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**Luciano Monzali**, *Guerra e diplomazia in Africa orientale. Francesco Crispi, l'Italia liberale e la questione etiopica*, Biblioteca di Nuova Rivista Storica, Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, Rome, 2020, pp. 154.

Luciano Monzali's engaging book retraces a fundamental page in the history of Italy and Italian colonialism in Africa at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: namely, the colonial policy of Francesco Crispi and the Ethiopian question. The efforts of liberal Italy to create a colonial empire of its own constituted an essential theme of the period. The desire to gain admission to the "club" of great powers that already had colonial empires was only one of the reasons that impelled the recently unified nation to commit itself, late by comparison with the other powers, to the realization of a colonial empire. Compared with the centuries-old commitment and global extension of the other powers, the Italian possessions were small indeed, and the creation of an empire marked only a relatively brief period. The last of the European

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<sup>24</sup> R. Nurske, *Problems of Capital Formation in Underdeveloped Countries*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1953, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, p. 50.

powers, a new and inexperienced nation, Italy first tried indirectly and then without intermediaries to acquire territories and assume the role of an imperial power, but only revealed its unpreparedness for the task it had set itself.

The author uses Italian archival sources and numerous French, British and German diplomatic sources as well as Italian diplomatic sources published in the series "Italy in Africa" and "Italian Diplomatic Documents" to examine the role of Francesco Crispi in the birth and maturation of Italian colonialism and analyse the diplomatic relations that allowed Italy to establish control over the territories of the Horn of Africa. The theme, studied by such eminent Italian and foreign historians as Angelo Del Boca, Raffaele Ciasca, Nicola Labanca, Irma Taddia, Gian Luca Podestà, and Jean Luis Miège, is taken up again here to further our understanding of the origins of Italian colonialism and provide a new key to interpreting the crucial period that was intended to sanction Italy's entry into the group of colonial powers. Luciano Monzali reconstructs the entire period of early Italian colonialism in Africa in six chapters. He analyzes all the phases of Italy's approach to imperialism, dealing first with the premises of expansion in the Horn of Africa, ranging from the late 1860s to the Italian defeat at Adwa in 1896, a traumatic breaking point that altered the entire Italian approach to colonialism. The first chapter focuses on the period from the late 1860s to the defeat of Dogali in 1887, which led to the fall, on February 8, of the government of Agostino Depretis. From the second chapter on, the author deals with the historical period that opened with the return to politics of Francesco Crispi, thoroughly analyzing the political and diplomatic relations and the military clashes between Italy and Ethiopia-Abyssinia from 1887 up until the military defeat of Adwa in 1896, which led to the resignation of Crispi and the definitive demise of his colonial policy. But the conclusion then reconstructs the perspectives that arose in the aftermath of Adwa. Italy elected to keep the possession of Eritrea, which was still considered a fundamental foothold for future expansion in the rest of the Horn of Africa. That is, the book

shows that despite Crispi's exit from the scene, the effects of his colonial policy continued to be felt under subsequent governments, so much so that his influence endured for decades. These themes were part of the background to the "Scramble for Africa," the imperialist race between the European powers for the partitioning of Africa, which had its apogee in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but did not end until the years immediately preceding the First World War. The figure of Crispi, which Monzali analyzes in detail, is decisive for the treatment of this important historical period, which for Italy was a time of dreams of conquest and bitter disappointment, owing above all to inexperience, the confusion of programs, and an inability to assert itself as a prestigious actor in the African theater. Furthermore, the role played by the European colonial powers, Britain and France, would prove to be fundamental to Italy's entry into the dynamics of imperialist partitioning. The author weighs all these issues in a reflection on the first period in Italian colonialism, which had a significant impact on the destiny of the Italian state and people as well as on the peoples whose territory was invaded. Italian colonial history was, indeed, characterized by lofty proclamations and "adventurous" policies that fed the concept of a poor expansionist policy, in territories lacking the natural resources that could enrich a country in search of international prestige. Italy, as the author shows, was a "fragile state in itself, weakened by deep regional divisions, economically dependent," which saw "participation in the process of carving up Africa and Asia as a way to protect its vital economic and strategic interests in the face of much stronger and more dynamic European Powers" (p. V). Italy basically differed from the other powers in history, resources and maturity. These problems and their repercussions on the approach to expansion produced a colonialism that ultimately relied solely on the art of diplomacy, and was thus without economic and social planning. Monzali can claim the merit of revealing these peculiarities, perceptible in the early years of the Italian experience in Africa, and providing an interpretation of the profound reasons that drove the Italian ruling

## BOOK REVIEWS

class to this enterprise and the effects of Italian colonial expansion in general.

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