The World Refugees Made

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Introduction
Mobile Histories

In 1958, Italian officials puzzled over letters received from the Unione Coloni Italiani d’Africa demanding a resolution of the outstanding problems of Italian “refugees” displaced from the region of Cyrenaica in former Italian Libya. The prefect of Verona, for example, requested information about this association in a telegram to the Ministero degli Affari Esteri (MAE). Bergamo’s prefect Antonino Celona sent the ministry a similar wire, noting “Unione Coloni Italiani Africa is unknown here. We beg you to furnish relevant details with which to identify this organization.”1 Answering Celona’s query, this study uses the experiences of Italians repatriated “home” in the wake of decolonization to trace both the genesis of the postwar international refugee regime and the consequences of one of its key omissions: the ineligibility from international refugee status and protection of those migrants scholars have labeled “national refugees” or, in contemporary parlance, internally displaced persons. Many historians have shared the prefect of Bergamo’s seeming ignorance about these colonists displaced by the end of empire. This has prompted one observer to characterize such repatriates as “Europe’s invisible migrants,” contrasting their relative scholarly invisibility to the intense interest in the immigration to the metropole by former colonial subjects.2 The irony is that, at the time of the events, many of
these population movements were highly—if selectively—visible at the level of diplomatic negotiations, in the press, and in the local communities that housed camps for such migrants.

Those prefects charged with matters of public security who sought information about the Unione Coloni Italiani d’Africa proved all too aware of the pressing need to resettle Italians from the former possessions. The officials’ incomprehension centered instead on the identity of this specific association precisely because a large and confusing array of advocacy groups for national refugees and repatriates already existed. Contrary to a popular belief that the presence and experiences of such migrants were erased or repressed in Italy, then, “what emerges is the sense that they were displaced.” In place of an assumed amnesia about Italian imperialism and its ending, *The World Refugees Made* focuses on a literal displacement and re-emplacement of that colonial past: the return of Italian settlers from the colonies and other *possedimenti* or possessions lost after World War II and their insertion into a series of political, classificatory/taxonomic, and built environments.

By the time Celona sent his telegram in 1958, Italian authorities and international actors had spent over a decade and a half debating the identity and refugee status of migrants from former Italian lands in Africa and the Balkans. These individuals came from the wide range of territories Italy lost with the defeat of fascism: Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia (after 1936 collectively known as Africa Orientale Italiana or Italian East Africa), Libya (first a colony and after 1938 incorporated directly into the Italian state), the Dodecanese Islands (a province or department rather than a colony), and Albania (a protectorate). With the 1947 Peace Treaty, Italy renounced its claims to its African colonies and Albania. It also ceded the Dodecanese Islands to Greece; the Tenda-Briga District of Piedmont, parts of Little Saint Bernard Pass in the Valle d’Aosta, and parts of the Val Roja in Liguria to France; the small concession of Tientsin or Tianjin to China; and the southern portion of Venezia Giulia to Yugoslavia. Another area of the contested Venezia Giulia region—which had been an integral part of the Italian state—was awarded to Yugoslavia in 1954. Finally, Italian supervision of a UN trusteeship over Somalia ended in 1960, effectively bringing Italy’s colonial era to a close. As a result of the transfer of sovereignty over these territories, as many as 425,000 Italians migrated to the Italian peninsula from the African possessions, over 50,000 from Albania, some 16,000 from the Aegean Islands, and up to 200,000 from Italy’s eastern Adriatic lands. Though modest in comparison to the approximately 6.2 million Japanese citizens repatriated from the former Japanese Empire or the some 11 to 12 million ethnic Germans expelled from Central and Eastern Europe in the immediate postwar, these flows out of
former Italian possessions had a significant impact at the local, national, and international levels. They stimulated extensive debate over what it meant to be Italian, to be a refugee, and what sort of Italy would house these national refugees.

As this study demonstrates, Italy served as a crucial laboratory in which categorizations differentiating foreign or international refugees from national refugees were worked out in practice, with consequences that resonated far beyond the particular time and place. Despite this, in histories of both refugee flows and decolonization Italy has represented an anomalous or peripheral case, at best. Even accounts dedicated to modern Italian history tend to treat these population flows as footnotes to the main events of the war and early postwar period: the 1943 deposition of Mussolini and subsequent armistice that divided the country into two governments and sparked a civil war that ended only in 1945; the 1946 institutional referendum that abolished the monarchy and established the Constituent Assembly that drafted the constitution for the new Italian Republic; the Peace Treaty of 1947 that delimited Italy’s new borders; the decisive electoral defeat of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) by Democrazia Cristiana (DC) in the general election of 1948; the extension of the Marshall Plan to revive Italy’s economy (1948–1952); the beginning of the “economic miracle” in the 1950s that transformed Italy into a mass consumer society; and Italy’s admission into the United Nations in 1955. All of these critical milestones, however, remained entangled with the protracted dismantling of Italian empire. The rhythm and tempo of repatriation from Italy’s lost possessions, for example, were conditioned by both international events and the exigencies of Italian domestic politics, even as these flows created urgent humanitarian emergencies on the Italian peninsula. A focus on refugees reframes the history of Italy’s emergence as a post-fascist republic in the early Cold War era.

The presence of displaced persons posed the complex question of who belonged—culturally and legally—in this territorially and politically reconfigured Italy. In the years immediately following the war, Italy housed a varied population of migrants from Eastern Europe, notably Yugoslavia, Poland, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union. Many of these individuals met the requirements for assistance as international refugees from the intergovernmental United Nations bodies: first the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, or UNRRA, in operation between 1943 and 1947; the International Refugee Organization, or IRO, that ran from 1946 to 1952; and finally the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, or UNHCR, which began its work in 1950. A variety of “voluntary agencies” (many of them faith-based NGOs) collaborated with the UN agencies in aiding these refugees. For
those who did not satisfy those requirements, the Italian state was often the only hope for assistance. Italy thus assumed care of those foreigners deemed ineligible as international refugees or labeled as “undesirables,” with many of these migrants housed in camps that after 1947 came under the aegis of the Amministrazione per gli Aiuti Internazionali (AAI) or the Direzione di Pubblica Sicurezza and, later, the Ministero dell’Interno. Italy also remained responsible for those considered its “own” refugees, that is, Italian nationals displaced from any part of Italy’s prewar territory. This reflected a broader division of labor that emerged out of the postwar encounter with displaced persons in Europe: national governments became responsible for their own displacees who remained within national borders, whereas those individuals who crossed an international border and met other criteria (notably persecution or well-founded fear of it) came under the care and maintenance of the UN agencies. In existence from 1938 to 1947, the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR) also cared for some displaced persons who could not return to their home countries; from 1952 on, the Intergovernmental Committee on European Migration (ICEM) played an important role in aiding “post-hostility” refugees, notably those from Hungary in 1956. This divvying up, in both practical and conceptual terms, of the task of assistance assumed that individuals who could claim Italian citizenship and had left a territory like Somalia or the Dodecanese Islands—even if owing to intimidation or fear—had not crossed an international border when they migrated to the Italian peninsula.

The 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, the guiding legal document for the work of the Office of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees created the previous year, codified the concept of the international refugee. In its origins, the convention was anything but a universal instrument of protection, for the most part covering pre-1951 European refugees. Article 1 of the convention defined as a refugee anyone who

as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. A subsection further clarified,
For the purposes of this Convention, the words “events occurring before 1 January 1951” in article 1, section A, shall be understood to mean either:

a) “events occurring in Europe before 1 January 1951”; or
b) “events occurring in Europe or elsewhere before 1 January 1951,” and each Contracting State shall make a declaration at the time of signature, ratification or accession, specifying which of these meanings it applies for the purpose of its obligations under this Convention.  

The Geneva Convention on Refugees thus placed temporal and geographic limits on who qualified as a refugee. In addition, individual states had the right to adopt the “geographic reservation”—clause (a) of the subsection—that restricted the refugees they would admit to those from Europe. Among the states initially exercising the reservation was Italy, which only abolished the reservation with the 1990 Martelli Law. Article 40 of the convention, the “territorial clause” (sometimes referred to as the colonial clause), also permitted signatory states to either extend or exclude the convention’s applications to their colonial possessions and overseas dependencies.  

Notably, the Geneva Convention excluded from its remit national refugees. Most German expellees, as well as Italian repatriates, technically fell under this category, defined by Article 1 Section E of the convention as an individual “recognized by the competent authorities of the country in which he has taken residence as having the rights and obligations which are attached to the possession of the nationality of that country.” This clause built upon, even if it did not prove synonymous with, understandings of the refugee enshrined in the constitution of the International Refugee Organization, whose work concluded as the convention and UNHCR came into existence.  

While various regional and national regimes of refugee management arose in the decade after World War II to cope with the problems of displacement occurring on a global scale, only the highly particularistic European one embodied by the convention became normative as international law. Together with European national refugees like Italian repatriates and ethnic German expellees from Central and Eastern Europe, the convention’s refugee definition omitted from eligibility a whole range of non-European refugees. These included those produced by decolonization in South Asia (the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947), the end of the British mandate in Palestine and the creation of Israel in 1948, and the influx of persons fleeing communist China in 1949 into the British colony of Hong Kong. In addition, the hikiagesha, Japanese colonial repatriates who arrived in the homeland as
refugees from Manchuria, Korea, and Taiwan as the consequence of mandatory repatriation carried out by Allied forces, had been excluded prima facie from this UN assistance regime. Later colonial repatriates, notably the European settlers from Algeria known as the pieds-noirs, also fell outside the terms of eligibility laid down by the convention. Only with the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees did the convention remove geographic and temporal restrictions on displacement. Nevertheless, the criteria of persecution and movement across an international border remained central to the definition of the refugee, thereby excluding so-called “economic” migrants as well as subsequent colonial repatriates like the Portuguese retornados. However imperfect, many of the international legal frameworks for assisting and managing refugees still in place today developed out of Europe’s extended refugee crisis in the 1940s and 1950s.

The parceling out of responsibility for the displaced and the construction of legal frameworks like that of the Geneva Convention on Refugees were achieved only through painstaking debates over how to classify the millions of people displaced by the Second World War and its aftermaths. This book reconstructs that story. Whereas much of the critical analysis of the convention has focused on the Eurocentric nature of its exclusions, the Italian case points up how the refugee definition also excluded many European displaced persons from recognition. As one of the premier scholars of international refugee law notes, after World War II “a consensus emerged that such national refugees were not ‘an international problem,’ and did not require international protection.” Yet achieving such consensus did not prove easy in practice, nor was it a foregone conclusion. In fact, “nothing in historical practice precluded bringing IDPS [internally displaced persons] within the scope of the [1951] Convention.” Not surprisingly, then, the question of how to classify displacees from Italy’s lost territories arose repeatedly and preoccupied a wide range of actors, including personnel with UNRRA, the IRO, the Italian government, the Vatican, and the British Military Administrations that governed former Italian territories in Africa and the Dodecanese Islands until their final disposition could be determined. Unpacking the Italian case thus highlights how laborious was the work at the foundational moment of the international refugee system to exclude from the international refugee category individuals such as those migrating from former Italian possessions, an exclusion rooted in the “turbulent days” of the war’s conclusion and aftermaths but also in the continuing postwar commitment of many European powers to colonialism. Heeding the call of legal scholars to take historical and “real account” of the refugee convention’s context, this study offers deep context and a critical prehistory. Doing so reveals how the
displaced themselves—like those petitioning under the banner of the Unione Coloni Italiani d’Africa—often challenged the categorizations applied to them as they navigated an emerging world of relief, assistance, and rights.

At the same time, as an Italian state defeated in war sought to regulate the movements of both “national” and “foreign” refugees into its territory, management of the displaced became a critical arena through which to reconstitute sovereignty and its instruments (notably citizenship). In the run-up to the 1947 Peace Treaty, for example, Italian officials insisted on the need to slow entry of Italian nationals from its former possessions, contrary to the recommendations and desire of the British who administered these territories. In 1947, the Italian government conducted a census and registration of aliens in its territory aimed at increased monitoring and control. This occurred in the same year as the treaty that many Italians saw as a humiliation imposed by the Great Powers but which also symbolized, paradoxically, the full restoration of Italian sovereignty after the war. In negotiations over the transition from UNRRA to the IRO, Italian authorities even threatened to pull out; this would have required, however, Italy to assume full logistical and, even more problematic, financial commitment for all foreign refugees in the country. By the time the IRO concluded its work in 1952, a joint committee composed of representatives of both the UNHCR and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of the Interior had begun to determine eligibility of international refugees, signaling Italy’s growing assertiveness in the management of foreigners on its soil. Simultaneously, assisting and integrating Italy’s own refugees of empire became part of a broader process to reclaim a sense of nation contaminated by fascism.

Decolonization and Refugeedom: The View from Italy

Throughout the nearly two decades in which Italian decolonization unfolded, Italian authorities uniformly insisted that Italy could barely absorb its own citizen refugees, let alone those coming from other states. At the same moment in 1958 that Italians from Cyrenaica were demanding from the Italian state the *qualifica di profugo* or rights as national refugees that had been codified legislatively in 1949 and 1952 (Law n. 51 of 1 March 1949 and Law n. 137 of 4 March 1952, respectively), the Italian state was engaged in a delicate dance with the UNHCR over the possibilities for foreign refugees to acquire citizenship. To this point, Italy had served merely as a transit country for foreign refugees awaiting permanent homes elsewhere. Italian authorities continued to insist that those seeking Italian citizenship provide “a certificate to the effect that they are freed from their nationality of origin
issued by the competent authorities of that country.” Not surprisingly, very few refugees could meet this requirement. Although for the UNHCR the issue appeared to be a small technicality that could be easily overcome, the relevant Italian authorities continued to drag their feet over the question until 1970. A strategy of bureaucratic inertia served as cover for Italy’s general unwillingness to become permanent home to foreign displaced persons.

The UNHCR had begun to press the question with the Italian government in the late 1950s in light of what one agency official, Ernest Schlatter, deemed the challenge posed by “those refugees who, for various reasons, cannot emigrate to other countries.” The UNHCR called for a campaign of “camp clearance” and integration to resolve the long-standing problem of all of Europe’s “hard core” or “hard to settle” refugees—those whose age, health, or political or ethnic identity rendered them undesirable to those countries accepting refugees as migrants. In 1959–1960, the United Nations sponsored the World Refugee Year (WRY) in recognition of the specific and enduring problems created by displacement in Europe during and after the Second World War, together with the broader challenges of displacement at a global level. In the preparations leading up to the WRY, Italian representatives on the ICEM’s planning committee continued to stress—as Italian officials had done since the waning days of the war—that Italy’s perennial problems of overpopulation and economic underdevelopment, together with the needs of Italy’s own displaced, limited the country’s ability to provide long-term refuge to the hard core. Ignoring the changed possibilities wrought by the growing postwar economic boom in Italy, these assertions repackaged older claims about Italian surplus population that had justified empire in the name of a “demographic colonization.”

Although the number of Italian nationals coming from Italy’s former possessions had tapered off by the time of the WRY discussions in the late 1950s, flows of Italian migrants to the peninsula increased from the newly decolonized states (especially Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt) of other European powers. These individuals left for the same combination of reasons that had motivated the national refugees from former Italian territories who preceded them: economic and social dislocation, legal difficulties created by the passport regimes of the new states, intimidation, expropriation, and even violence. In light of the continued needs of a wide range of Italian refugees excluded from the convention, Italian officials were no doubt pleased that the UN resolution establishing the parameters for the WRY offered a broad definition of refugee—one that went well beyond the legal requirements for UNHCR recognition—in order to highlight the staggering global dimensions and human costs of displacement. WRY organizers thus employed
a capacious understanding of refugee that dovetailed with the category of “displaced persons” (DPs) that became prominent during and after the Second World War.  

Employing now familiar tactics of humanitarian initiatives such as celebrity appeals, local grassroots fund-raising, and public information campaigns, the World Refugee Year raised awareness of the struggles of those denied international refugee status in places like Hong Kong, as well as the protracted nature of Europe’s post-1945 “displaced persons question” embodied by the hard-core refugees. The UNHCR, for example, commissioned booklets like Kaye Webb and Ronald Searle’s *Refugees 1960: A Report in Words and Drawings*, which offered brief portraits of the displaced individuals the authors met on their visits to refugee camps in Italy, Austria, and Greece. The pamphlet included a sketch of a little girl encountered in the transit camp of Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste. Singled out by the authors for its precarious living conditions and its large population of difficult-to-settle refugees (particularly those suffering from tuberculosis), this camp housed both foreign and national displaced persons who had made their way to Italy from the areas of Venezia Giulia ceded to Yugoslavia, as well as from Eastern Europe.

Like many refugee camps in Italy and beyond, San Sabba possessed a dark history during the war as a Nazi-fascist concentration camp. In the text accompanying their drawing of the young girl, Webb and Searle noted the irony of the camp’s postwar repurposing: “This child is one of many who wander about the cinder playground which was once the floor of a gas chamber.” Those cinderblocks at the Risiera di San Sabba became a literal meeting point of Italy’s national refugees and foreign displaced persons, revealing how in practice two populations and histories often treated as running in parallel actually converged in both time and space. San Sabba thus stands as a chronotope of the intertwined historical processes of Italian defeat, decolonization, and European forced migration(s).

Choosing the image of the child in San Sabba to grace the UN report’s cover, Webb and Searle drew upon a well-established iconography featuring children and women as quintessential refugees and objects of compassion. Yet even as they literally provided a face to that young refugee, the authors effaced her voice and individuality, noting, “When we tried to identify her after the drawing was made, no one knew her name and she never re-appeared. She was just another stateless child, a number on a card but having no individual existence.” In this book, I aim to reconstruct both the stories of those who became “a number on a card”—or a question mark on an official telegram to a ministry—and the processes (legal, organizational, and political) by which displaced persons were counted, evaluated,
and sorted into categories such as international refugee, national refugee, (colonial) repatriate, and (mere) migrant, as well as citizen.

*The World Refugees Made* thus charts the emergence of what Peter Gatrell has deemed “refugeedom,” focusing on a critical historical moment and geographic space where the modern international refugee regime coalesced. Representing “a capacious and also an insistent term,” the notion of refugeedom highlights mobilities together with a “specific category of humanity,” as well as “the changing manifestations of a ‘refugee regime,’ taken to mean the principles, rules and practices adopted by government officials and others in order to manage refugees, and the protection gaps in the system.”

Gatrell and other scholars of displacement have noted how the conceptual and classificatory boundaries employed in managing displacement have created persistent lacunae in our scholarly understandings of refugees, with refugees’ frequent social marginality mirrored in their marginality within mainstream historiography. Within accounts of modern Italy, not only refugee histories but even the much broader experiences of migration have remained surprisingly peripheral. This remains true despite the formative role played by outmigration in Italian history.

The last decade has, however, witnessed the growth of a specialized historical literature on displacement, particularly European population flows during and in the aftermath of World War II. Once-peripheral questions now sit at the center of both national and international histories. “Nonetheless, the emerging canon still has some notable and fundamental blind spots,” acknowledge Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch. These two key contributors to critical debates in refugee history admit, “Overall, there is still no consistent historiography that locates the many different kinds of refugees, migrants and uprooted people within a common framework.”

One of this study’s many aims includes putting together categories of migrants—foreign and national refugees—usually kept apart in order to probe both the processes and consequences in theory and practice of such conceptual differentiations. Doing this directs attention to those persistent “blind spots” that characterize relevant scholarly literatures, notably the entangled histories of foreign and national refugees (including colonial repatriates) and the longevity of Italian decolonization and its visibility at the time of events.

### Making Refugees: Critical Entanglements, Categorical Ambiguities

Although the modern refugee was largely a product of the First World War, it was in the aftermath of the twentieth century’s second global conflict that
the international regime of protection, relief, and regulation familiar to us today consolidated. This system differed in key respects from the first international refugee system centered on the League of Nations. Though the League did begin to codify refugee rights, these remained far from widely accepted; only eight states, for example, ratified the 1933 Convention on Refugees. As the League’s first High Commissioner for Refugees, the Norwegian polar explorer and scientist Fridtjof Nansen lent his moniker to the travel document known as the “Nansen passport” that facilitated travel for stateless people. The League’s work with refugees focused on Russians displaced by the events of the Revolution and survivors of the Armenian genocide, together with the Greek and Turkish populations compulsorily exchanged by the terms of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. In these instances, membership in a group (rather than having crossed a political border) determined refugee status prima facie. In the aftermath of the Second World War, by contrast, refugee recognition was accorded to individuals, rather than groups. This created time-intensive eligibility procedures in which “the individual evaluation of personal narratives became a predominant aspect of refugee selection.”

The events of World War II also produced a displacement crisis on a much greater scale than had the Great War, prompting organized assistance on a scale not seen in the interwar period. In 1945, Europe was a continent in ruins, literally and figuratively. By VE Day in May 1945, an estimated eleven million civilians in Europe had become refugees. This figure does not include the millions of prisoners of war, as well as the significant numbers of European refugees in other parts of the world, such as China. Displaced persons in Europe included Jewish survivors, individuals deported to the Third Reich as forced laborers, persons fleeing occupying armies or civil wars, and those whose homes had been destroyed by warfare. Within six months of the conclusion of the conflict, Allied military authorities (SHAEF, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) and the Displaced Persons section of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration had repatriated the majority of Europe’s refugees.

There remained, however, at least a million or so persons who would not or could not be returned home because they feared persecution. These displaced persons were soon joined by new refugees coming from Eastern Europe, including Jewish survivors fleeing pogroms in Poland, between eleven and twelve million ethnic German expellees, and those whom the US State Department would come to deem Cold War “escapees” from state socialism. In the face of these new refugee flows and the realization that Europe’s displaced persons problem had not disappeared, the International
Refugee Organization came into being in 1946, with the aim of finding new homes for those who could not return safely to their countries of origin. The IRO had a fixed term of five years, reflecting the misplaced optimism that the refugee crisis produced by the war and its aftermath was exceptional and finite. Likewise, the UNHCR that succeeded the IRO initially had a five-year mandate. The UNHCR, of course, ultimately became permanent, in recognition that refugees had become an all too regular feature of international politics.

Debates between 1945 and 1960 over just who constituted a bona fide refugee eligible for international protection point to a complex story, one that is as much about exclusions as it is about inclusions. This characterization challenges many broader histories of human rights, often depicted along a fairly linear path or in terms of circles of ever-widening inclusion. While the history of refugee relief and law should not and cannot stand in for all of human rights history, it does prove representative in many ways. Historian Daniel Cohen even goes so far as to characterize Europe’s DP crisis as a central moment in the post-1945 “human rights revolution.” In the case of refugee protections, though, we find a narrowing circle of eligibility worked out in practice through the successive efforts of UNRRA, the IRO, and the UNHCR, rather than the “history of progressive inclusion in the rights protection system through a series of successful struggles” usually ascribed to human rights genealogies. After initial reluctance to help Italians as an “ex-enemy,” UNRRA provided critical relief to the peninsula and assistance in repatriating Italians to their homes. By contrast, the IRO generally excluded from its remit Italians displaced to the peninsula. By the time the UNHCR came into existence, the distinction between international refugees and national refugees had hardened—as seen by its consolidation in the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees. The refinement of these eligibility procedures required a new bureaucratic apparatus of experts (translators, interviewers, placement officials), one largely filled by Anglo-American personnel, many of them women, in the first decade and a half after the war. At the same time, this management regime demanded local expertise, as well as cooperation with officials of the host countries.

The shift away from collective definitions and rights for refugees that underwrote these new regimes of expertise and management reflects the broader post-1945 redefinition of human rights as inhering in the individual rather than groups. The degree to which postwar human rights rested on this individualistic basis, however, should not be overstated, as collective categories such as gender and family remained inextricably built into what is usually taken as the quintessential expression of the individual focus of
human rights after the Second World War: the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). As we shall see, in both philosophy and practice, humanitarianism also reinscribed collective categories such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality. 40 The very notion of a refugee implies a certain inescapable degree of groupness. Status as a Jew in/from the former Nazi occupation zones, for instance, quickly became the grounds for automatic refugee status and a key exception to the requirement of individual determination of eligibility. 41

For those ultimately left out of the category of international refugee, like the displaced Italians at the center of this book, the classifications applied to them actually reinscribed notions of groupness—that is, belonging to a national community, however tenuous that nation might appear in the wake of catastrophic defeat. Yet the displaced in postwar Italy bore many labels and statuses beyond those of international and national. The term sinistrati typically referred to so-called “bomb-damaged” Italians internally displaced within the peninsula, “those persons whose homes were partially or completely destroyed by enemy action who lost most or all of their belongings, who did not leave their town of residence either voluntarily or through evacuation. In general they are crowded in with friends and relatives or are billeted in homes or shelters in their own community by local authorities.” 42 Italian authorities and international agencies alike sometimes distinguished these internally displaced Italians from sfollati or profughi—Italians displaced into the peninsula from territories no longer under Italian control, like Libya or Ethiopia. Sfollati and profughi alike might also qualify as profughi di guerra (war refugees) displaced by German occupation on the peninsula or in Italy’s Balkan territories. Such displacees were contrasted with rifugiati stranieri (foreign refugees), a broad term covering both those recognized as eligible for UN assistance and “undesirables”; the latter category included war criminals and collaborators. Before 1948, Jews transiting through Italy for clandestine passage to Palestine formed a significant portion of those foreign refugees. Yugoslavs, including supporters of the Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović and the Ustaša head Ante Pavelić, also crowded into the peninsula along with demobilized soldiers from the Polish army in exile. Many of these displaced populations were already present in large numbers on the Italian peninsula by 1943–1944, fleeing the German zones in the north and the Balkans. With its proximity to Yugoslavia and Albania by sea, the region of Puglia, in particular, hosted many foreigners. 43

The diverse personnel in charge of processing these arrivals often applied such labels in an inconsistent manner. Italians who had left their homes within the peninsula were sometimes deemed sfollati alongside their fellow
citizens who had come from beyond Italy’s peninsular borders. Foreign and national refugees alike might be labeled either profughi or rifugiati. Indeed, in 1947 the parastatal Comitato Nazionale per i Rifugiati Italiani (CNRI) came into existence to aid Italians from the lost territories; this committee would give rise to the Opera per l’Assistenza ai Profughi Giuliani e Dalmati (OAPGD), dedicated to helping Italian displacees from the eastern Adriatic. These entities thus used the terms profugo and rifugiato interchangeably for Italians from lost possessions. And both words—profugo and rifugiato—translate into English as refugee, though in certain contexts their Italian versions possess more technical or precise juridical meanings. Rifugiato, for example, typically denotes those who have fled or been expelled from their country. The relevant Italian laws of 1949 and 1952 instead defined profugo to include displaced Italian citizens with demonstrated need from Libya and Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI), from those territories over which Italy ceded sovereignty by the terms of the Peace Treaty of 1947, from foreign territories, and from parts of Italy impacted by war. Nonetheless, usage of these terms outside the legal realm remained labile. Furthermore, migrants from Italy’s lost Adriatic territories (technically profughi in legal terms) often referred to themselves as esuli or exiles, reflecting their hope for an eventual return to their homes.

The imprecision inherent in the vocabulary of repatriation further complicates our understanding of just what kind of migrants officials in postwar Italy were dealing with. Intergovernmental agencies like UNRRA, whose work with displaced persons focused on repatriation—return to countries of origin—employed a category that stressed the voluntary nature of this return migration. This contrasted with those who could not go home owing to persecution and therefore became classified as refugees. Both classifications ignored the troubling question of just what “home” or “country of origin” consisted in (the former colony? the metropole?) for repatriate settlers. Further confusing matters, Italian settlers who had been displaced out of areas like Libya or the Aegean Islands during the war often requested to repatriate back to the possessions at conflict’s end, a complicated situation of multidirectional migration. When humanitarian organizations like the International Red Cross (ICRC) offered impoverished Italians from Cyrenaica clothing and other assistance in the late 1950s, however, they did not classify these individuals as refugees but rather as repatriates, revealing that such organizations viewed mainland Italy as these migrants’ rightful homes.

In Italian, the category of rimpatriato translates to “return migrant.” This may refer either to individuals from the former colonies who “returned” to Italy or to those voluntary or “economic” migrants who came back to
the peninsula in the return migrations that typified Italy’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century mass migrations. The Italian concept *rimpatriato* thus overlaps with, even as it proves more expansive than, scholarly terminology that describes flows of colonial settlers to the metropole as “population refluxes” or mere “reverse migrations.” Such labels sidestep the contentious issue of whether such colonial migrations constitute something akin to the refugee experience. In the Italian case, then, the *rimpatriato* designation contrasts with that of populations like the *pieds-noirs*, European settlers who fled Algeria in the early 1960s and whose particular bureaucratic classification as *rapatrié* within France served to mark out their difference from other migrants, on the one hand, and metropolitan French citizens, on the other.

Whether in France or Italy or elsewhere in Europe, the migration of colonial settlers to the metropole provoked humanitarian and political crises similar to and often intimately bound up with the “emergencies” prompted by the arrival of foreign refugees. Skinner and Lester have underlined the need for research that captures the intersections of imperialism and humanitarianism, given “that the two phenomena are ultimately bound together in a series of mutually constituting histories, in which the ideas and practices associated with imperial politics and administration have both been shaped by and have in themselves informed developing notions of humanitarianism.” In heeding this call, this study examines a foundational moment in which imperial and humanitarian histories collided and proved mutually constitutive in the making of the modern refugee system. This challenges the common view that refugees became a global concern only in the 1960s after the resolution of Europe’s refugee question.

Precisely because 1960 stands as a key temporal marker in many accounts of refugee history, this study takes it as its ending point in order to problematize what has often seemed like a sharp transition. In a review of the history of the international refugee system, for example, Dennis Gallagher contends, “By 1960 the European refugee problem was greatly reduced in scale.” He adds, “However, refugee problems were burgeoning in other parts of the globe and new approaches were needed to address them.” One reason for the expanding refugee question beyond Europe, implies Gallagher, were the displacements attendant to decolonization. Of course, 1960 marked not only a World Refugee Year that celebrated the achievement of closing many of Europe’s camps, but also the “Year of Africa” in which seventeen African countries attained independence and the UN issued its “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.” Somalia numbered among those attaining independence that year, after a decade of an Italian-administered United Nations trusteeship. This actually marked
the end of formal Italian decolonization. The Italian case thus evidences how the displacements produced by the Second World War and by decolonization not only run on parallel tracks but also cross and entangle at many points, in contrast to a periodization that treats these as successive moments in a history of refugees. Nor does the simultaneity of such entangled displacements prove unique in the Italian case.

Decolonization processes in Dutch possessions began during World War II, as the Netherlands confronted the dual displacements created by Nazi occupation in the metropole and Japanese occupation in the Dutch East Indies. The defeat of the Japanese, in turn, resulted in rapid decolonization and the mandatory repatriation by Allied personnel of imperial settlers from Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria to the metropole. Lori Watt has detailed the clear linkages in Allied planning for handling displaced persons in Europe and Asia, noting that the US Special Committee on Migration and Displacement commissioned by President Roosevelt and in existence from June 1943 to November 1944 took operations in Italy in 1943 as its template or “prototype” for assistance to displaced persons elsewhere in Europe and Asia. In particular, the Inter-Divisional Area Committee on the Far East in the US State Department “suggested that the repatriation of Italians from East Africa might serve the U.S. military as a model for the Japanese.”

Some scholars have nonetheless dismissed the temporally inconvenient examples of Italy and Japan by deeming them “precocious” or “third-party” decolonizations. Such labels replicate the teleological narrative of decolonization that underwrites many histories of the “rise” of the global refugee and thereby obscure how the end of the Second World War already constituted a refugee crisis of global dimensions and one in which, as Watt demonstrates, “the American military became involved in facilitating the migrations of decolonization.” In many ways, too, the territorial and geographic clauses of the 1951 Refugee Convention represented “relics of the world of European colonialism.” Yet all too often in accounts that wrongly position the era of decolonization and the globalization of refugee crises as subsequent to Europe’s displaced persons crisis colonial repatriates disappear from the refugee story altogether.

Whereas refugees are by definition liminal (betwixt and between home and host country), colonial repatriates possess an additional classificatory ambiguity, placing them somewhere between metropolitan citizen and foreign displaced person. Repatriates fit uneasily into a whole range of conceptual paradigms: those of refugees and displacement, forced migration, and diaspora. The Italian case was further complicated by the ambiguous citizenship status of a number of these repatriates. While my discussion so
far has emphasized the conceptual dilemmas that produced scholarly blind spots around national refugees, the political dimensions of these populations’ reception in their putative homelands must not be overlooked. At the time of events, colonial settlers displaced to the metropole were not erased from view but rather served as uncomfortable reminders of repudiated pasts, what I deem “extruded” histories in recognition of the ways they can erupt painfully into public debate.54

Unlike their Dutch or French counterparts, Italian repatriates bore the burden not only of a problematic history of colonialism but also that of fascism.55 Rightly or wrongly, both non-Italian populations in the former possessions and metropolitan Italians tended to portray repatriates as enthusiastic agents of fascism. In this, the Italian repatriates proved most similar to the Japanese (as the Allied planners had recognized) and the Portuguese retornados from Angola and Mozambique who migrated after 1974 to a “homeland” only just emerging from decades of authoritarianism under Salazar. Many Italian repatriates also shared with their Portuguese counterparts a relatively low socioeconomic status, one reflective of an “emigrant nation” whose poor had hoped that the colonies would facilitate social mobility.56 As these comments suggest, Italian experiences of decolonization and refugeedom possess many analogues with other cases. This contrasts with the frequent claim by both scholars and Italian popular media that both Italy’s colonial engagements and their conclusion prove exceptional in the annals of European imperialism. In such a telling, Italian colonialism figures as belated and brief, its legacies limited by comparison with those of its European counterparts. The protracted migrations of Italian national refugees put paid to the myth of either a quick or easy decolonization.

A Long Decolonization? Presences and Silences in the Archives and Beyond

This nonevent is, precisely, the cultural effects of decolonization in Italy. The term nonevent suggests, indeed, that the lack of any traumatic severing of Italy’s colonial appendages has contributed to the lack of a full-scale national reevaluation of the country’s colonial past.


The characterization of Italian decolonization as quick, relatively unproblematic, and lacking the trauma associated with events like the Algerian or Indochina wars that marked the French experience proves widespread among
Italian and foreign scholars alike. Nonetheless, while the diagnosis of a mild “imperial hangover” for Italy suggests a benign process, such language hints at another pervasive bias that views returning colonists as undigestible bits of an unpalatable past. Gastric imagery of hangovers or refluxes suggests that with its regurgitation of settlers into the homeland, decolonization left a bilious aftertaste. Regurgitative images thus reveal a “conceptual anguish” that highlights “memory’s importance in self-definition.” Certainly, the arrival of over half a million national refugees in Italy between 1943 and 1960 left multiple traces, as this study evidences. How to conceptualize this history in light of the frequent assertion that the “uneventful” nature of Italian decolonization (epitomized by the work of scholars like Pinkus) resulted in collective amnesia?

First, we need to examine critically the notion of an abrupt and “precocious” process of decolonization in the Italian case. This notion of “precocity” refers to the fact that well before formal renunciation of these territories after World War II, during the conflict Italy had already lost effective control over its overseas colonies: East Africa in 1941, Libya between 1942 and 1943, the Dodecanese Islands in 1943, and Albania between 1943 and 1944. In the Dodecanese, Libya, and much of East Africa, the British Military Administration (BMA) temporarily governed the territories until their fate could be determined after the war. Article 23 of the 1947 Peace Treaty with Italy renounced Italian claims to its colonies but did not provide for their final disposition. This led many settlers and metropolitan Italians alike to hope that Italy might retain special relationships with, or even trusteeships over, several of the African territories. In particular, it led to protracted negotiations over Libya. Even after Libyan independence in 1951, it took another five years for the new state and Italy to conclude bilateral accords settling a wide range of contentious issues, including the properties in agricultural villages created for Italian settlers under fascism. In Eritrea, the BMA ended only in 1952 with the advent of federation with Ethiopia. Somalia, by contrast, would remain under a UN trusteeship administered by Italy until 1960. In reality, then, Italy’s African territories did not attain independence (de jure) during or even in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Contrary to claims about its “precocious” nature, Italian decolonization actually does not prove an exception within the general chronology of European colonial exit. In light of these extended engagements, Italian decolonization—whether understood in the more conventional terms of diplomatic history or the decentered histories of Italian outmigration from the former territories—appears as anything but quick, easy, or early. It was also highly uneven, a reality highlighted by this study’s very structure. Rather than aim
for uniform chapters, I have embraced units of varying length in recognition of the distinctly irregular tempos and rhythms of repatriation attendant to Italian decolonization.\textsuperscript{61}

Reframing and reperiodizing Italy’s contraction not as precocious but rather as a “long decolonization” thus proves productive here. Drawing on recent historical reevaluations of decolonization, this phrasing takes its specific cues both from Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar’s argument that scholars have failed to adequately account for the spatial and temporal processes involved in India’s “long partition” and Nicola Labanca’s discussion

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{map.png}
\caption{Italian territory in 1961 at the close of formal decolonization. Map designed by Mike Bechthold.}
\end{figure}
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of the challenges in (and multiple possibilities for) defining Italian decolonization. In his pioneering work on Italian colonialism, Labanca has argued that “decolonization is never finished, especially on the cultural level.” Elsewhere, though, Labanca deems the Italian experience a “strange decolonization,” a phrasing that I reject, given its implication of the deviation from a standard or normative decolonization. This wording repeats the trope of anomaly or exceptionalism prevalent in other scholarship on Italian colonialism. One might instead view the Italian case as another instantiation of what Akiko Hashimoto has called “the long defeat.” Though focusing on Japan, Hashimoto calls for understanding such protracted defeat in a global comparative context.

Scholars’ tendency to focus on the formal, diplomatic aspects of empire’s end in Italy has reinforced a reductive or even dismissive view of Italian decolonization, ignoring the many cultural and social reverberations of colonialism’s end. The myth of a decolonizzazione mancata has thus joined those of the rivoluzione mancata and the conquista mancata. Yet Jordanna Bailkin’s reasoning for recasting decolonization in broad terms for Britain proves equally valid for Italy. “I am not arguing that Britons were especially knowledgeable about the end of empire,” writes Bailkin. “Rather, the consequences of imperial collapse were built into the structures of their world. Decolonization changed how people in Britain lived whether they knew it or not.” In Italy, decolonization manifested itself in everything from rearticulations of citizenship to a diffidence toward foreign refugees and migrants to the remaking of the built environment—whether Italians knew it or not.

Framing decolonization in this way emphasizes a politics of selective recognition, as well as nonrecognition, rather than either an active erasure or a wholesale forgetting. The anxious tendency of “looking and looking away at the same time” characteristic of postwar Germany proves true for postfascist and decolonizing Italy as well. The tight control exercised by the Italian state and a colonial lobby over colonial archives for several decades after World War II is often invoked as evidence for both the amnesia and imposed forgetting theses. A 1952 interministerial decree established the Comitato per la Documentazione dell’Opera dell’Italia in Africa. Restricting access to the materials of the Ministero dell’Africa Italiana (Ministry of Italian Africa or MAI, closed definitively in 1953) and seeking to control the narrative of Italy’s colonial experience, this committee—in existence until 1984 and functioning as the “‘custodian’ of official memory”—produced forty volumes of dubious scholarly quality. Without a doubt, the efforts to regulate access slowed, but did not halt, the development of a critical historiography on Italian colonialism in Africa. Nor did this committee prevent former settlers
and national refugees from Africa from making their own claims, publishing memoirs, or organizing themselves in associations like the Unione Coloni Italiani d’Africa. As far as I know, no similar archival custodians of memory existed to police and discipline study of Italy’s other possessions in the Balkans, though the geopolitics of the Cold War weighed heavily on the remembrance and analysis of such experiences.

In any case, the dispersal of documentation continues to pose logistical challenges to scholars studying Italian colonialism and its afterlives. This remains true even with the opening up of access to MAI’s documentation on deposit at the Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE) and the recent availability of the records of the Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale (INPS) for its colonial entities in Libya and the files of the Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (PCM) for the Ufficio per le Zone di Confine. Access to relevant documentation in the former possessions was sometimes impossible, as in the case of the Italian materials at the Albanian Central State Archive in Tirana that became available only after the end of state socialism there. The fifty-year embargoes placed on most archival documents in Italy (with a seventy-year ban for materials containing sensitive personal information, such as medical records) have further slowed historiographic undertakings, as have pressing resource questions (particularly funding for archivists to catalog material and to staff consultation rooms). Staff in several specialized institutions in Italy where I consulted documents urged me to hurry my efforts, since they did not know whether their contracts would be renewed (with subsequent temporary closure of the archive). The most dramatic example occurred with the 2011 closure and liquidation of the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (ISIAO). When I worked in the State Archive of the Dodecanese in 2010, I likewise found Italian-era materials that had suffered from water damage and mold, a consequence of Greece’s severe austerity crisis and cuts to cultural institutions. In a very real sense, then, the decolonization of the archives in and of Italy has proven as long and complex as the broader political and cultural processes of decolonization, and it is still under way. As Bailkin has urged, “Conceiving of decolonization as an archival event can enrich our understanding of its diverse histories and give it a new multidimensionality.” Such a perspective recognizes greater nuance than that of mere forgetting / enforced forgetting.

The so-called “archival turn” has encouraged scholars to think ethnographically about archives, treating them as both event and process. Ann Laura Stoler, in particular, reminded scholars that archives prove important repositories not only of content but also of form—as sites where “colonial sense and reason conjoined social kinds with the political order of colonial
In tracking down evidence of the complex intertwining of displacement, decolonization, and the emergence of the postwar international refugee regime in Italy, I have considered archive-as-subject, as well as archive-as-source. Thus, I have seen the archive in both ethnographic and “extractive” terms. When working in institutes with their origins in colonial-era collections, such as the Istituto Agronomico per l’Oltremare (IAO, the Overseas Agronomy Institute, formerly the Istituto Agricolo Coloniale Italiano) in Florence and the now defunct IsIAO in Rome, I was struck by literal questions of form—that is, how the architecture and physical organization of these institutions gave clear expression to their colonial logics.

Dusty botanic and zoological specimens from long-ago colonial expeditions line the halls of the IAO, evidence of old colonial taxonomies that live on in the mission of this branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs today dedicated to agricultural development abroad. The tropical plants raised at IAO bring to mind Kew and all those other imperial botanical gardens that blended questions of beauty with utility, science with sovereignty, pleasure with power. The former IsIAO’s building instead featured colorful, wall-size colonial-era maps with airplanes and naval liner routes marking out the
distance between the Italian peninsula and its colonial cities. Symbols of a lost imperium, these maps were relegated to a storage area near the bathrooms. For a country that is supposedly amnesiac about its colonial past, then, such spaces resemble nothing more than museums to Italy’s lost empire, even as they encode considerable ambivalence toward that past.

Italy does not possess a central archival repository specifically for the colonial possessions akin to France’s Archives nationales d’outre-mer, an issue of form that reveals much about the selective visibility of Italy’s imperial legacy. Nonetheless, the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS) and the Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri house many relevant collections essential to the study of Italian colonialism and decolonization. These two archives reside in buildings built in the fascist monumental style. The ASDMAE is found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs complex adjacent to the Foro Italico, built by the fascist regime and repurposed for the 1960 Rome Olympics. The ACS instead occupies a prominent place in Rome’s EUR quarter, begun in celebration of fascism’s achievements but completed only after the war (and a site of resettlement for national refugees). Mia Fuller has wryly noted that after fascism, the EUR neighborhood “became the repository for yet another ‘end’ of history: the state archives, where scholars have tried to make historical fragments into smooth, new narratives.” In a very real sense, then, Italy’s imperial past hides in plain sight, its archival traces assembled in structures that owe their existence to fascism’s expansionist project.

As these comments about Italy’s most prominent state archives remind us, Stoler’s prescriptions to treat archives ethnographically go well beyond the colonial realm and alert us to both the epistemological assumptions and workings of power inscribed in all archives, as well as the production of historical knowledge more generally. Yet whereas all histories therefore necessarily encode silences and prove inevitably fragmentary, histories of both decolonization and refugees/displacement arguably pose greater methodological challenges because of the frequent silences and wide gaps in the making of both sources and archives. Certainly, these archival gaps have contributed to the mistaken belief that Italian decolonization and the arrival of national refugees in the metropole went largely unnoticed or possessed little reverberation at the time of events.

In many instances of decolonization, departing colonizers deliberately destroyed archival documents, or archival documents perished as collateral damage. In the Italian case, decolonization’s beginnings within the context of the Second World War meant that bombings or occupation destroyed or reduced any number of documentary repositories. In 1955, for example,
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a search for relevant materials from the Amministrazione Governativa Centrale di Tripoli was made. The archive was said to have been definitively lost, having been sent to the recycling mill (macero) in the summer of 1944 during the British occupation. Filiberto Sabbadin claims that most of the other relevant documentation of the communal administration of Italian Tripolitania was likewise destroyed or lost through neglect. Similarly, the central archive of the Società Dante Alighieri in Rome—a cultural organization that sponsored branches in both Italian territories and diasporic communities alike—proves highly uneven, the building having been occupied by German forces during the war and some files lost or gutted. The fate of some Italian-era materials left behind in former colonies that have experienced civil war like Libya or Somalia likewise remains unknown. A number of collaborative Italo-Libyan projects had been launched before the events of 2011 disrupted communications. In Eritrea and Somalia, the destruction of archives in war has complicated efforts by mixed-race children to attain Italian citizenship; in many instances, too, records of birth were not registered in the first place, a silence encoded at “the moment of fact creation (the making of sources).”

The precarity of archives in both Italy and the former possessions has also meant that once-available documentation has actually become less accessible. For example, large chunks of the archive of the Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia (ECL), one of two parastatal entities that administered rural settlements in Libya, remained unavailable until recently. Historian Federico Cresti made a detailed study of the ECL documentation before its transfer to the Central State Archive in Rome. He also published an inventory of that documentation, an inventory that drew on the original categories and classification system of the ECL itself. Inventory in hand, in March 2011 I approached the archivists at the Central State Archive, who seemed puzzled by what sounded like well-ordered files, including ones explicitly labeled “Repatriation.” Venturing into the depths of the ACS basement, an archivist and I disappointingly found only a few dust-caked boxes containing accounting books (contabilità) and some dossiers from the settlement at Baracca. Most of the documentation has now become available, though bearing classificatory logics different from those used by the ECL or in Cresti’s pioneering study of the ECL.

Similarly, when I made the first of two visits to the State Archives of the Dodecanese in Rhodes I came armed with information from a colleague who had worked there that a catalog in Italian existed and could be easily consulted on the computer. Since my colleague’s visit, however, the Italian-language and Italian-era records had undergone recataloging in Greek. This exercise in rearchiving appeared to have followed out of a careful reordering and study
of the documentation to ascertain whether Italy had exercised sovereignty over the islets of Imia/Kardak (contested between Greece and Turkey since 1996) and thus had transferred it to Greece by the 1947 Peace Treaty. The Italian documentation had thus become caught up in postcolonial projects of Greek and Turkish nation-building and sovereignty. In searching for documents on movements in and out of the islands, the archive’s director Eirini Toliou patiently translated key terms (“repatriation,” “citizenship,” “migration”) into Greek after I had translated them from Italian into English (our language of communication at the time; she has since learned Italian). All this made for a much slower and opaque process of archival digging.

In my exploration of the interregnum in the Dodecanese between Italian rule and union with Greece, much of the relevant documentation came from records of the International Red Cross, which had visited the islands during the famine winter of 1945 and again after the war’s conclusion. UNRRA also sent a mission to the Dodecanese, and that material—housed primarily in the UN archives in New York—proved invaluable in reconstructing the story of Italian repatriation out of the Isole Egeo, as well as out of Albania. In fact, the records of international organizations like the ICRC and the UN intergovernmental organizations yielded critical data on Italian nationals and the process of Italy’s departure from its overseas possessions. Tacking between the archives of state institutions (Italian, as well as those of the British who administered these former territories and of the now independent states themselves) and international organizations helped me fill critical gaps in the story. In this, I followed the example of scholars like Bailkin, who has demonstrated the value in turning to sources not typically associated with decolonization, such as welfare records or debates over foster parenting in Britain. Going against archival and historiographic convention in order to discover “‘information out of place’”—such as the insistent demands by and about Italian repatriates and national refugees in the files of UNRRA and the IRO—reminds us that “the failure of some kinds of practices, perceptions, and populations to fit into a . . . ready-made system of classification—may tell us as much or more” than the consensual archival categories.

Indeed, by its nature, decolonization—like displacement—refers to processes or states of transition, ones that may not necessarily be legible within the logics of archival cataloging. Tony Kushner has argued forcefully that historians have generally failed to take account of refugees more for ontological than epistemological reasons—not because of source difficulties but because of an “enforced and absolute absence coming out of discrimination, exclusion and expulsion.” While seconding Kushner’s verdict regarding historians’ relative lack of engagement with refugee questions until recently,
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Gatrell nonetheless points ways forward that underline challenges precisely with sources. In offering solutions, Gatrell reminds us, “there is also a conversation to be had between historians and refugees themselves,” something I have taken to heart in my own ethnographic research in this book and elsewhere. The ethnographic research for this study centered on communities in Italy designated for refugee resettlement.

Returning to the question of written sources, refugee histories often don’t present themselves neatly as such in terms of the archival classifications common to state institutions. Furthermore, tracking migrants frequently requires following them through multiple archives—in those moments when their tracks actually became traces. Because the sites of refugee camps are usually transient, the literal infrastructures of many refugee histories were typically dismantled soon after the time of events. In postwar Italy, as in much of Europe, authorities frequently repurposed military structures, internment camps, or even concentration camps (like the Risiera di San Sabba) to house displaced persons. Memorials at those sites may recall their earlier usages, privileging wartime histories of violence over refugee stories. When the Italian state declared the Risiera di San Sabba a national monument in 1965, for example, the refugee camp that had existed there for nearly two decades was disassembled and the Nazi camp carefully reconstructed. I visited the Risiera in 2002 with a former national refugee from Pula/Pola who had not returned there since her family immigrated to the United States in 1958. She marveled at how different the space looked, particularly as sites of sociability where she had played as a child like the dining hall had been returned to their role as wartime cells. Similarly, the notorious concentration camp at Fossoli—from which departed the train deporting Primo Levi to Auschwitz—later became a camp housing first foreign and then national refugees. Refugees from Italy’s lost lands in the eastern Adriatic succeeded in 2011, after years of lobbying, in having a small plaque placed within the confines of the camp to acknowledge their experiences in nearby Carpi and the Villaggio San Marco. Nonetheless, Fossoli remains best known for its role as a fascist-Nazi camp, highlighting once again the selective and shifting visibilities of Italy’s postwar refugee histories. The museum at the former refugee camp at Padriciano on the Triestine Karst, by contrast, instead focuses on the histories of Istrian-Julian-Dalmatian refugees who lived there to the exclusion of the foreign displacees who replaced them as camp residents in the 1970s.

In light of their fragmentary and processual natures, refugee and decolonization histories alike may thus pose particularly acute, if not necessarily unique, methodological challenges. In considering the displacements of
Italian decolonization as gap-ridden, it is useful to reconceptualize gaps as not just erasures or absences but as generative spaces that may encode surfeits of meaning.89 The World Refugees Made makes a case for the generative nature of refugee studies in general and histories of the displacements of decolonizing settlers and national refugees in particular. Heeding the admonitions of Stoler and others, this book draws on an archive of my own synthesis and creation, fashioned out of many documents and accounts and traversing many gaps—one that involves “attention to new kinds of sources, but also to different ways of approaching those we already have, different ways of reading than we have yet done.”90 My hope is that this will inspire research into the many histories of national and foreign refugees in the era of Italy’s long decolonization still waiting to be told.