The World Refugees Made

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Chapter 1

Empire as Prelude

A specter haunted Italian nation building and the imperial histories entwined with it: the emigrant, emblem of a poor country’s inability to provide for its citizens.


Migration has proven paradoxically both central and peripheral to accounts of modern Italy, a state defined in many ways by its long experience as an “emigrant nation.” Italians seeking opportunities abroad in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries participated in the largest single voluntary migration in global history, in which some twenty-seven million individuals departed between 1876 and 1976, often leaving and returning to the peninsula multiple times in a pattern of circular migration.

From almost the beginning of its existence the Italian state had preoccupied itself with protecting its emigrants, on the one hand, and seeking to contain the potentially disruptive effects of migration, on the other. Italians who moved to Italy’s overseas possessions numbered among these “voluntary” migrants, even if their return movements differed significantly from those of fellow citizens returning to Italy from countries like Argentina or the United States similarly classified as rimpatriati. The term coloni or colonist mirrors the linguistic imprecision of rimpatriati, discussed in the introduction, dissolving distinctions between Italian emigrants to third countries and settlers in Italian overseas territories, as well as Italian “pioneers” on fascist projects of land reclamation within the Italian nation-state.

Although they represented only 2 percent of Italians who left the peninsula,1 Italians from former possessions who repatriated demanded a higher and more visible level of state intervention than other returning citizens.
Symbols of defeat, repatriates from the lost possessions also bore an ideological freight absent in the case of idiosyncratic return migrations made by individuals in non-Italian host countries. As life for Italians in former territories in Africa or the Balkans became untenable, the Italian state found itself tasked with humanitarian and political responsibilities defined in contradistinction to and in dialogue with those assumed by the postwar intergovernmental refugee regimes. At the same time, however, the Italian state’s response to flows from the lost possessions involved nongovernmental and intergovernmental actors—often in novel ways.

The protracted and costly experience of dealing with its own refugees from the former territories also informed Italy’s restrictive policies regarding resettlement and naturalization by foreign refugees until the end of the Cold War (see the introduction). This long-standing juridical diffidence to foreigners echoes in contemporary debates over today’s newcomers to Italy. Many scholars have remarked on the connections between Italy’s emigration past and immigration present, though they often treat the journeys of Italian emigrants as mere analogues to the dangerous Mediterranean crossings made by migrants who wash up on the shores of contemporary Italy. As Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti put it, “Although separated in time, yesterday’s migrant who abandoned rural life in southern Italy for Buenos Aires, and today’s migrant abandoned on a beach in Puglia or Lampedusa are part of the same historical constellation.” Invoking Walter Benjamin’s concept of constellation, Chambers and Curti embrace an understanding of history that “does not necessarily favour the established notion of linearity. Nor does it favour the notion of processuality or chronology of history as such.” Unexpected juxtapositions thus work to illuminate and translate common experiences, in this case of migration, and provide the grounds for possible future solidarities and empathy. Teresa Fiore employs a similar method when, in her analysis of the “pre-occupied” spaces in which current migrants to Italy come to reside, she employs Italo Calvino’s metaphor of an imaginary “one point” to foreground spatial linkages between past and present movements.

These literary scholars rightly question and complicate narratives of both outmigration and colonialism that operate “according to a temporal paradigm” that encodes an “apparent sense of historical completion,” instead highlighting their open-ended legacies and potential for textual recombinations and remappings. In doing this, however, these scholars risk conflating Italian mass emigration and contemporary mass immigration to Italy without acknowledging a key historical moment of transition and connection between them: the migration out of the former Italian colonies of subjects
who could make claims to both Italian citizenship and (national) refugeedom. This tendency to analogize Italian emigration and current immigration to Italy is encapsulated in the popular tagline, “Quando noi eravamo gli albanesi” or “When we were the Albanians”; the Albanians in question are those migrants whose boats overwhelmed the ports of Brindisi and Bari in 1991. Derived from the subtitle of journalist Gian Antonio Stella’s best-selling account of Italian emigration L’Orda, this notion gestures to experiences of stigma, discrimination, and hardship uniting past and present migrants. Telescoping between “us” (Italians who left the peninsula, prototypically for la merica) and “them” (Italy’s new arrivals, many of them non-European), however, neglects the critical function played by colonial repatriates in mediating this “us” and “them” in both a legal and cultural sense. It also ignores the reality that in the aftermath of the Second World War, Italians not only confronted “immigrants” in the form of foreign refugees but also resolutely closed the door on large-scale naturalization. Fiore goes so far as to praise Calvino for anticipating the future with his story “All at One Point,” penned in the mid-1960s when the country “was not yet affected by the arrival of immigrants.” Yet what Fiore posits as a future development—the flow of non-Italian migrants into the peninsula—was by the mid-1960s actually a very recent past. As this study evidences, the history of refugees—together with that of empire—thus constitutes a critical connective tissue linking Italy’s emigration pasts and immigration presents both spatially and temporally.

The multidirectional flows of Italians between Libya and the Italian peninsula during the war and the early postwar period illustrate the explicit “preoccupation,” to adopt Fiore’s term, of contemporary spaces of migration by Italian settlers and repatriates. In June 1940, the fascist regime ordered a mandatory evacuation of Italian children from Libya. With the war’s conclusion, some children began to rejoin family members who remained in Africa. By 1946, with an eye to the delicate question of the future territorial disposition of the country, the British Military Administration governing Libya suspended reentry of Italians. As a result, clandestine immigration to Tripolitania by Italians—particularly young people—became a persistent problem for the BMA. The Sicilian city of Syracuse served as a well-known departure point for these Italian migrants, who traveled in small boats to unmonitored points along the Libyan coastline and risked deportation if apprehended. Prefiguring the arrival of clandestini to Italy’s shores from North Africa today, this history underscores the very recent reversal of flows across the Mediterranean in the Italian case. Few Italians are aware of, let alone appreciate, the irony that not so long ago they constituted the “illegals” in those very same
Libyan spaces where at the beginning of the twenty-first century potential migrants to the Italian peninsula were immobilized. Bilateral agreements with the Gadhafi regime had facilitated the removal of migrants from Italian locales such as Lampedusa to Libyan detention centers or, alternatively, the preventive detention of migrants in Libya before they ever reached Mediterranean shores. Here, then, the experience of Italian national refugees after World War II does not just prove analogous to that of today’s immigrants (“when we were the Albanians”) but rather constitutes a direct historical antecedent.

Recognizing and taking account of these deeper histories of migration—histories that intersect with the wider streams of population movements reshaping Europe and the globe in the aftermath of the Second World War—suggest the need for a notion of what I call *oltreitalie.* In Italian, the prefix “oltre” means “beyond.” Demographic studies of migratory flows from Italy frequently employ this label to differentiate those who emigrated beyond the sea (*oltremare*) from those who went beyond the mountains (*oltremontane*)—that is, within Europe. Under fascism, the term *Oltremare d’Italia* or *L’Italia Oltremare* signified Italy’s wide range of possessions and the imperial space within which movement no longer constituted emigration but rather internal or domestic movement. The notion of *oltreitalie* captures these associations—and many others. While in dialogue with the concept of *altre italie* (other Italies) that lends its name to a journal and research center, *oltreitalie* nonetheless sidesteps the problematic ways in which *altre italie* continues to define itself in relation to and as a kind of adjunct of a “standard” Italy. Leaving in place the notion of a normative Italy, the concept of “other Italies” risks reproducing the marginality of emigrants/migration within national historiographies and literatures. The vision of *oltreitalie* aims, then, not merely to pluralize an understanding of Italy but also destabilize and decenter it, just as the figure of the refugee decenters histories of the postwar period in Europe and beyond.

By reframing Italy in this way, I follow the lead of scholars like Donna Gabaccia, whose work demonstrates that Italian (nation-)state making—and, I would add, empire building—can only be comprehended through transnational perspectives that take into account global Italian migration. At the same time, Gabaccia cautions that “while their lives were transnational, the ‘italiani nel mondo’ did not form a ‘nation unbound,’ or a ‘deterritorialized nation state.’” Space and territory proved central to Italian visions of nation, empire, identity, and mobility. Indeed, *The World Refugees Made* builds on the insight of the “new imperial history” that the national/metropolitan must go beyond and be read through the imperial and vice
versa. At the same time, the study aims to go beyond (or oltre) historiographical conventions by bringing the insights of international history and recent findings on internationalisms to bear on understandings of Italian state-making in both its national and imperial forms. Putting refugees and colonial repatriates—by definition liminal and “out of place”—at the heart of this study thus provides the anchor from which to bring into dialogue disparate bodies of scholarship and to tack back and forth between varied scales: local, national, regional, imperial, transnational, international, and intergovernmental.

Expanding Italy, Migrating Italy: Competing and Entangled Models of Colonialism

Migration has preoccupied both the Italian state and students of Italy since Italian unification in 1861. With the achievement of statehood, the Direzione di Statistica (part of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce) began to keep systematic statistics on movements out of the Italian peninsula. The Censimento degli Italiani all’estero, the first general census of Italians abroad, was carried out in 1871. Five years later, the Direzione began to compile and publish annual data on migrations. These statistics testified to considerable outmigration, a phenomenon that figured prominently in the extensive political debates over whether the new Italian state should acquire formal colonies. The characterization of emigration as a debilitating drain necessitated by the Italian economy’s deficiencies rhetorically underwrote Italy’s nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial efforts in Africa, as well as fascism’s more ambitious imperial expansionism. From the outset of Italy’s colonial era, then, the emigration and colonization questions were inextricably entangled.

Within less than a decade after Italian unification, an Italian foothold on the Red Sea coast had been established with the lease from the local sultan of the port of Assab (in today’s Eritrea) by the Compagnia Rubattino, which sought to exploit the opportunities created by the newly opened Suez Canal. The explorations of the Società Geografica Italiana, founded in 1867, had helped lay the groundwork for these commercial contacts. In 1882, the Italian government assumed control over the area, followed by the military occupation of Massawa (Mits’iwa, Massaua) three years later. These acquisitions provided the basis for the creation of Italy’s first formal colony: Eritrea. By 1884, Italians had also divvied up “Somaliland” with the French and British, the Compagnia Filonardi having obtained a lease over
the Sultanates of Obbia and Majerteen by 1889. Within another four years, the Filonardi Company was also administering Barawa, Merca, Mogadishu, and Warsheikh, the latter a concession granted Italy by the sultan of Zanzibar. In the aftermath of a fatal 1896 attack on employees of Società Anonima Commerciale del Benadir, Filonardi’s successor, the Italian state began to directly govern Somalia in 1905. In the case of both Eritrea and Somalia, then, Italy followed a well-established European pattern in which private commercial concessions preceded formal colonization. In addition, the 1901 establishment of an Italian concession under a consul at Tientsin/Tianjin resulted from Italy’s participation in the Eight-Nation Alliance responding to China’s Boxer Rebellion. The Italian government undertook these actions in a context of rivalry and wrangling for position among European powers. The state (re)directed its energies to East Africa after the French created a protectorate over (formerly Ottoman) Tunis, home to a large population of Italian speakers.

The Tunisian example highlights how, from the very beginning, demands for territories imagined as belonging to the madrepatria on cultural, linguistic, and/or historical grounds (the so called “unredeemed lands” or terre irredente) were bound up with the desire for the formal colonies that signified standing as a European Great Power. Indeed, Tunisia blurred the boundaries between such types of territories. Irredentists insisted on Italy’s right to territories controlled by the Habsburgs (Veneto, Trento, Trieste), including the historically Venetian possessions along the Eastern Adriatic (Istria, Dalmatia), as well as other areas with large Italophone populations (e.g., Nice, Corsica). Although Italy’s success in the 1866 war with Austria gave the fledgling state the Veneto, this did not still voices calling for the “redemption” of Italy’s “lost” territories. Such activism would acquire greater organizational capacity in the 1890s, with the establishment of groups such as the Società Dante Alighieri in 1889 and the Lega Nazionale in 1891. Ostensibly cultural associations promoting Italian language and culture, these groups often proved overtly political in the actual work of advancing Italian interests.

It is no coincidence that such irredentist networks flourished in the 1890s, the same decade in which Italy sought to both deepen and expand its colonial presence in East Africa. An 1890 parliamentary plan to transform Eritrea into a settler colony founded on small-scale agriculture (as well as an experiment in creating a textile industry there) was abandoned within five years, however, in the face of inadequate understanding of the environmental conditions and violent reactions by Eritreans to land expropriations.
investment and retrenchment in Eritrea had followed the attack on Italian forces by Ethiopian soldiers at the battle of Dogali in 1887. This humiliating loss, however, did not quench Italian desires for Ethiopian territory, leading to the even more disastrous defeat of Italian soldiers at the hands of Emperor Menelik II’s army at Adwa (alternatively Adowa, Adua) in 1896. Constituting the first major defeats of a modern European state army by an African one, these losses temporarily empowered critics of the colonial enterprise. In particular, Adwa led to the political downfall of Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, who had seen in African colonies the solution not only to Italy’s problem of surplus population but also to its “Southern Question” constituted by the supposed developmental lag of the southern provinces. Crispi and other supporters of colonialism envisioned Eritrea and Ethiopia as future sites of large-scale settlement by Italian agriculturalists. Somalia, by contrast, was posited as the site for commercial interests and latifundia-style estates devoted to cotton and tobacco.  

In the aftermath of Adwa, liberals like Luigi Einaudi instead promoted an alternative “colonial” solution to the mass emigration that politicians like Crispi saw as both symptom and cause of national weakness. Einaudi argued that the informal or “expatriate” colonies formed by Italian migrants to countries like Brazil and the United States were better vehicles for promoting Italian interests abroad than costly formal colonies. Noting the semantic indistinguishability of the Italian term colony to signify colonies of direct domination and concentrated migrant communities in other sovereign states, historian Mark Choate has described the latter as constituting “ethnographic colonies.” What Crispi and, later, Mussolini would see as a source of Italian weakness—mass emigration—Einaudi instead reconceived as a national asset. Einaudi’s always minority vision of a colonialism formed by expatriate communities, however, would lose appeal after Italy acquired the former Ottoman territories of Libya and the Dodecanese Islands in 1912 as the result of the Italo-Turkish War. The nationalist excitement over these territorial gains muted alternative models of colonialism, as formal colonies once again appeared a means for asserting Italian greatness and redirecting surplus labor. Still, an alternative form of “socialist” irredentism that rejected formal colonies persisted in the thought of figures like Cesare Battisti. The 1911 speech by poet Giovanni Pascoli, delivered in honor of the Libyan campaign’s dead and wounded, typified the belief that the existence of Italian colonies would erase the humiliations and discrimination suffered by Italians who went abroad to work. After condemning the indignities suffered by Italians in places like the United States, Pascoli praised the new colonial Italy in which
these workers would instead labor for the greatness of the nation and retain their dignity as Italian citizens:

There [in Italian Libya] they will be workers, not day laborers, poorly paid, poorly valued, and insulted; they will not be foreigners. They will be workers in the noblest sense of the word, and they will farm their own property, on the soil of the Motherland. They will not be forced to renounce allegiance to their Motherland, but instead will clear paths, cultivate new land, channel water, build houses, and open ports always seeing our tricolor flag flying high over the waves of our great sea. 20

In reality, however, few Italian settlers made their way to these new territories before World War I. Italy’s control over Libya remained nominal, confined to coastal areas of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Italy only formally acquired the Dodecanese Islands by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, having occupied them for the decade before that. Many more Italians continued to migrate to third countries, including the imperial possessions of other European powers (notably Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt) than did to Italy’s own colonial possessions. Indeed, Italy’s peripheral status as a European power and the ever-growing diaspora of Italian workers had led nationalists like Enrico Corradini to describe Italy as a “proletarian nation.” At the first congress of the Associazione Nazionalista Italiana, Corradini argued, “There are nations in a condition of inferiority in relation to others, just as there are classes that are in a condition of inferiority in relation to other classes.” 21 For nationalists like Corradini, the means to overcome such national proletarian status were not those of international class struggle—the solution proposed by the Left—but, rather, colonial conquest.

With the advent of the Great War, Italy initially maintained a stance of neutrality despite its adherence since 1882 to the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany. Strident advocates of militarism like Corradini and the poet Gabriele D’Annunzio urged Italian intervention into the war. Italy then entered into secret negotiations first with the Central Powers and then the Allied Powers in pursuit of guarantees of the long-sought-after irredentist lands of Trieste, Trentino, Istria, parts of Dalmatia, and the port of Vlorë/Valona and the island of Sazan/Sanseno in Albania. 22 In May 1915, Italy joined the war on the side of the Allies, having signed the secret Treaty of London promising a range of territorial concessions. Despite Woodrow Wilson’s insistence at the subsequent Paris Peace Conference that such secret pacts not be honored, Italy ultimately acquired the Alto Adige, Trentino, Trieste, Istria, the Dalmatian city of Zadar/Zara, and some islands in the Kvarner and Dalmatia in the aftermath of the Habsburg Empire’s dissolution.
This did not satiate Italian territorial ambitions, however, and the Italian navy briefly occupied Vlorë/Valona. In 1919, the poet D’Annunzio also led a ragtag band of veterans, nationalists, and proto-fascists in seizing the city of Rijeka/Fiume desired by both the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and Italy. Italy would eventually annex Fiume in 1924, two years after the establishment of the fascist regime. Italy’s military withdrawal from Albania in 1919 instead prompted schemes to bring Italian “colonists” (coloni) there. This reflected the continued, if uneven, competition in Italy of two models: one stressing colonies of formal domination and another of expatriate or “ethnographic” colonies created by Italian migration to third countries. The regime headed by Benito Mussolini would embrace both of these, enfoldng them into a third model: that of fascist empire.

When Mussolini and the fascist party took power in 1922, they inherited a fragmented set of possessions in Eritrea, Somalia, and the Aegean together with those newly “redeemed” northern and northeastern territories now incorporated into the Italian state. Mussolini had successfully exploited the economic and political crisis opened up by the war and the pervasive sense of disappointment that despite being among the Allied victors, Italy was in a position closer to that of a defeated power. Following the invalidation of the Treaty of London at the Paris peace negotiations, D’Annunzio captured this sense of betrayal in his denunciation of a “mutilated victory” (la vittoria mutilata). For D’Annunzio, Mussolini, and other nationalists, this betrayed victory figured as merely the latest in a chain of catastrophes that began with the Risorgimento’s failure to forge unity through revolutionary means (later reformulated by Gramsci as la rivoluzione mancata) and was compounded by military fiasco in Africa (la conquista mancata). Mussolini positioned fascism as a revolutionary movement that would complete the work of forging the nation begun with the Risorgimento. In this vision, Italy and Italians would be (re)made through victory both at home and abroad, creating a hybrid “nation-empire.”

This remaking of Italy and Italians involved an ambitious transformation of the landscape through reclamation or bonifica integrale. Although technically referring to massive public works projects to render productive previously marginal areas like the malarial Pontine Marshes, bonifica also carried broader notions of spiritual, moral, and political regeneration. Ruth Ben-Ghiat argues, “The campaigns for agricultural reclamation (bonifica agricola), human reclamation (bonifica umana), and cultural reclamation (bonifica della cultura) . . . are different facets and phases of a comprehensive project to combat degeneration and radically renew Italian society by ‘pulling up bad weeds and cleaning up the soil.’” By the early 1930s, this process of
regeneration explicitly included what Italian endocrinologist Nicola Pende deemed a “bonifica della razza” or racial reclamation. In keeping with this, *bonifica* stood as a geographically comprehensive project that linked new settlements housing colonists on the Italian peninsula with those in the Italian possessions through the shared claim to conquer *terra nullius*.

This claim—common to settler colonialism—effaced the sometimes brutal displacements that made such reclamation possible. This was perhaps most evident in Libya, where the fascist regime waged a decade-long campaign between 1922 and 1932 aimed at “pacifying” the local population. Although termed a “reconquest” (*riconquista*), this repressive and at times genocidal military operation—which targeted Sanusi guerrilla fighters and civilians alike—actually consolidated Italian control for the first time over the three regions (Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, the Fezzan) composing Libya. The internment of native populations and expropriation of land created the grounds of possibility for the subsequent projects of demographic colonization of Libya launched by Governor Italo Balbo, who had inherited the earlier projects of the Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia (ECL) begun in 1932. Much propagandized by the regime, a contingent of state-sponsored settlers deemed the *Ventimila* arrived in 1938 to occupy agricultural villages quickly built in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and overseen by the Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale (INFPS) and the ECL. In the space of four years, Libya’s Italian population grew from 64,000 to 110,000.

Fascism also entailed consolidation of Italian control over Somalia. When Cesare Maria De Vecchi became governor of Italian Somalia in 1923, he strengthened and reorganized the Somali Police Corps into the colonial Corpo Zaptié. De Vecchi put the corps to work disarming northern tribes long accustomed to indirect rule even as Italian Somalia grew through the incorporation of formerly British Jubaland into the territory. By the time De Vecchi left Somalia in 1928, Somalia’s “pacification” was largely complete. The regime then began to pin its hopes on the sorts of agricultural settlement that later would assume pride of place in Libya. The Società Agricola Italo-Somala (SAIS, Society for Italian-Somalian Agriculture), in existence since 1920, held several agricultural concessions, with the largest one at Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi (Villabruzzi). Government aid and land reclamation also revitalized the Azienda Agraria Governativa at Genale, founded in 1912. In contrast to the villages populated by Italian settlers constructed in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in the late 1930s, however, Somalia’s Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi and Genale relied heavily on native labor and attracted relatively few Italians. In addition, agricultural outputs remained modest,
and the high cost of certain products—such as bananas—made them uncompetitive on the world market.  

Following Italy’s brutal invasion of Ethiopia, in which the military employed illegal chemical weapons, in May 1936 Mussolini triumphantly announced, “Italy finally has its empire.” He did not hesitate to add, “A fascist empire.” In this, Mussolini sought to distinguish Italian empire from what he saw as capitalist or bourgeois colonialism, as well as from the ancient Roman example that fascism intended to exceed. The launch in December 1936 of construction on a “second Rome” on the outskirts of the capital gave concrete expression to this desire to both emulate and best ancient Rome. As the site for the Esposizione Universale di Roma (EUR) planned for the twentieth anniversary of the fascist revolution in 1942, the EUR neighborhood was to serve as “a parallel capital . . . [that] valorized the authority and prestige of Rome in a new, equally monumental but modern, setting.”

The declaration of empire brought other important shifts. Eritrea and Somalia were fused with Ethiopia in the newly established Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI). In keeping with the new conception of empire, the former Ministero delle Colonie became the Ministero dell’Africa Italiana (MAI) in 1937. Regime propaganda promoted AOI as an “impero di lavoro” (an empire of work or labor) for Italy’s surplus laborers, as attested to by the influx of thirty-nine thousand Italian workers to Ethiopia’s capital city within the space of three years. In doing so, fascism furthered a process of “whitening” Italy’s internal Others (southerners, rural poor) that had been under way since unification, deflecting stereotypes of “blackness” long associated with the Meridione or Italian south onto the native inhabitants of the colonies, above all those in the territories of AOI. At the same time, the Italian state also sought to encourage return migration from expatriate communities to the new imperial acquisitions. This was just one initiative in a multipronged outreach to communities of Italian migrants; the Italian regime devoted considerable resources to sponsoring fasci all’estero with the intent of bringing Italians in the diaspora into the fascist fold. Asserting that Italy’s territorial expansion had obviated the need for emigration, the regime claimed that those once labeled “emigrants” would now be known as “citizens” and part of an “army of workers.”

This reflected a much larger effort by the fascist regime to control and regulate migration within and beyond the peninsula. In 1927 the regime had abolished the Commissariato Generale dell’Emigrazione (created in 1901), signaling a key shift in governmental policy on emigration. In its place arose the Commissariato per le migrazioni e la colonizzazione interna, which
explicitly fused the projects of external and internal colonization through settler-driven land reclamation. Through this entity the regime also sought to curb rural migration into Italian cities. Like so many fascist schemes, this one failed, and internal migration actually increased as a result of economic difficulties in the 1930s.35

The regime did succeed, however, in redefining the terms of migration and how some coloni conceived of their movements. As one settler bound for Libya put it, “We aren’t emigrating though, are we? We’re still going home, even more so; we were born here [in Italy] but there [in Libya] we will have land.”36 After 1938, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (already administratively unified in 1934) were incorporated directly as a regional district or province of Italy, reinforcing this sense that a move to Libya entailed a move within Italy and not emigration abroad. As occurred in Libya with Balbo’s much-publicized plan of demographic colonization, AOI also became the object of state-directed colonization schemes. Although technically these projects were administered by parastatal entities like the INFPS in Libya or the Ente Colonizzazione Puglia d’Etiopia in Ethiopia, they nonetheless remained top-down schemes in which settlers proved dependent on the state for their basic means of existence. In contrast, Somalia—perceived as unsuitable for large-scale European settlement—never received as many Italian settlers as Eritrea or Ethiopia. The top-down nature of these settlement efforts contradicted the stated aim of producing in the colonies a class of self-sufficient Italian agriculturalists who embodied the virtues of thrift, sobriety, and virility. While the regime exalted these agriculturalists as the model fascist settlers, Italian colonists also occupied a wide range of positions in the empire’s cities: doctors, traders, businessmen, merchants, civil servants, mechanics, shopkeepers, and so on.

The establishment of empire also brought significant changes to the Dodecanese Islands, under Italian control since 1912 but only formally annexed in 1923. Unlike AOI, the Isole dell’Egeo held the status of possedimento or possession, rather than colony. The first civil governor of the islands, Mario Lago, pursued policies of Italianization and oversaw an ambitious program of infrastructural development. As in both Italy and other overseas territories, sites of land reclamation became home to Italian settlers, though in smaller numbers than in Libya. The regime established five such agricultural villages in the Dodecanese: three on Rhodes (Peveragno, San Marco, San Benedetto) and two at Kos (Fiorenza and Torre in Lambi).37 Lago’s successor, Cesare Maria De Vecchi (former governor of Somalia from 1923 to 1928), inaugurated a phase of harsher Italianization and fascistization
that coincided with the proclamation of empire. When interviewed decades afterward, many Greek residents of the Dodecanese recalled the De Vecchi era as the time “when fascism came,” even though technically the islands had been under fascist control since 1923. 38

Italy acquired its final imperial possession in 1939, with the establishment of a protectorate over Albania. The fascist doctrine of spazio vitale or “vital space” envisioned concentric circles of influence and domination, with the piccolo spazio (or small space) reserved for ethnic Italians and the grande spazio (large space) encompassing southeastern Europe and much of the Mediterranean. 39 Within that larger sphere, Albania was to serve as a base for further expansion. As Dino Alfieri, head of the Ministero della Cultura Popolare, exulted on the day of the invasion, “Albania constitutes a bridgehead from which become possible further movements. One moves toward the restoration of the Roman Empire.” 40 In that new Roman empire, Albania occupied an unusual position, conceptualized as a kind of “brotherly” union between Italians and Albanians but in which the king’s lieutenant governor exercised executive power. 41 Like the ethnic Greeks of the Dodecanese, Albanians sat high in the imperial racial hierarchy owing to their status as fellow European subjects. One author in the journal Difesa della Razza (the most prominent of the journals embracing the racial line from 1938 on that Italians belonged to the Aryan race), for example, characterized the Albanian as belonging to one of the “piccole razze” (small, less important races) but nonetheless “a born warrior, valorous and generous, hospitable, sober, simple, but unrelenting in the vendetta.” 42 In both the Aegean and Albania, intermarriage between Italians and locals was permitted. In contrast, the widespread practice of concubinage or madamismo with local women and the intimate contacts between officers and colonial soldiers (ascari) led Mussolini to impose anti-miscegenation laws and residential segregation in Italian Africa’s colonial cities in a futile effort to avoid racial “promiscuity” in the empire. 43 The translation of these racial colonial hierarchies into legal and social practices of citizenship is discussed at length in chapter 4.

Given its importance in the fascist imperial imagination, Albania was projected to become Italy’s quinta sponda or fifth shore. This followed on the proclamation of Libya as Italy’s quarta sponda. The addition of Albania to the fascist empire attracted a number of Italian civilians to the country, as well as soldiers deployed there during the Greek campaign (1940–1941). Whereas the number of such civilians is estimated at no larger than fifty-eight thousand, it included state functionaries, employees in road construction and other public works projects, workers in various Italian companies
Figure 3. Map of Italian Empire, 1940. Map designed by Mike Bechthold.
with branches in Albania (such as Fiat), and teachers for Italian schools. Italy’s imperium—which incorporated territories with statuses ranging from colonies to possessions to protectorates—reached its maximum size, then, just a year before Italy entered the Second World War on 10 June 1940. In less than three years, Italy would lose military control over all its African and Balkan territories, precipitating the return of many (civilian) settlers. Exalted as the vanguard of Italian fascist empire, these settlers little suspected that they would instead serve as the vanguard of Italy’s imminent (if protracted) decolonization.