober, warrior-like, vital and prolific. The labour factor was going to play a crucial role in the valorisation of AEI and, quite deliberately, Mussolini emphasised this, calling the Italian dominion “The Empire of Work” (Mondaini, 1937). Like all other economic activities, worker recruitment in AEI, in the public and private sectors alike, had been completely institutionalised and was directly managed and controlled by the State, which acted as an intermediary between business and labour, strictly regulating labour demand and supply. The first contingents of Italian colonists sent to Eritrea and Somalia in the summer of 1935 consisted of workers directly organised and enrolled in the legions of the Fascist militia; they were employed to build the infrastructures needed to house the expeditionary corps and prepare the army’s advance into Ethiopian territory.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Meregazzi, “Lineamenti della legislazione per l’Impero”, in *Gli Annali dell’Africa Italiana*, no. 3, 1939, p. 12.

Italy's economic policy for AOI differed from other colonial models: Mussolini had ordered that every necessary measure be taken to limit imports from Italy.<sup>3</sup> The empire had gradually to advance not only towards food self-sufficiency, but also towards the creation of its own industrial facilities to supply its needs for goods such as construction materials, textiles and beverages.<sup>4</sup> Naturally, AOI also had to contribute to economic autarky in the mother country, by developing the production of cotton, wool, leather, meat, oil seeds, coffee and minerals. At the same time, a series of rules were issued to regulate and protect the labour force in AOI as regards the organisation of production, working hours, wages and accommodation. Following Mussolini's explicit directives, the Fascist trade unions were not allowed to operate in AOI, their functions being taken over by the Fascist Party, which was charged with speaking for and defending workers vis-à-vis employers both in the private sector and in the civil service. Altogether, the number of workers recruited by the Commissariat for Migration and Colonisation between 1935 and 1939 surpassed 200,000.<sup>5</sup> Wages were higher than in Italy. Between 1935 and 1938, workers' remittances to Italy amounted to more than 5.2 billion current lire,<sup>6</sup> a sum corresponding to more than 1% of Italy's GDP in 1936 and 1938 and about 2% in 1937. From 1937 onwards, Italian workers were gradually repatriated and replaced by African workers. Mussolini took this course because he thought that the Italian workers did not uphold the prestige of the "Italian race" in the eyes of Italy's African subjects.<sup>7</sup>

There are no precise data on the European and African population of AOI. An estimate made in the spring of 1939 indicated

<sup>3</sup> ASDMAE, ASMAI, Archivio Segreto di Gabinetto (hereafter ASG), b. 160, Mussolini to Graziani, 26/5/1936.

<sup>4</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter ACS), Fondo Graziani, Lessona to Graziani, 10/11/1937.

<sup>5</sup> ACS, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (hereafter PCM), 1934-1936, f. 1. 1. 23-f. 3299/14, *Commissariato per le migrazioni e la colonizzazione interna. Migrazioni in Africa Orientale Italiana al 31/12/1938*.

<sup>6</sup> ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 67.

<sup>7</sup> ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 67, Teruzzi to Amedeo d'Aosta, 30/12/1937.

165,267 Italian civilians, against some 12 million Africans (Ciferri, 1942). Eritrea had the largest number of settlers: 72,408, or 43.8% of the total. The percentage of women was very low; only in Eritrea did it exceed 20%. In 1939, there were 26,628 Italian women in AOI, of whom 14,827 (55.7%) in Eritrea.

Around 25,000 Italians worked in the public sector. The number employed in the private sector was estimated at 20,000, but, taking temporary residents into account, the actual number was probably much higher. Doctors made up the largest professional group, followed by engineers, land surveyors, lawyers, pharmacists and veterinarians, along with architects, notaries, midwives, journalists and artists. Apart from the military and temporary or permanent employees of the public administration or private companies (including banks and insurance companies), tens of thousands of Italians had set up their own businesses. These hard-working people displayed great adaptability, initiative and creativity. They comprised a multitude of small entrepreneurs, traders, managers of small, often mobile, catering businesses, drivers and owners of means of transport, skilled workers who doubled as artisans, owners of small building firms, trade representatives and intermediaries.

In April 1939 the Foreign Ministry carried out a survey of Italian industrial and commercial enterprises registered in AOI and their invested capital.<sup>8</sup> There were 4,007 industrial firms with a total capital of over 2.7 billion current lire. The highest concentration of private businesses and capital was in Eritrea, with 2,198 companies (54.8%) worth about 2.2 billion current lire (80.4%), followed by Shewa with 561 firms (14%) and 305 million lire (11.1%), and Somalia with 584 firms (14.5%) and capital totalling 75 million (2.7%). The most important sector was road transport with 1,262 private businesses (31.5%) worth about 1.7 billion lire (62.2%), followed by construction with 823 firms (20.5%) and invested capital of about 745 million lire (27%). Commercial enterprises numbered 4,785 with invested capital of over £1.1 billion. Economically, the most important

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<sup>8</sup> ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 67.

regions were Eritrea, with 2,690 businesses (56.2%) worth about 486 million lire (43.7%), and Shewa with 634 businesses (13.2%) valued at about £500 million (45%).

Paradoxically, although Mussolini had declared that the empire's true wealth consisted in Italians' labour, the new economic conditions involved a sizable part of the African population as well. Both the State and private sector businesses needed labour. A 1940 survey recorded an estimated 750,000 Africans employed in construction, road-building and agriculture. If we add those recruited by the armed forces or working for private businesses, the number of Africans employed surpassed one million, about 10% of the African population.

A large number of Africans were active in commerce and handicrafts. Without the former, the European population of the towns could not survive. To avoid mixing of the races, Mussolini had barred Italians from accessing the African market, but the government had to revoke the order almost immediately due to shortages.

Management of the demographic colonisation programme was delegated to the Opera Nazionale Combattenti (the national organization for veterans of the world war) and to some regional bodies under the PNF. The Italian press reported that by 1940 854 farmer families had already settled on their lands, but more reliable sources reduce their number to 377 (Sbacchi, 1980).

Mussolini constantly urged the need to increase the number of families, in order to reduce the imbalance in the ratio between the two sexes. The Duce was obsessed with racism. Above all, he was horrified by the sexual promiscuity of Italian workers and soldiers with African women, and since 1935 had received hundreds of alarming reports deploring the increasing number of births of children of mixed blood (Podestà, 2015); he had even discussed this subject with the foreign press. The promulgation of racial legislation from spring 1937 onwards (Barrera, 2008) was a consequence of the decision to force settlers to take their families with them to the colonies. The problems this entailed were not so easy to solve. Most Italians lived in the towns, but the increasing number of new arrivals

**TABLE 3**  
Italian civilians in AOI (1939)

District	Italian civilians	%
Eritrea	72,408	44.0
Shewa	40,698	25.0
Somalia	19,200	11.0
Galla and Sidama	11,823	7.0
Amara	11,103	7.0
Harar	10,035	6.0
Total	165,267	100.0

Sources: R. Ciferri, "I cereali dell'Africa Italiana", in *Rassegna economica dell'Africa Italiana*, no. 1, 1942, p. 12; *Annuario dell'Africa Italiana e delle Isole Italiane dell'Egeo*, Rome, 1940.

**TABLE 4**  
Italian women in AOI (1939)

District	Italian women	%
Eritrea	14,827	20.4
Shewa	6,564	16.3
Somalia	2,287	11.9
Harar	1,350	13.4
Amara	946	8.5
Galla and Sidama	654	5.7
Total	26,628	100

Source: ACS, MAI, b. 2123, *Popolazione nazionale femminile residente in AOI e iscritte ai fasci femminili al 31 dicembre 1939*.

between 1936 and 1938 caught the colonial governments totally unprepared as regards housing and urban services (water, electricity, gas, transport, etc.). The case of Asmara was emblematic. In 1934, Asmara had a population of about 3,500 Italians and 12,000 Africans. By 1939, these numbers had grown to 48,000 and 36,000, respectively. In just five years, the total population had increased fivefold, while the ratio between Italians and natives had been reversed. These developments reflected the city's importance as a logistical base for the war. Families coped as best as they could, and many single men had no choice but to sleep in their vans. At the outset, almost all new immigrants were single men, but in 1938, thanks to the construction of

new housing estates, families started to arrive regularly, normalising the population's female-to-male ratio. In 1940, 11,296 women lived in Asmara (23.5%). In Eritrea, the Italian population's birth rate was continuously on the rise, seeming to validate Mussolini's hopes that the empire would contribute to the regeneration of the Italian race: the birth rate was 27.8 per thousand in 1937 and 28.8 per thousand in 1938, while in Italy the figures were 22.9 and 23.6 per thousand, respectively (Podestà, 2007).

The new residential quarters were built in typical Italian style in the city suburbs, featuring two or three-storey buildings, symbolically counterposed to the old town centre made up of one-storey houses occupied by Eritreans lured to Asmara by the demand for labour. The new town planning scheme envisaged the forced removal of the indigenous quarter, the market and the mosque, but the governor of Eritrea, Giuseppe Daodiace, objected, pointing to the Eritrean population's constant loyalty to Italy. The town therefore retained a core indigenous area, which ran counter to Fascist racial policies and determined "the peculiar social structure that characterized the town for a long period after the war" (Gresleri II, 1993).

In Addis Ababa, the situation was different. The capital of the empire was destined to become, Mussolini proclaimed, the most beautiful and futuristic city in Africa, the beacon of the new Fascist civilisation (Podestà, 2009). The preparation of the new town planning scheme was very laborious and saw the involvement of such prominent figures as Giò Ponti, Enrico Del Debbio, Giuseppe Vaccaro and even Le Corbusier, who asked the Duce to be allowed to design the plan for the new city (Talamona, 1985; Gresleri III, 1993). Work did not get under way until 1939. The plan provided for a clear separation between the European and indigenous areas, but this would have necessitated transferring the African population and building tens of thousands of new homes. Italian settlers had increased from a few thousand in early 1937 (with 150 families) to over 40,000 in March 1940 (33,059 men, 6,998 women and about 4,000 families), while the African population had practically doubled to an estimated 120,000.

In Addis Ababa, the number of births rose from 50 in 1937 to 570 in 1939 and the number of weddings shot up too, despite the dramatic housing shortage (Podestà, 2009). Italians coped in all possible ways: many continued to live in temporary shelters (tents, huts and prefabricated houses); many families used indigenous homes that had been expropriated or leased. Mussolini found this situation intolerable, and he constantly called on the AOI government to enforce a more vigorous policy of racial separation. As Amedeo d' Aosta, the Viceroy, once remarked, solving the problem of racial prestige was incompatible with the housing situation: first, there was not enough money to build houses for Italians or tukuls in the new indigenous town; then there were enormous problems in sourcing water and building materials, which is why most Ethiopians, after cashing in their expropriation indemnity, went back to the old quarters. Given that it was impossible to separate the two races "by evicting one hundred thousand natives,"<sup>9</sup> it was necessary to stop new family units from emigrating to Italian East Africa, until low-cost housing had been built for the colonists.

### **Demographic Planning and the Division of Labour: Libya 1936-1943**

The demographic colonisation myth elaborated by Fascism partially veiled how things stood in reality: in actual fact, most Italian in Libya were still employed in industry or services, while tens of thousands of Libyans were integrated in the urban economy. On the eve of the Second World War, the colony combined two models of society: the urban model, very similar to that of the mother country, and a rural society based on demographic colonisation, organized into villages built on State land and composed of farmer families selected for their moral, political and physical credentials. The regime counted on the latter to achieve food self-sufficiency in the dominion

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<sup>9</sup> ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 70, Amedeo d' Aosta a MAI, 29/3/1940.

and to increase birth rates, in order to offset the steady decline of Italian births in the cities.

The Italian population in Libya had grown rapidly: from only 26,000 in 1927 to 44,600 in 1931, 66,525 in 1936 and 119,139 in 1939. The increase in the towns was even sharper: in 1929 there were 16,761 Italian settlers in Tripoli (25.6%) out of a total population of 65,688 inhabitants, and 7,901 in Benghazi (25.3%) out of population of 31,248; ten years later, they had increased respectively to 47,442 (42%) out of 113,212, and 23,075 (34.5%) out of 66,801, compared with an Arab population of respectively 47,123 (41.6%) and 40,331 (60.3%).

**TABLE 5**  
The population of Libya in 1939

Italians	119,139
Arabs	744,057
Jews	30,578
Total	893,774

Source: *Annuario generale della Libia 1940-41*, Tripoli, 1941.

**TABLE 6**  
The population in the main urban centres of Libya in 1939

	Italians	Arabs	Jews	
Tripoli	47,442	47,123	18,467	113,212
Misratah	1,735	44,387	977	47,099
Benghazi	23,075	40,331	3,395	66,801
Darnah	3,562	13,555	391	17,508
Total	75,814	145,396	23,410	244,620

Source: *Annuario generale della Libia 1940-41*, Tripoli, 1941.

In 1939, the Italians residing in the cities (Tripoli, Misratah, Benghazi and Darnah) numbered 75,814 (64% of the total Italian population), while 43,325 Italians lived in the demographic villages or elsewhere. Demographic settlers numbered some 41,000 (34% of all Italians), of whom 27,000 had immigrated in just two years, 1938 and

1939. In 1936, there were 28,701 Italian women (43% of the Italian population); in 1939, about 34,200 (29%). On the whole, the Italian population was young: one-third was under age 14 and only 2.4% were over 65. Single men made up 57.6% of the population, married people 39.2%, and widows 3.2% (Herkommer, 1941).

Economic and social transformations certainly contributed to the juridical and administrative reorganisation of the territory in 1939, whereby, at least formally, the coastal regions became Italian provinces and Libyans were eligible for a special kind of Italian citizenship, while only the Sahara remained a proper colony.

Until 1937, before the migrations of 1938 and 1939 increased the number employed in agriculture, most Italians worked in industry, the civil service or commerce. It was hoped that demographic colonisation, supplemented by indigenous agriculture and company-managed concessions, would speed up the growth in agricultural production. Up to April 1937, 840 farms had been set up by Italians. But the real revolution was represented by the planning and construction, between 1933 and 1940, of 36 rural settlements (villages),<sup>10</sup> of which eight were reserved for Arab colonists. The war intervened before all of these were completed. The colonisation programme was a tragic operation destined to have enduring repercussions on Libyan-Italian relations. The Libyan population living in the Cyrenaic Gebel was forcibly removed from the plateau and resettled on the coast. Italo Balbo, who only a few months later would oppose the regime's racial legislation against the Jews, wrote to Mussolini in summer 1938: "1. Gebel must be wholly assigned to Italian settlers; 2. Libyans should be allowed to raise livestock only in the specially assigned areas; 3. When the economic limits of Libyan livestock raising are reached, we must be ready with a suitable Libyan organisation on the coast that can attract any further Libyan demographic increase."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 70, Balbo to Teruzzi, 25/7/1938 and 4/8/1938.

<sup>11</sup> ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 70, Balbo to Mussolini, 4/8/1938.

The planning scheme of the villages was based on the traditional model of Italian rural centres, with a wide central space (the square) ringed by the town hall, the church, the Fascist Party premises, the police station, post office, surgery, consumer cooperative and an inn (Gresleri IV, 1993). The farmers' houses radiated from the centre into the surrounding area. The architectural style was essential, displaying the simplicity and functionality of design characteristic of modern rationalism. The visual impact, the whiteness of the villages contrasting with the blue sky, was remarkable and conveyed the impression of a new civilisation on the move. The first results of colonisation seemed to answer Mussolini's hopes for rising birth rates (De Nardo, 1942), yet it is doubtful that the model could have survived for long without constant and considerable State support. In 1939, in order to estimate the birth trends of Italian settler families in Libya, a survey was carried out on a sample of 1,458 mothers, to study their fertility and "productivity" (Casu, 1942). Altogether, these women had had 11,277 pregnancies, divided as follows: 9,708 deliveries, 181 premature births, 1,288 miscarriages, 100 pregnancies still in progress (De Nardo, 1942). The highest fertility rate was recorded for women from Lazio and Campania, the lowest for women from Lombardy. The survey, presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Scientific Meeting of the Italian Society for Demography and Statistics, also underlined that the coefficient of matrimonial fertility was rather high, a sign that the selection of prospective settlers had been rigorous and fully in keeping with Mussolini's desires. The first settlers redeemed the farms already in 1942. Germany studied Italy's demographic colonisation in Libya as a possible model for use in Russia (Schmieder and Wilhelmy, 1939; Herkommer, 1941).

The Arab population residing in the towns had also increased considerably. In 1939 there were 744,057 Arabs, of whom 145,396 (19.6%) lived in the four largest cities and about 51,000 (6.8%) in the Libyan Sahara (6.8%), while Libyan Jews, of Italian language and culture, numbered 30,578, of whom 23,410 (77%) lived in the four urban centres and as many as 18,647 (61%) in Tripoli alone.

Partly because of the cruel repression carried out by Badoglio

and Graziani in Cyrenaica, in just ten years the ratio between the Italian and Arab populations changed from 1:17 to 1:6.2, a figure comparable to the proportion of 1:5 between Europeans and Arabs in Algeria. Between 1931 and 1936, the share of the Arab population classified as residents increased to 84.2% (+9%), while those classified as semi-nomadic declined to 11.6% (-6.4%) and nomadic to 4.2% (-2.6%). In Tripoli, between 1929 and 1939, the Arab population increased by about a third; in Benghazi it practically doubled, from 20,255 to 40,331, and in Misratah it increased fivefold, from about 7,500 to 44,387.

Migration to the towns was undoubtedly determined by the collapse of agricultural prices and livestock raising during the Great Depression between 1929 and 1934. Many Libyans looked for jobs in the vast public works financed by the Italian government, such as the construction of the coastal road, of new settler villages and of military infrastructure, in urban building sites or in the other sectors – industry, commerce, transport – that were growing with the Italian population.

Until 1937, before the demographic migrations of 1938 and 1939 increased the number working in agriculture, most Italians were employed in industry and in the civil service. According to official estimates, in 1936 the employment distribution was as follows: industry 30.4%, public administration 29.8%, agriculture, hunting and fishing 16.7%, commerce 10.7%, transport and communications 5.8%, domestic work 3.8%, free professions and teaching 1.3%, credit and insurance 1.1%, others 0.4% (Morgantini, 1938).

In 1936, Tripoli counted 2,943 registered industrial enterprises (+136 compared to 1933), of which 1,158 were Arab-owned (+4), 968 Italian-owned (+121), 691 Jewish-owned (+7), and 126 foreign-owned (+4). The fastest growing sectors were building (+34), wood (+26), machinery and equipment (+22), textiles and clothing (+21) and transport (+10). Italians dominated the building sector, while Arabs surpassed them in the textile and food sectors, as well as in businesses linked to agriculture, most of which were small or tiny.

There were 7,915 commercial enterprises (+129 compared to

1933), of which 921 Italian-owned (+93), 5,384 Arab-owned (+7), 1,415 Jewish-owned (+24) and 195 foreign-owned (+5). Food retailing was the biggest sector, with over 57% of the businesses, of which 84% were Arab-owned; next came catering and hotels (13%), followed by second-hand shops (6%), shops dealing in yarns and textiles (6%), chemical products (3.1%) and art and antiques (1.3%).

A total of 1,779 industrial firms were registered in Cyrenaica in 1938 (Herkommer, 1941), of which the most numerous sectors were clothing (441), transport (314), food processing (197), machinery and equipment (194), building materials (186), sanitation and waste management (161), wood (139) and industries connected to agriculture (102). There were 7,279 commercial companies, of which 2,330 dealt in foodstuffs, 545 hotel and catering businesses, 523 dealing in yarns and textiles, 514 in livestock, 401 in chemical products, 207 in furniture, plus 168 sundry agencies, 132 art and craft workshops and 85 metalsmiths and machinery repair shops.

In 1936, the employment office in Tripoli recorded 3,971 Italian employees, of whom 3,007 in industry (1,593 in 1928) and 964 in commerce (123 in 1928). Most industrial workers were employed in building sites and mines (57.3%), metalworking industries (17.4%) and factories making furniture and household goods (9.3%), while most of the employees in commerce worked for wholesalers and shipping companies (57.5%), or in tourism-related businesses (36.2%). Wages were higher than in Italy, but by a smaller margin than in Italian East Africa, while the cost of living was slightly lower than in Italy, except for housing. Indigenous workers earned about a third less than Italians.

Some estimates can be made of the income distribution of the ethnic groups composing the population of Tripoli in 1937. The estimates are based on income from financial investments, commercial and industrial activities, professional businesses and craftwork. The tax office recorded 3,696 incomes as being above the minimum rates. Italians declared about 50% of the total income, Jews 30%, Arabs 15% and foreigners 6%.

The tax data confirm the inequalities of the Libyan economy:

**TABLE 7**  
Population of Tripoli aged 10 and over employed in industry  
and commerce on 21/4/1936, and business activities registered  
at the Economy Bureau on 30/6/1937

Ethnic Group	Population	%	Registered Businesses	%
Italians	6,044	28	1,826	34
Arabs	9,937	47	1,873	34
Jews	4,569	22	1,483	27
Foreigners	628	3	258	5
Total	21,178	100	5,440	100

Source: Author's calculations based on A. M. Morgantini, *Distribuzione dei redditi mobiliari nei gruppi etnici della popolazione di Tripoli*, Rome, 1947.

**TABLE 8**  
Income tax returns and incomes by ethnic group

	No. of Tax Returns	Income in Lire	Tax Returns (%)	Income (%)
Italians	1,271	8,095,141	34.39	49.31
Arabs	957	2,489,398	25.89	15.16
Jews	1,287	4,825,813	34.82	29.40
Foreigners	181	1,005,583	4.90	6.12
Total	3,696	16,415,935	100.00	100.00

Source: Author's calculations based on A. M. Morgantini, *Distribuzione dei redditi mobiliari nei gruppi etnici della popolazione di Tripoli*, Rome, 1947.

Italian enterprises were larger and produced the greater share of the colony's income, while most Arab businesses were small and generated modest incomes.

The number of Arab students enrolled in State schools was growing steadily, eroding attendance at Koranic schools. In 1939 there were 10,268 Arab students attending State primary, secondary and vocational schools reserved for them and 13,408 (57%) attending Koranic schools, with respective shares of 43% and 57%. Education was free of charge and the government provided students with books, educational materials, canteens and uniforms, thus encouraging the population to send their children to Italo-Arabic schools.

This produced some remarkable results. According to surveys carried out by the British Military Administration (BMA) after the war, about 70% of Arabs living in the cities could speak Italian, while it was estimated that 27% of all Libyans could speak at least basic Italian (Cresti, 2000). However, few educated Libyans had access to civil service jobs. Before the Second World War, the State employed 116 qadis, together with 257 clerical workers and 210 teachers. Only six Arab doctors and one lawyer had attended university in Italy.

Among the chief institutions through which Fascism exerted its influence were schools, the Fascist Party organization itself, and sports, leisure and cultural organisations. State primary schools were established wherever the Italian community was large enough (84 schools in 1939-40 with 12,000 pupils), while secondary schools were opened in main towns (10 schools with 3,100 pupils).<sup>12</sup> In 1939, there were also eight nursery schools attended by more than 800. The number of teachers increased from 670 in 1937 to 972 in 1938 (Contini, 1953).

In Libya, the Fascist Party played a key role as organiser of cultural and social life for the Italian communities. Overseas, local Fascist Party headquarters were not only “the temple of political religion” (Gentile, 1995) conceived by Mussolini, but also the institution that managed Italians’ leisure time through its collateral organisations. Italo Balbo, the governor, wanted to set up a football league where teams of young Italian Fascists and Arab youths from the GAL would compete, but Mussolini objected because this went against his racial policy.

Besides the Fascist institutions, there was an abundance of cultural, sports and military societies, which helped to regulate the colonists’ free time, organising all sorts of exhibitions, meetings, sports events, concerts and plays, festivals and parties, and often publishing their own bulletins and newsletters, just as in Italy. The most popular form of entertainment was the cinema. Some theatres,

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<sup>12</sup> ACS, MAI, b. 161, *Funzionamento scuole*.

like the one in Tripoli, and a few movie houses pre-dated the foundation of the empire, but after 1936 their number multiplied. Travelling theatre companies performed in the demographic villages. In November 1938 a new radio station, Radio Tripoli, was inaugurated in Zanzur, broadcasting programmes in both Italian and Arabic. The two capitals offered the settlers museums, public libraries and bookshops.

### **Conclusions: The Legacy of Fascist Autarky for the Italian Colonies**

Between 1936 and 1940 the conquest of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the Italian empire set in motion a radical transformation of economic structures in Italian Africa. Though the war put a sudden end to the most ambitious projects, the programmes of economic valorisation undoubtedly expanded the capitalist economy and significantly reduced the importance of traditional economic activities both in Libya and in Italian East Africa.

The most notable innovations were a huge increase in public spending, to build the towns and infrastructure necessary for economic development, and the start of regular immigration from Italy. In 1940, there were some 120,000 Italian colonists in Libya and at least 180,000 in Italian East Africa. Both factors helped widen the scope of the capitalist economy.

A large number of Italian civilians were employed by the public sector, but a good many also worked for private businesses in trade and industry. Two additional categories consisted of workers employed by the militia to build roads and other infrastructures, and immigrant families selected by the regime to populate its agricultural settlements in order to launch its demographic experiments. In Mussolini's view, the demographic colonists would increase the overseas empire's agricultural output and reduce its dependence on the mother country.

These policies had important consequences for the African pop-

ulation. Many natives abandoned subsistence agriculture to join the armed forces, while a considerable number found employment in Italian enterprises, both private and public. Their wages augmented the monetary economy and stimulated the diversification of consumption along European lines.

The growth of schools for Africans in Libya and Italian East Africa also testifies to the increasing number of persons who wanted to learn Italian. Some surveys carried out in the 1930s enable us to partially document the employment situation in Libya and AOI in the public and private sectors, for both Italians and Africans. We have also presented some estimates of the income distribution for the different ethnic groups composing the population of Tripoli in 1940. Unfortunately, it is impossible to offer similarly significant data for the other areas of the empire, but only a generic table of wage levels set by the colonial governments.

The acceleration of economic and social change was the outcome of the infinite possibilities available to a modern totalitarian regime to control and shape social structures directly, in a way inconceivable for any democratic government. The economy of the empire was artificially supported by the State. Following the onset of the Great Depression, Mussolini was convinced that the capitalist system, like liberal democracy, was doomed (Podestà II, 2011). Accordingly, the construction of Eurafrika proceeded rapidly in the years before World War II. But not even Mussolini could do without monetary policies. Italy had suffered from a constant haemorrhage of official reserves and had been forced to scale down its plans for AOI and Libya. This retrenchment was influenced by the winds of war in Europe, but by then it was plain that the empire could only exist with financial support from the State. However, in a totalitarian system such as Fascism, in which ideology was raised to the level of a political religion, and where form was therefore equivalent to substance, autarky and the empire played a primarily political role and were, in fact, put to good use by Mussolini to mobilise the Italian masses and build consensus for the regime.

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