

**Matteo Nardozi**, *La porta degli imperi. Il ruolo dell'Eritrea e degli imprenditori italiani in Africa orientale 1934-1953*, Edizioni Nuova cultura, Roma, 2024, pp. 398.

The history of the Italian colonial experience is one of the essential elements to understand the evolution of the country's domestic and international dynamics between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. After the seminal works by Angelo Del Boca, the subject has been progressively deepened by a broad and articulate historiography that has analyzed all its aspects, including the domestic political events, the Italian position on the international scenario and the relationship between the colonies and the homeland. In 2002, in the first edition of an essential text for those wishing to approach these issues, Nicola La Barca noted how the analysis of economic aspects lent itself to numerous possible paths of investigation. Since the late 1990s, in a context marked first by a renewed opening of Italian economic history to new international sources and fields of research and then by attention to the themes of "global history", several studies have deepened the economic aspects of Italian colonialism in its various declinations, geographies and periodization. A few significant examples include the research by Gian Luca Podestà, Donatella Strangio and other authors, as well as the attention given to these issues by the *Journal of European Economic History* in several specific contributions as well as in the monographic issue dedicated to the relations between Italy and Africa in the colonial and postcolonial periods edited by Gaetano Sabatini and Donatella Strangio in 2021.

Matteo Nardozi's volume fits into this line of research, with a focus on the history of the Italian entrepreneurial community in Eritrea in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century moving, – and this is an essential factor – from the connections between that specific event and the changes in the Italian and international political and economic context. The author's objective, as he recalls in the introduction, is to analyze "the dense network of interests and relations between the political authorities and the world of Italian business in the final phase of direct (during the colonial period) and indirect (during the British period in Eritrea) domination. The analysis is based on the study of Italian economic interests in East Africa, as a point of convergence of issues of local and international origin, with the aim of seeking new interpretative keys that could explain the difficulty of a complex political and economic process, in which private and public agents were protagonists, who moved within the complex game of turbulent international relations" (p. 16).

The case study of the Italian entrepreneurial community in Eritrea, in addition to highlighting little known experiences and events, becomes the key to understand Italy's role in the changing context of those years. The methodological structure of the volume highlights the solidity of the research, which is the result of the use of a large quantity and variety of sources, both quantitative and qualitative, found at the Historical Archives of the Bank of Italy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Italian Central State Archives and various other institutions, also in non-Italian sources. Another feature of the volume is the ability to constantly make the sources dialogue with literature and historiography. The extensive annotated bibliography inserted at the end of the text, in fact, in addition to representing a useful compass for anyone wishing to orient themselves in these themes starting from a transdisciplinary approach, is assiduously resumed in the various parts of the volume, enriching and substantiating the author's interpretations and reflections. Finally, from a methodological point of view, the volume is notable for the aspiration, declared by the author himself in the introduction and largely successful, to promote research in which the traditional – and in some respects obsolete – boundaries between the spheres of political history, economics and social changes are progressively broken down, with the result of enhancing the most fruitful and virtuous characteristics of economic history research in its own methodological dimension and its interdisciplinary nature.

This methodological approach allows Nardozi to present a picture of the Italian business community in Eritrea that goes beyond the purely important confines of the twenty-year period indicated in the volume's subtitle, placing the theme in a longer-term context in which the specificities of the Eritrean case become the lens through which to look at

the entire Italian colonial experience in the changing global scenario. There are three factors that enable the author to achieve this objective. The first concerns the ability to bring out and utilize the Eritrean “economic space,” both in reference to the Kingdom/Empire binomial to understand the Italian colonial strategies in the years of fascism, as well as with respect to the changing position of the Eritrean geo-economic space in the modifications of the international scenario. This attention to the “economic space” is intertwined throughout the volume with a careful use of chronology (second factor), which moves from the traditional periodization of the Italian colonial experience, only to find within it a further ramification starting from the impact of the Second World War. In this way, the author explains the changes and adaptability of the Italian entrepreneurial experience in Eritrea in the modifications of the role of this area from being the first-born Italian colony, to a point of expansion for the Fascist conquest of Ethiopia, to becoming an important logistic hinterland for the Allied advance in Africa after 1941. Within these two poles, between economic space and chronology, lie the elements of continuity and discontinuity and the moments of expansion and contraction of the Italian business community experience in Eritrea. First, before the conquest of Ethiopia; second, after the proclamation of the Empire, third, in the transition from Italian to Allied control after 1941; and finally, and no less importantly, in the choices of the post-World War II period, when the colonial question is linked, on the one hand, to the birth of the Italian Republic and the Peace Treaties and, on the other hand, to the contradictions with which the crisis of the British Empire was managed.

These themes represent the basic structure of a volume that, owing to its constant anchoring to the sources, is full of documents, information, analysis, data on the economy of the colony, the most interesting sectors of Italian entrepreneurship, the social and political reasons behind emigration to Africa, and the complexity of the relationships between the same community in Eritrea and the motherland within the general context briefly summarized above. For all these reasons, Nardozi's book succeeds not only in deepening aspects and characteristics of the colonial experience but also in offering a privileged point of observation on the history of Italy within the global history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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