Chapter 2

Wartime Repatriations and the Beginnings of Decolonization

Today, when I’m asked where home is for me, I am struck by how far away it is; and yet, home is nowhere else but right here, at the edge of this body of mine... Displacement takes on many faces and is our very everyday dwelling.

Elsewhere, within Here, Trinh T. Minh-ha (2011)

On 2 June 1940, seven-year-old Grazia Arnese (Grimaldi) and her older brother Guerino hugged their parents goodbye and boarded the Saturnia bound from Tripoli to Marina di Ravenna on Italy’s Adriatic coast. The Arnese children formed part of a contingent of an estimated thirteen thousand settler children (ages ranging from four to fifteen) sent from Libya to the Italian peninsula as a protective measure in advance of Italy’s entry into the war eight days later. Parents knew why their children had been sent away but had little say in the matter, in contrast to the voluntary mass evacuations of children and other civilians taking place simultaneously in places like Britain. The children instead had been told they were embarking early on an exciting vacation to summer camps on the Italian mainland. This story would not necessarily have raised the suspicions even of older children, given the established practice of sending youngsters (including those in the colonies) to seaside and mountainside holiday camps sponsored by institutions of the fascist regime, notably the youth organization Gioventù Italiana del Littorio. Neither parents nor children, however, could have foreseen the long separations that awaited them.

Grazia Arnese would never again see her father or her older brother Antonio, victims of the war. Separated from her brother Guerino, Grazia reunited with both her sibling and their mother only after five years of hardship.
shuttling between various institutions on the peninsula. Other families from Libya whose children were transferred to mainland Italy in 1940 endured even longer periods of separation. The diary entries for 1946 and 1947 of Giacomo Cason, an Italian colonist from the Oliveti settlement in Tripolitania under the aegis of the IN(F)PS, for example, center on his desire to see his three daughters. The girls finally returned to Libya in June 1947, after a seven-year separation from their parents.

These large-scale repatriations of civilians from the “fourth shore” of Italy’s empire would be among the first but certainly not the last of such mass, organized movements. The Libyan repatriations occurred in tandem with evacuations from other Italian overseas territories on the eve of the war; five hundred women and children sent from the Isole Egeo on the Oceania, for instance, arrived in Bari on 9 June 1940. From the very start, demographic colonization aimed at establishing sizable and permanent settler populations in various parts of the empire had necessitated policies of both voluntary and involuntary repatriation of individual colonists and settler families. Nonetheless, in contrast to the migrations of the *bimbi libici* (“Libyan children”), these earlier prewar repatriations had proven largely ad hoc.

Reasons for such individual repatriations ranged from illness, to inability to work, to “immoral” behavior that could damage fascist prestige in the colonies and encourage insubordination on the part of fellow colonists. “The potential and actual presence of impoverished and ‘unfit’ whites informed social policies in many colonial contexts,” notes Ann Laura Stoler, an observation that proves as true for Italy’s African colonies as for the Dutch East Indies she studies. Administrators of colonial settlements in Ethiopia complained, rather unsurprisingly, about the tendency of colonists to “drink, dance and party” (*si beve si balla e si fa festa*); forcible repatriations from Ethiopia occurred for reasons that included “incapacity to work the land.” In the Libyan villages administered by the INFPS, offenses resulting in involuntary repatriation included theft, arson, family discord, and illegitimate pregnancies. In the case of an unmarried pregnant woman who requested a temporary return to Italy in 1938, INFPS officials agreed on the necessity of her removal from the village given that “women of the settlement engage in their usual gossiping.” Just as importantly, the woman’s condition prevented her from doing any “useful work.” Alberto Stern, the director of the INFPS’s Tripoli section for “Demographic Colonization,” treated the pregnancy—like other examples of work indiscipline—as the sign of a poor moral character. In Italy, he noted, this woman had worked as a maid, and from the beginning of her time in the colony she
had displayed undisciplined behavior and antipathy toward life in the village. He characterized her as suffering from “tendencies that were scarcely colonial,” which in Stern’s reasoning had led her to slip off to Tripoli where she had a relationship with a man who abandoned her upon learning of the pregnancy.9

In contrast to such individual movements, the removal of Italian civilians from Italy’s African territories carried out between 1940 and 1943 took place under the banner of state-sponsored humanitarianism. Once Italy joined the conflict, a number of repatriations occurred on so-called hospital ships—including the Saturnia on which the Arnese children had previously voyaged—and received considerable press coverage. The three missions from AOI to Italian ports carried out between 1942 and 1943 on the “white ships” or navi bianche—four transatlantic cruise ships painted white with the red cross—remain the best known of such efforts and brought approximately 27,778 citizens back to the peninsula.10 These voyages required cooperation with the enemy British navy, as well as collaboration with humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and its Italian counterpart (Croce Rossa Italiana, or CRI). In several key aspects—notably the involvement of multiple actors, including members of the Allied governments and international humanitarian organizations—these migrations established a template for movements by Italians out of the former possessions and delivery of post-migration assistance after the armistice of 8 September 1943 and, in particular, after 1945. In other respects, however, these initial repatriations proved exceptional, thereby creating a mistaken impression that the end of Italian military control in much of Africa signaled the end of its imperial presence. As discussed in the introduction, the question of just when and how decolonization occurred in Italy’s former possessions remains open to debate. If we consider decolonization from the point of view of the out-migrations of settler populations, the end of Italian empire proved protracted rather than abrupt and expeditious. In addition, repatriation proved anything but the definitive and one-way return “home” to the Italian peninsula usually implied by the term.

Organized Mass Repatriation and Rehabilitation Schemes: The Navi Bianche

Wartime schemes to evacuate Italian women, children, and elderly from the colonies of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia that made up AOI developed as a response to Italy’s rapid military defeat in East Africa. Within just
a year of entering the conflict, the Italians had lost control over their formal colonies in East Africa. Describing these dramatic losses, one author gives voice to a common view that Italy’s colonial moment not only was brief but ended abruptly and decisively: “The Italian military machine, so overwhelmingly victorious five years earlier [in Ethiopia], literally crumbled, and Italy precipitously withdrew from Somalia. On February 25, 1941, only weeks after the British crossed the Jubaland border, Mogadishu was occupied and the colonial government ceased to function. . . . The last Italian flag in the horn of Africa was lowered at Gondar in northwestern Ethiopia on November 27, 1941.”

Armed with the benefit of hindsight, such an account takes for granted the irreversibility of Italian military collapse in East Africa. Likewise, when viewed in retrospect, the evacuations from AOI would become symbolic of the consequences of empire’s end for civilians. At the time, however, the regime promoted these measures (like those of the Libyan children sent to Italy) as merely temporary, until the fortunes of war turned again in favor of Italy. Italian Cyrenaica became a battleground for much of 1941 and 1942, as Allied (largely British but also Australian) forces captured and occupied it, retreated, and took it again. In light of such dramatic reversals, Italians could continue to hope that their displacement and repatriation was merely temporary. Furthermore, Italians in AOI faced with the decision of whether or not to repatriate to Italy followed the events of the North African front closely, and “enthusiasm for the voyage to Italy ebbed and flowed with the tide of battle in Libya.”

By the time of the third and final British occupation of Cyrenaica in November 1942, however, very few Italians remained in that territory. On 29 November 1942, Cardinal Celso Costantini wrote in his diary that he had received word from Monsignor Moro in Benghazi/Bengasi that “no Italians remain in the vicariate except missionaries and the sisters.” Most Italians had either repatriated to the Italian peninsula (where many of them received financial assistance from the Ministry of Italian Africa) or been evacuated by the Italian military to Italian Tripolitania. In 1942 Tripoli’s bishop, Camillo Vittorino Facchinetti, organized a casa dell’assistenza to provide aid to the Cyrenaican evacuees in Tripolitania. As late as 1958, as we have seen, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs grappled with the issue of “refugees from Cyrenaica” living in and around Tripoli (profughi della Cirenaica residenti Tripoli), indicating that these individuals still remained in limbo over a decade after their initial displacement. These, no doubt, formed the core of the Unione Coloni Italiani d’Africa bombarding local prefects with requests for assistance. This highlights the protracted and
multidirectional process by which populations left Italy’s overseas possessions, beginning on a large scale in 1940 and 1941.

Like the fascist regime, the British military had not anticipated the rapid collapse of the Italian military and developed ad hoc responses to the humanitarian exigencies it created. As a 1944 publication on the British Military Administration in Eritrea and Somalia put it, “Even in January 1941, when the state of Italian morale was becoming apparent, General Cunningham believed that he could do no more by May than clear Kenya’s Northern Frontier Province and capture Kismayu.” In reality, by April of that year all of AOI had fallen under British control. The British found themselves unprepared and shorthanded to deal with such a vast territory. The chief political officer of what was then known as the Occupied Enemy Territories Administration (OETA, subsequently the BMA) underlined the logistical difficulties when he noted drily, “By the end of June 1941 the total number of officers employed under me, in occupied enemy territories and at my headquarters, amounted only to 268, which is almost the exact strength of the European Italian staff of the Post Office at Asmara.”

Although OETA took as its model the military government exercised by the British over Palestine during the previous global conflict, Lord Rennell of Rodd—who worked under OETA’s chief political officer for North and East Africa, Sir Philip Mitchell, and later wrote a detailed account—claimed, “We had no precedent to work on and builted [sic] empirically.” The BMA in East Africa thus developed, in part, as an ad hoc response to the emergencies created by the war. Rennell, in particular, possessed a pragmatic bent that allowed him to “thrive in a fluid wartime situation” even as “his thinking had its origins in a network of colonial administrators well versed in the traditions of indirect rule.” Like many of his fellow administrators in the BMA, Rennell favored leaving considerable control to local authorities (in this case, to Italian officials and police, as well as Italian courts). This reflected not only British traditions of indirect rule in many of its own imperial possessions but also the laws of war, as well as purely practical considerations. Chief Political Officer Mitchell, for instance, stressed that a whole range of questions about the Italian territories “are likely to be raised at the Peace Conference which must follow the war . . . but at this stage it is impracticable to go beyond study and preparation.”

Confronted with sizable numbers of Italian military and civilians in East Africa, British authorities settled on a multipronged policy of internment, co-optation, and repatriation. The British employed a category “E” to denote “an Italian Male Civilian over the age 16 who is able-bodied and medically fit, and therefore in the ‘Evacuee’ category and non-repatriable.”
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One Italian civilian male from Addis interned first in AOI and then Kenya claimed that there existed three subcategories of “evacuees.” On the initial days of the occupation of AOI, the British sorted Italian men and gave them a red, green, or black card (*tessera*), depending on their status. Those with black cards were sent immediately to Berbera, those with red cards were considered civilian POWs and confined to the “Case Incis” that had previously housed Italian state employees, and those with green found accommodation in the camp of Dire Daua under British surveillance. An unknown number of Italian males eluded the British net, either operating as guerrillas against the Allies or disappearing into the local population. Postcards produced by the Fascist Party (PNF) celebrated this rearguard battle, featuring an Italian soldier astride a pile of corpses, a tattered British flag, and the vow “We will return!” (Ritorneremo). Nonetheless, the majority of Italian military men and other males over the age of sixteen remained confined to prisoner of war and “evacuation” camps scattered throughout the British Empire, rendering wives and children of these Italians particularly vulnerable.

Many of these remaining women, children, and elderly ultimately went to “transit camps” like those established at Ghinda, Harar, Sembel, Mandera, and the former Italian airport of Dire Daua until the diplomatic agreements and logistical arrangements necessary for their repatriation could be effected. Prior to their internment, some families—such as that constituted by Maria Carelli and her two children, Luisella and Piero—had sought shelter in the Circolo Ufficiali in Addis Ababa or religious institutions such as the Missione della Consolata, fearing reprisals and violence by local populations. Carelli’s husband, the *vice comandante* of the XIV Brigata Coloniale, had been imprisoned in Kenya in July 1941. Red Cross documents from September 1941 speak of four “safe zones” within Addis Ababa in which Italian civilians lived but which offered merely “temporary solutions,” likely referencing the provisional accommodations initially occupied by families like that of the Carelli.

Former settlers recall organizing local defense units, in which adolescents and older men served to protect Italian civilians and their property. Whether fears about the safety of civilians proved exaggerated or not, they were shared at the time by Italian civilians themselves, some British officials, and members of the International Red Cross. As Alfredo Romiti, the former head of the AOI’s Ufficio Commerciale Centrale dell’Ente Approvvigionamenti (Commercial Supply Agency) and a protagonist in providing food assistance to civilians and POWs in AOI, put it, “The predictions of the defeat and the specter of Abyssinian retaliation danced before the eyes
of the authorities and fathers/heads of families.” As a result, “One planned and discussed extensively a mass evacuation from Addis Ababa to Asmara of all women and children.” Eventually, this planned mass evacuation would instead carry many civilians to the Italian peninsula.

The primary and extended negotiations for carrying out this mass evacuation by sea involved the Italian and British governments, with the additional services of Swiss and American diplomacy. The Red Cross played an important role in the scheme’s execution, less in its genesis. Upon visiting occupied AOI in 1941, the ICRC honorary delegate Henri-Philippe Junod—a Swiss citizen, missionary, anthropologist, and resident of Pretoria who worked with the South African Red Cross—highlighted the precarious position of Italian women and children, abandoned to a “hostile” climate and population. Although he had not been charged with making a recommendation about repatriation, Junod urged the necessity of returning these civilians to Italy as soon as possible. Junod noted that the situation in Eritrea proved less dire than in Ethiopia or Somalia, in part owing to the deeper roots of Italian settlement in the former. Nonetheless, Junod distinguished between colonists in Eritrea “who have been long established and more or less consider the country as their patrie and whose children consider it as their native soil” and “the others who were newly arrived” after the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935. Furthermore, a number of colonists had been evacuated from Ethiopia to Eritrea, and these colonists found themselves in “difficult, even desperate” circumstances. Junod further argued that while Italian Somalia, in contrast to Ethiopia and Eritrea, never proved home to sizable European populations, as many as seven thousand civilians remained there. He recommended that, among these civilians, women who suffered the additional burden of “the continuous and debilitating influence of a trying climate” should receive priority for repatriation. Finally, Junod deemed the situation in Ethiopia “the most urgent and grave,” contending that “it is absolutely certain that the Italian population, on a whole, is in danger and that only the presence of the occupation troops protects them.” The Red Cross delegate attributed this to the hatred fomented by the 1935 war and occupation. Junod recommended, “I repeat that this [repatriation] should be done without delay.”

In her diary, Maria Carelli recounts the uncertainty and fear that prevailed among Italians themselves as the preparations for repatriation dragged on (eventually taking over eleven months). The British informed civilians that they would conduct a population census in preparation for eventual repatriation by ship to Italy. In compliance, the members of the Carelli family presented themselves in Addis Ababa’s central piazza on 28 December 1941
and were assigned to the Dire Daua camp until their departure for Italy became possible. Carelli’s diary, published in 2014 together with her daughter’s recollections and embellishments on the events, details the key role in camp administration played by Italian carabinieri and colonial police (Polizia Africa Italiana, PAI), together with volunteers from the Italian Red Cross or CRI. In rereading her mother’s words, Luisella Carosio (née Carelli) remarks, “The Red Cross: how frequently it is cited as a basic reference point, as a refuge, as a source of reassurance!”  The employment of Italian police in the camps and later on the *navi bianche* reflected the shortage of British personnel (particularly those with the requisite language skills), as well as the continuance of certain forms of Italian governance such as Italian law and courts. In former AOI, the British thus kept on some Italian police despite pronouncements that “the Italian police organisation proved as incompetent as it was corrupt.”

Although civilian residents of these camps did not confront hunger or violence, they struggled with uncertainty and suspicion regarding the intentions of the British. In addition to complaints about lack of privacy and hygiene and her worries over the measles and malaria outbreaks that claimed the

![Figure 4. Italian Red Cross sisters assisting Italian civilians, Berbera. Published with the permission of the ICRC Visual Archives. "War 1939–1945. Berbera, British Somalia. Italian [Red Cross] sisters give drinks to civilians aboard the transport barges." May 1942. V-P-HIST-E-01313, SOMALIA. Copyright ICRC.](image)
lives of many children in the camp, Maria Carelli mistrusted British promises about repatriation. Even the reassurance of Red Cross representative André Evalet, who visited the camp in January 1942, could not extinguish her fear that once aboard the ships the civilians would instead be sent to camps within the British Empire.

Although Carosio attributes her mother’s fears to indoctrination with fascist propaganda about “perfidious Albion” (perfida Albione), as well as the silence of Vatican radio on this subject, such worries appear less fantastical when considered in light of the experience of civilians like Alfredo Romiti. After cooperating with the British authorities in the supply of emergency food to Italian civilians and internees in Ethiopia, Romiti was arrested in April 1942 for carrying a letter from a CRI worker intended for that volunteer’s mother in the Dire Daua camp. Reassured by the support of some British officials who recognized the humanitarian relief he had carried out, Romiti learned he would be sent to the civilian camp at Mandera. Relieved at this prospect, in particular because his family was scheduled to depart for Italy from Mandera on the 10 May 1942 transport of the Saturnia, Romiti instead found himself sent to a POW camp in Kenya. Despite his entreaties
that he be treated as a civilian internee, as he had been previously, Romiti remained in a POW camp until war’s end. Romiti’s experience points to both the fluidity and definitional fuzziness of categories applied to Italians in the former possessions, a dilemma that would become only more pronounced after the war as the BMA and new international actors (notably personnel of UNRRA, the IRO, and the UNHCR) sought to sort out displaced persons and determine eligibility for assistance. The complexities of this process form the subject of the next chapter.

As would occur after the Second World War, other actors offering humanitarian assistance to these Italian civilians in Africa displaced by the events of war frequently disagreed with the relevant state powers as to the scope of their activities. The British, for instance, considered the Vatican—another sovereign power—as having overstepped its role when it began to intervene in 1943 on the question of repatriation of six hundred sick and wounded Italian POWs. As a British official testily put it, “With regard to the suggested reply to the request for their repatriation, we should explain that although we fully appreciate the valuable work done by the Holy See among prisoners of war we regard the question of repatriation as one which falls outside the scope of their activities and as one which should be dealt with through the Protecting Power.” A few months earlier, the BMA officers had complained about the Vatican advancing “personal” requests and asking for favors. The Vatican, for example, requested that the British grant permission to repatriate to one Gualtiero Agrati, employed in an oil company in Massawa and future son-in-law of the head of the Vatican Telegraph Office. As the official forwarding this request to Major Taylor of the BMA put it, “We are getting rather tired of these individual requests and should not wish to impose ourselves further on your exemplary patience by passing this one on to you if there were not the possibility that it may be as convenient as not to get rid of Signor Agrati. In that case we should acquire merit in the Vatican (for what that may be worth) without inconvenience to ourselves. We leave it to you to take action or not as you think fit.” After the war, the Vatican would play an important, if often underacknowledged, role in assisting Italian repatriates and foreign refugees alike in the Italian peninsula. The lack of access to much of the Vatican’s documentation on these activities has contributed to this gap in understanding.

Members of the Red Cross also came under attack for partiality or inappropriate activities. The ICRC representative to Ethiopia André Evalet, for instance, would ultimately be expelled by Haile Selassie. This occurred in the context of the bad feeling created in the aftermath of Italy’s 1935 attack on Ethiopia, during which the organization had remained silent regarding
evidence of Italy’s use of chemical weapons and found itself accused by the Ethiopians of being pro-Italian. According to a 1941 telegram from the ICRC delegate Junod, Evalet—a Swiss citizen born in Ethiopia and married to a German woman who ran a small pensione in Addis Ababa—initially met with general goodwill: “Evalet is persona grata to British, Italians and Ethiopians. . . . Evalet is about to take over responsibility for work of National Red Cross in Addis-Abeba. Everyone praises the work of this young intelligent and tactful man who pleases everybody.” By 1942, however, there existed growing doubts within the ICRC about whether Evalet had overstepped his role. In particular, Evalet was accused of siding with Italian civilians over the British authorities, having delivered personal Italian letters that also supposedly contained contraband material. Like Alfredo Romiti, who claimed that each time he visited an internment camp in his humanitarian role Italian women and young persons “assailed” him with letters and requests to send these missives to relatives in POW camps and on the peninsula, Evalet ran afoul of the occupying power over the issue of the post. By 1945, things had taken a dramatic turn. Evalet had left Ethiopia for Eritrea, apparently expelled on the pretext of his wife’s dealings with opponents of Emperor Selassie. One internal document within the ICRC suggests that the real reason had more to do with jealousy over properties held by Evalet’s wife and stepmother in Ethiopia.

At times, however, the BMA asked members of the Red Cross to engage in activities that those representatives themselves deemed inappropriate. In the early days of occupation in Eritrea, for example, the BMA requested that the American Red Cross carry out the distribution to European civilians of food supplies diverted to AOI from Greece. As the United States remained at this point neutral (prior to its entry into the war in December 1941), “this proved to be contrary to the principles of the American Red Cross administration which desired to limit its scope to handing over the supplies to the Administration on the spot.” Ultimately, members of the South African Red Cross took up this task of providing relief to Italians in the former colony. The fluidity and rapid transformation of events meant that states and international organizations like the ICRC and its national chapters often puzzled over the best and most appropriate ways to proceed.

Not surprisingly, controversies also embroiled members of the Italian Red Cross assisting civilians in AOI. Some of these CRI personnel were explicit fascist supporters, as evidenced by the testimony left by Clotilde del Balzo, who was repatriated to Italy on the Giulio Cesare in January 1943 (the navi bianche’s second mission). Del Balzo’s detailed statement to PAI officials on board the ship testified to dissent within the CRI, as well as between
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the CRI and the BMA. In September 1941, del Balzo had transferred from the CRI offices in Addis Ababa to Asmara. She claimed that at that time, the CRI was in disarray, with a lawyer named Ostini heading it up. Del Balzo lauded the local Red Cross women there for carrying out difficult and heroic work (unsuited for women, in her opinion) among civilian prisoners. Soon, however, the British prohibited even this work, denying the CRI volunteers the necessary pass to enter the fort that housed the prisoners. According to del Balzo, various unpleasant incidents occurred with the aim of forcing all the CRI volunteers to abandon their posts. In February 1942, the British interned Ostini, the provisional head of the unit; an extraordinary commissioner, Latilla, then took over the work.

In del Balzo’s opinion, the British sought to establish antifascist organizations among the Italian population, beginning with the CRI. The British instead likely saw their task as merely removing the most compromised individuals.46 Asked whether she would join the newly reconstituted CRI, del Balzo sought the advice of Asmara’s bishop, who encouraged her to fulfill her duties. Del Balzo thus reorganized her volunteers, and they set about putting together care packages for POWs. Del Balzo began to worry, however, when her request to meet with the CRI’s newest extraordinary commissioner, Barile, met with silence. The final straw came when ICRC delegate Thiebaud arrived and there began negotiations with the BMA to establish a new committee to assist Italians, with discussions reaching an impasse on the question of del Balzo’s participation. As she put it, “I remained sad and amazed and I confess that I didn’t understand at all for what reason I was considered ‘the black beast’ [la bestia nera].” Despite reassurances to Thiebaud that del Balzo would continue her mission, once the ICRC delegate departed, Barile requested del Balzo’s resignation. According to the Red Cross sister, Barile explained that del Balzo should never have agreed to take part in the newly constituted CRI, and that while “he approved of my gesture of fascist discipline he hoped that with my resignation the CRI would dissolve.” Barile added that the British had already fingered her “as a person with strong fascist sentiments.” In the end, del Balzo remained on in an unofficial capacity for another two months, after an unknown assailant shot and killed Latilla. At the time of her departure from Africa, Clotilde del Balzo took satisfaction in the fact that the CRI had weathered the storm and that thirty-five workers remained behind, providing assistance.47

Although thrilled at the prospect of leaving behind the internment camps, many other repatriates from the AOI on the navi bianche like Maria Carelli left the continent with heavy hearts, knowing that their husbands and other loved ones remained behind in Africa. The ambivalence felt by many of the
departing repatriates was shared by Italian officials themselves, as Emanuele Ertola has demonstrated in his analysis of the documentation on the *navi bianche* contained in the archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASDMAE). Despite official pronouncements regarding the temporary nature of these evacuations, those within the government worried that such removals might ultimately become prelude to Italy’s definitive loss of the territories. Nonetheless, many children of Africa (“i ragazzi di Africa”) like Massimo Zamorani, who later penned a memoir of his experience on the *navi bianche*’s second mission, returned to Italy convinced that their country would ultimately emerge victorious. Zamorani thus shared the sentiments captured by a 1943 propaganda poster that featured a young boy and an elderly man (presumably repatriates) that declared: “I know, I know that millions and millions of Italians suffer that indefinable bug that we call ‘mal d’Africa’ [nostalgia for Africa]. There is only one cure: to return. And we will return.” An alternative version of the same image bore the caption, “There where we were, there where our dead await us, there where we left powerful and indestructible traces of our civilization, there we will return.”

In the same year, the Istituto Fascista dell’Africa Italiana published a *Guida del rimpatriato d’Africa* (Guide for the repatriate from Africa) that sought to put a positive spin on what might otherwise be read as a sign of defeat: “Besides its high humanitarian mission, the ‘white fleet’ represents for Italy an affirmation of prestige that is particularly dear to the hearts of those Italians constrained to make a temporary return from the Empire.”48 The guide facilitated assistance claims paid out by the Ministry of Italian Africa for the “profugo dell’Africa Orientale” or refugee from Italian East Africa, a bureaucratic category already in existence by 1942, suggesting that at least some in the government were aware of the possibility that such returns might become permanent.49

Contrary to the stalwart and heroic image of hardy pioneers eagerly awaiting a victorious return to Africa, internal documentation reveals the ambivalence of Italian officials toward the repatriates themselves. As Ertola details, the Italian officials in charge of the ships—notably Saverio Caroselli, former governor of Italian Somalia, and his official Bernardo Vecchi—perceived many of the Italian civilians as having degenerated as a result of their time in the internment camps, noting problems of both political and moral impropriety. Women who purportedly had sexual relationships with British officials were singled out, including those suffering from venereal disease or who “forgot” their imprisoned husbands and “trod upon any tradition of family.” Particular note was made of a thirteen-year-old who gave birth during the second mission to a child sired by a British soldier; absent was any
Figure 6. “Torneremo,” 1943. Reproduced with the permission of the Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, XB1992.2392. Photo by David Almeida. Display card, “Io so, io sento che milioni e milioni di italiani soffrono di un indefinibile male che si chiama il male d'Africa. Per guarirne non c'è che un mezzo: tornare. E torneremo” (I know, I feel that millions and millions of Italians suffer from an indefinable malady, known as the Africa sickness. There is only one means of recovering: to return. And we will return), 1943. Designed by Giulio Bertoletti (Italian, 1919–1976); published by Studio Tecnico Editoriale Italiano, Rome; and printed by Ind. Grafiche N. Moneta, Milan.
sympathy for this minor or sensitivity regarding the potential circumstances of the pregnancy.\textsuperscript{50} Likewise, a repatriate on board informed the crew of the moral laxity of a mother and her daughter traveling to Italy. According to the source, the daughter was “well known [in Asmara] for her sexual relationships with English, Americans, etc. Lately she was an ‘entraîneuse’ [woman
who attracted men into bars] at the Kit Kat, an evening club frequented exclusively by Englishmen.” The woman was said to be infected with syphilis and to have borne an illegitimate child by an Allied serviceman. Other criticisms targeted excessive drinking and smoking by women and minors, as well as the breakdown of class hierarchies.

At the same time, the women of the Fasci Femminile or Women’s Fascio assigned to assist the repatriates on board also came under fire for their unsuitability and lack of tact. Although officers highlighted the need to reinstate (fascist) hierarchy, they complained about one Alma Farnesi, sister of the vice secretary of the fascist party, who presumably obtained her post “not so much as a reflection of her individual qualities, but above all as a function of her kinship with a bigwig [gerarca].” The impact of both parentela and conoscenza (kinship and connections) in the assignments aboard the ships pleased some repatriates—like Maria Carelli—and irritated others. After the “indignities” of having to mix with the lower classes in the camps, for instance, the officer’s wife Carelli breathed a sigh of relief when she boarded the Duilio. Almost immediately, she made the acquaintance of the ship’s doctor, who knew Carelli’s brothers from medical school, and a pharmacist from her hometown. As a result, the family received a comfortable cabin, rather than merely beds in a room. Carelli’s daughter Luisella remarks, “I have to smile at the thought that, having touched, so to speak, the soil of Italy [i.e., the ship], the mechanism of influential acquaintances and recommendations immediately kicked in!”

As Luisella Carosio’s comments indicate, the navi bianche were considered Italian ships under the command of Italian officers but with an English escort in the conduct of a humanitarian operation. As one of the special editions of Italian newspapers printed expressly for the navi bianche put it, “This comfortable steamer is a piece of your, our, Patria, it is a symbol of the Patria.” In spite of the fact that these ships symbolized Italy’s rescue of its vulnerable citizens, some of the navi bianche contained a few non-Italian repatriates to Europe. The second mission in November 1942, for example, included sixty-six German citizens, five Hungarians, and one Romanian. The navi bianche also brought succor to the remaining European populations in AOI, as when the Saturnia arrived in Africa on 30 June 1943 laden with goods sent by the CRI of Rome for needy civilians in Mogadishu (via the apostolic delegate there), as well as packages sent to individuals living in the city. These supplies included critically needed medicines. In addition, the outbound voyages from Italy included a number of (former) Italian colonial subjects repatriating to Africa. Although the British complained about Italian refusal to recognize Ethiopians as anything other than Italian subjects even after Emperor Haile
Selassie had returned to Addis Ababa in May 1941, they ultimately succeeded in securing the release of Ras Imru, the emperor’s cousin whom the fascist regime had imprisoned on the island of Ponza. Another nineteen Ethiopians or Eritreans (various documents refer to them differently) sailed from Trieste on the *Vulcania* in May 1943. After the war, such two-way traffic in repatriations would continue, as East Africans, Libyans, Albanians, and others returned home from service or imprisonment in Italy, and Italian citizens made their way to the peninsula. As in the case of the *navi bianche*, however, the flows of former colonial subjects from Italy remained small in comparison to Italians leaving the former possessions. At the same time, the postwar period would witness a new phenomenon whereby Italians who had left the former possessions for the (imagined) safety of the peninsula now sought to return.

In contrast to postwar movements, the *navi bianche* traveled in treacherous waters where mines and other hidden dangers lurked. Forbidden by the British to travel through the Suez Canal, the ships made much longer passages (lasting about a month in duration) from the Red Sea, around the Cape of Good Hope, up the western coast of Africa, and into the Mediterranean. The British monitors left the ships at Gibraltar, after which they traversed the Mediterranean to various ports of disembarkation in Italy (Naples, Genoa, Trieste). The length of the trip provided the Italian officials on board plenty of time to conduct what Ertola has deemed a policy of “rehabilitation” and political reeducation, with the aim of inculcating fascist discipline and patriotism. The means of such reeducation included standard fascist propaganda, such as newspapers and films. Children received particular attention, and a report of the second mission claimed that on arrival in Italy, those “children, who forty days earlier embarked in a state of moral abandonment presented themselves as ordered, disciplined and full of patriotic enthusiasm, singing hymns to the Patria in an exemplary manner, that were well received by all.” Children enlisted in volunteer work on board received a certificate attesting to service as part of the youth organizations of the regime.

On the one hand, these ships served as microcosms (perhaps even heterotopias) of Mussolini’s Italy, with fascism’s particular calculus of consent and coercion on prominent display. Repatriates filled out bureaucratic forms on the promise of an “extraordinary subsidy” (*sussidio straordinario*) available through the Ministry of Africa’s Assistance Office (*Ufficio Assistenza*) in Rome; the regime also made available loans or advances (*anticipazioni*) to families whose breadwinner remained against his will in the former AOI. While employing other classic instruments for forging consensus like film
and ritual, the personnel on board simultaneously undertook tried-and-true practices of surveillance on repatriates and encouraged informers. Members of the PAI, for example, mined repatriates’ letters for any signs of potential subversive (antifascist) sentiments. A 1943 report claimed that such letters caught the civilians with their guard down: “The censorship of letters, on the return trip [to Italy], gave us the possibility to get to know the minds of the repatriates who had the maximum liberty to write, given that few believed in the possibility of a censorship service on board.” Those on board certainly would have been aware, however, of the monitoring of their everyday behavior, as when PAI officials were entrusted with the nightly screenings of films. The PAI collected information (whether spontaneously volunteered or actively solicited is not clear) about particular repatriates suspected of antifascism or collusion with the enemy. Several repatriates were noted as members of Italia Libera, an antifascist group with a branch in AOI, and suspected of serving as English spies.

On the other hand, concerns about the repatriates’ promiscuity and indolence after life in internment camps embodied common and pervasive fears about refugees, worries that would become more prominent after the conflict’s end with the arrival in the metropole of significant numbers of displaced Italians and foreigners. Indeed, UNRRA would go so far as to make its motto “Helping people to help themselves,” stressing the rehabilitative aspect of assistance to DPs and others, in contrast to charity-based models that positioned recipients as passive dependents. As had occurred on the navi bianche, after the war international agencies like UNRRA and its successor the IRO devoted particular attention to children and the dangers to home societies posed by those abandoned to their own devices during the conflict. In 1945, Martha Branscombe, who temporarily headed UNRRA’s Child Welfare Section, wrote of the organization’s enormous task in assisting war-torn children subjected to “shock and emotional disturbances”; these children, she warned, “have been schooled in deception and sabotage.” A year later, educator and writer Alice Bailey similarly sounded the alarm about “those peculiar and wild children of Europe and of China to whom the name ‘wolf children’ has been given. They have known no parental authority; they run in packs like wolves; they lack all moral sense and have no civilized values and know no sexual restrictions; they know no laws save the law of self-preservation.” If, during the war, Italian fascist officials worried that children from the colonies lacked adequate discipline as figli di lupo (“children of the wolf,” one of the fascist youth group designations), after 1945 the specter of unruly and asocial “wolf children” symbolized the threat to the family posed by the war just past.
The role of the *navi bianche* as schools of fascist (re)education and refugee rehabilitation came to an abrupt halt midway during the final mission in July 1943, when news of Mussolini’s ousting from the Grand Fascist Council and subsequent arrest on the orders of King Victor Emmanuel III became known. Marshal Pietro Badoglio—the Italian commander who had presided over the 1936 conquest of Addis Ababa and then served as Italian Ethiopia’s first governor-general—became Italy’s new prime minister. Badoglio ordered fascist insignia removed from the four *navi bianche* then making their way to the peninsula. Italy’s division into two hostile governments after the Badoglio government’s armistice with the Allies on 8 September 1943 meant that any further such organized naval evacuations from AOI were postponed until after the war. Just twenty days after the capitulation of the Italian military, Colonel Mirehouse in the British War Office noted that a fourth mission from AOI must be “shelved for the time being.” Mirehouse reported that three thousand Italians in Ethiopia awaited repatriation, although many had changed their minds after the events of 8 September, and another fifteen hundred or so civilians and “decrepit prisoners of war” remained in Somalia. 69

One British observer in Somalia in July 1943 claimed a muted response on the part of Italians still there. The most immediate concerns expressed were for those repatriates still en route to Italy:

In assessing local reactions [in Somalia] to the Sicilian campaign and to the fall of Fascism, certain local factors must be taken into consideration. These events happened at a time when the dominant concern of the local Italians was the repatriation of over 2,000 women and children. Almost every person in Mogadishu had a relative amongst the repatriates on the high seas, and the immediate interest was their safe arrival in Italy. These personal sentiments almost completely overrode interest in the campaign, and most comments were confined to regret that the repatriation from Somalia, several times delayed, had arrived so late that their families would arrive in Sicily to come under British rule once more. . . . The current belief had been that if fascism fell, it would do so in a bath of blood. Consequently, the event was greeted with relief that their home-returning families would not be subjected to the dangers of internal troubles. 70

Just as the British tried to discern the political sentiments of those Italians still in AOI and those repatriating home on the third mission, so too did Italian consular officials. In July 1943, incidents occurred in places like the city of Lorenco Marques (today’s Maputo) in Portuguese Mozambique,
one of the provisioning stops for the repatriation ships. After sending hostile letters to the Italian consul Campini, Italians there took down Mussolini’s image and replaced it with that of the king, shouting, “Viva il Re!” (Long live the king!). Campini ordered the arrest of the ringleaders. British observers appeared more bemused than anything, noting that Campini’s lack of “scruples” meant that he would soon become an antifascist once he understood the ramifications of the Duce’s fall.71

The rapid mutation of the situation on the Italian peninsula meant that the remaining civilian population of Italians in former AOI, as well as Libya, would largely stay in place there until war’s end. There were some exceptions, such as ten-year-old Mario Schifano (born in Homs, where his father directed the archaeological excavations at Leptis Magna), who in 1944 left Libya with his mother and siblings by plane for Rome. Schifano—whose image “When I Remember Giacomo Balla” graces this book’s cover—would later become a leading proponent of the Italian Pop Art movement.72 Those individuals who did come to the peninsula from Africa during the latter stages of the war experienced distinct and uneven conditions of assistance, depending on whether repatriates found themselves in the territory under the control of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI) at Salò or the areas liberated by the Allies.73 Schifano and his family, for instance, received accommodation in the refugee camp at Cinecittà on the outskirts of Rome.

In East Africa and Libya, the British found it useful to retain some of the Italian civilians still resident there working in areas such as agriculture.74 Italian farmers who remained on the land concessions of the INFPS and ECL in Libya (administered by the BMA between 1943 and 1951), for instance, no longer labored to provide foodstuffs in service to the dream of Italian empire, fascist economic autarchy, or (ultimately) small farmer self-sufficiency but rather to feed Allied troops. For the farmers, the demand created by the BMA brought about relative prosperity, although this changed by 1947 with the constriction of demand as troops went home and then prolonged drought set in.75 Despite a few good years, many farmers became further indebted, and the overall quality of land development suffered, as settlers planted crops that offered immediate profits at the expense of planting trees and undertaking other long-term improvements.

The BMA found that the absence of Italians to work the land in places like Cyrenaica, where almost all Italian farms had been abandoned by 1943, created its own set of problems. As a result, in 1943 the Agricultural Department of the BMA instituted a “Hill Farms Scheme” in Cyrenaica in which Libyan farmers worked the land under the supervision of a BMA officer. On the rich Barce plain, the “Administration undertook direct
responsibility for the cultivation of the Domain areas [ex-ECL], as well as for some private estates.” Italian and German prisoners of war harvested wheat.  

Critical food shortages in East Africa similarly prompted the British military administrations there to encourage the resumption of agricultural activities by natives and, where possible, remaining Italians. Lord Rennell claims that by the end of 1943 agricultural output in Eritrea exceeded that of the Italian period and that Somalia became self-supporting in terms of food production. The British took particular pride in this achievement, given that under Italy neither Eritrea nor Somalia had boasted significant numbers of Italian agricultural settler families, in contrast to Libya and Ethiopia. In Somalia, for example, the Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi (with sixteen thousand cultivable acres) remained throughout the Italian period a concession run by employees of the Society for Italian-Somalian Agriculture and worked by largely native labor. Even those areas with Italian settlers like the Genale-Vittoria farm remained reliant on local labor. With the establishment of the BMA over Somalia, a British political officer assumed control at Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi. The BMA encouraged those Italian settlers who had worked the land in places like Juba to return, with the result that “by the end of 1943 most of the reasonably fertile Italian farms were in cultivation under food crops, mainly maize, either by Italians or Somalis.” The administration in Somalia also organized an industrial exhibition in December 1943 with the aim of stimulating the initiative of Italians and native Somalis alike. In addition, a number of Italian colonists with skills in transport—such as truck drivers and mechanics—worked for the British in the Reserved Areas of Ethiopia.

Although Italians from both Libya and AOI (as well as within different Italian ministries) differed sharply in their assessment of their treatment by their British overlords, there is little doubt that between 8 September 1943 and war’s end Italian civilians who remained in Italy’s African territories on the whole faced less danger than did Italy’s civilian populations in its Balkan territories: Albania, the Dodecanese Islands, Venezia Giulia, and parts of the Kvarner (Rijeka/Fiume, the islands of Cres/Cherso and Lošinj/Lussino), and Dalmatia (Zadar/Zara, Palagruža/Pelagosa). In these areas, the precipitous collapse of the Italian military and the Badoglio government’s armistice with the Allies exposed Italian populations (military and civilian) to reprisals by either German or local forces, as well as other privations of war (notably hunger). As the result of occupation by the Yugoslav partisan forces and executions, followed by German occupation and intensive Allied bombing that destroyed much of the city, for instance, Zadar/
Zara’s Italian population had almost completely abandoned the city by 1944. Many would relocate to Istria, only to face displacement once again after the war.

In recent years, episodes of violence that followed the collapse of Italian military control—notably the killings carried out by Yugoslav partisans in the karstic pits around Trieste and Istria known as the foibe and the massacres of Italian troops in places like Kos (part of the Italian Isole Egeo) and Cephalonia at the hands of their former German allies—have received considerable attention. Long a focus of political contestation (and capital) at the local level in Trieste, by the late 1990s the foibe killings had entered broader public discourse in Italy. A memorial complex centered on these executions has now become bound up with the Giorno del Ricordo or Memory Day created in 2004 to commemorate the exodus from Istria-Dalmatia-Venezia Giulia. Material on the massacres of Italians by German troops at Kos/Cos, Leros/Lero, and Kefalonia/Cefalonia instead came to light with the discovery in 1994 of the so-called “armoire of shame” (armadio della vergogna) in Rome, which contained details of various war crimes committed in Italy. During World War II and even today, the issue of violence remains key to which types of migrants potentially earn the designation of refugee and the moral capital attached to attendant claims for recognition and restitution.

Deportations, Detentions, and Assistance: The Italian Aegean Islands and Albania from 8 September 1943 to Liberation

In both the Italian Aegean and the Italian protectorate of Albania, the events of 8 September left Italian soldiers and civilians alike confused and uncertain about how to react. Ultimately, it would create conditions for repatriation very different from those in Africa, with the result that large-scale repatriation of Italian civilians would occur only after the conflict’s end. Nevertheless, the picture of immobility (in contrast to the wartime evacuations out of AOI on the navi bianche) should not be overdrawn. In February 1943, for example, 322 women and children were repatriated from the Aegean Islands to Venice and then taken by train to various destinations on the peninsula. Likewise, documents from the ICRC assert that Greek, Italian, Muslim, and Jewish refugees made their way to nearby Turkey from the islands once German occupation began. Then, as now, these clandestine flights in small boats carried the risk of shipwreck and drowning. As the ICRC delegate Raymond Courvoisier put it, “A very high number of these unfortunates disappeared in the waves as a result of the terrible storms raging in those
regions, or were carried by the current and crushed on the reefs.” The Brit-
ish established a reception center on the island of Simi, for those who sur-
vived the crossing.84

In these territories, as in the metropole, many Italian soldiers initially
believed the 1943 armistice meant the end of the war and the possibility to
go home. In the Dodecanese Islands the failure of British troops—employing
an inadequate “shoestring strategy”—to wrest control of the Aegean from
the German military after battles at Kos/Coo, Leros/Lero, and Ródos/Rodi
meant that those Italian soldiers who escaped massacre at the hands
of the Germans subsequently found themselves disarmed, rounded up, and
deported to the Reich.85 Some of these POWs never arrived at their destina-
tion; the British navy sunk the SS Gaetano Donizetti, and all 1,800 aboard died,
for instance, while the Orion shipwrecked, and only 21 of some 4,115 Italian
prisoners aboard survived.86 The islands’ highest-ranking Italian officials—
Admirals Inigo Campioni and Luigi Mascherpa—instead found themselves
sent to lager 64/Z in the concentration camp of Schokken, a camp section
reserved for “traitors” who refused to adhere to the Repubblica Sociale Italiana
headed by Mussolini until his death at the hands of partisans on 25 April
1945. After several months, the Germans sent Campioni and Mascherpa to
face trial and execution in northern Italy.87 The failure of the Allied cam-
paign to take the islands also sealed the fate of Rhodes’s Jewish population,
deported en masse on 23 July 1944, first by boat to Piraeus and then by train
to Auschwitz.

A minority of Italian soldiers and functionaries accepted collaboration
with the Germans and carried on the task of administering the islands.
The local fascist party group was reconstituted under the centurione Valenti
Dante, commander of the Port Militia (Milizia Portuaria), and war corre-
respondent Renato Burrini. Some 450 Italian civilians, mostly workers, still
adhered to the fascio.88 With Mussolini’s rescue by German paratroopers and
the establishment of the RSI by 23 September 1943, a military formation in
the islands pledging loyalty to the RSI and under the command of Captain
Ferdinando Cerulli came into being. Scholars have debated how to evaluate
the actions and complicity of other Italians—required to swear loyalty
to Mussolini’s puppet state at Salò—who led the Italian community in the
Dodecanese during the German period. In particular, opinion has diverged
over how to judge the actions of Iginio Faralli, who became civilian governor
of the islands upon the arrest of Admiral Campioni, and mayor of Rhodes
Antonio Macchi. Whereas many authors have tended to accept the self-
justifications offered by these men that they accepted a deal with the devil
in order to protect Italian soldiers and civilians alike (by giving Italian soldiers
positions within local government and thus helping them evade deportation, for instance), scholars Marco Clementi and Eirini Toliou have instead emphasized their complicity with the destruction of the islands’ Jewish population. Clementi and Toliou note that Faralli apparently had valuables from a deported Jewish family in his home (as revealed by documents concerning those goods’ theft by two servants and a maid). They likewise emphasize Macchi’s silence after the war over the commune’s role in drawing up the deportation list of Jews.89

For our story here regarding the experience of Italian civilians, Macchi played a decisive role, given his efforts (much lauded after the war) to assist at least some of the islands’ civilian populations. In the final winter of the war, the islands faced severe food shortages. Whereas food insecurity in these islands was not new—indeed, the problem had prompted several waves of outmigration in the 1930s90—the situation became critical by late 1944. This reflected repeated Allied bombardments of the islands (particularly Rhodes), German requisitions of livestock and grain, and naval blockade. Things had become so bad that in January 1945 the German occupiers authorized the movement of civilians out of the islands, with a number of Italian citizens going to Syria, and Turkish subjects and other Muslims migrating from the islands to Turkey.91 Italians frequently made their way first to Marmaris in Turkey and then on to Syria, as well as Simi and Cyprus. As with clandestine migrations out of the islands, there occurred shipwrecks, as in the case of two ships that sank in the waters off Marmaris in January 1945. In this instance, however, the Turkish authorities had been expecting the migrants and rescued and housed them.92

Outmigration ameliorated but did not resolve the fundamental problem of inadequate provisioning. In his capacity as mayor of Rhodes, Macchi appealed to the International Red Cross for food relief in the face of famine. Macchi’s action was not unilateral, however. Heads of religious communities in Rhodes (the Catholic archbishop, the Orthodox metropolitan, and the Islamic mufti) similarly called on the ICRC to provide humanitarian assistance. Ester Fintz Menascé cites testimony that in early February 1945 these religious leaders also made clandestine contacts with the British on Simi to provide humanitarian assistance to the Dodecanese’s civilians, aid that Macchi facilitated at risk to himself.93

Shortly thereafter, a Red Cross team, headed by Raymond Courvoisier and Luigi Jaquinet, organized three shipments of food and critical supplies for the islands in February and March 1945. In recounting the results of this work, Courvoisier—who spent two months in Rhodes—highlighted the tragic situation of the civilian population and the high mortality rate due
to famine. One report claims that at the time of Courvoisier’s arrival in Rhodes in February 1945 an average of six or seven deaths a day occurred due to hunger. As late as April 1945, a memo from the Italian consul general in İzmir/Smirne highlighted the problem of food on Rhodes as “an exasperating nightmare not only for the population but also for the troops of the [Italian] garrison who, with the stocks upon which they relied almost depleted, receive as a daily ration a piece of bread and a bit of vegetable soup.”

From their base on Simi, British forces liberated Rhodes on 9 May 1945. The British then established military administration over the Dodecanese, which operated until the islands’ union with Greece on 31 March 1947. The BMA continued to employ ICRC assistance to supplement the work of the BMA Central Relief Committee, created in May 1945. In addition to two representatives from the BMA, six representatives from the Greek community and one representative each from the Turkish and Italian communities made up this body. Macchi, no longer mayor, now became head of the Commissione per la tutela degli interessi Italiani nel Dodecaneso (CTIID), an assistance committee for local Italians created in June 1945 and recognized (if never officially authorized) by both the Italian government and the BMA. As a summary report put it, the work of the committee was financed initially by individual contributions from well-off local Italians, donations in kind (such as fresh vegetables, grain, and wool) from local branches of Italian companies, free medicines from the Italian-owned pharmacy Rialdi, and donations of services by Italian doctors in order to alleviate the poverty and suffering of their co-nationals. With the help of Father Pier Grisologo Fabi, deacon of Rhodes, the assistance section (sezione assistenza) of this committee first conducted an informal census of needs. Subsidies to the needy were channeled through the diocese of Santa Maria della Vittoria, indicating the important role played by the Catholic Church in aiding Italians on the islands.

As its name suggests, the Commissione per la tutela degli interessi Italiani nel Dodecaneso focused exclusively on aiding Italians, drawing not only on private donations but also funds provided by the Italian Red Cross and those from the BMA’s Central Relief Committee earmarked for Italians. The committee helped house and feed 987 Italian “refugees” (profughi) from the island of Kasos/Casos. Of these, 378 were considered (ex-)military and lodged in the POW camp at Peveragno to await repatriation. This number included children and wives of these former military personnel, underscoring the blurriness here of categories such as military and civilian. Other Italians displaced from the outer islands lived temporarily in Rhodes Town, receiving assistance from the CTTID. The committee also helped in the maintenance of Italian schools and hospitals, published an Italian-language newspaper,
ran camps for Italians, and facilitated repatriation. As noted earlier, the bulk of repatriation from Italy’s Aegean Islands would occur in this post-conflict period and with the cooperation of a variety of actors, notably the Italian government, the BMA, the CTIID, and UNRRA. Although UNRRA initially argued that Italians, as ex-enemy nationals, did not fall under its remit, it would ultimately reverse its decision and provide aid to both the Italian peninsula and to some “intruded ex-enemy nationals,” including Italians in the Dodecanese and Albania. This help reflected the changed political landscape within which Italian nationals would negotiate their migrations after the war’s end, the topic of the next chapter.

As in the Dodecanese, the armistice of 8 September 1943 had put Italian military personnel in Albania into a precarious position. The Germans who had just yesterday been allies promised repatriation to those Italian military men who turned over their weapons and surrendered themselves. Like the suspicious Italian civilians in AOI who had worried whether the British would honor their promises of repatriation on the navi bianche, many Italian soldiers did not take the Germans at their word. In contrast to Africa, however, the fears of Italians in Albania were not misplaced. Most of the military men who agreed to the Germans’ terms found themselves deported to the Reich to serve as forced laborers. Others hid in the countryside, aided by Albanian peasants. Whereas some of these soldiers literally walked home to Italy, making their way through Yugoslavia to the peninsula, others joined groups of Albanian partisans or the Lëvizja Antifashiste Nacional Çlirimtare, directed largely by the Albanian Communist Party. In several celebrated instances, entire divisions—including the Perugia and Firenze infantry divisions of the Ninth Army—went over to the partisan side. Just twelve days after the armistice, these troops had been reconstituted as Comando italiano truppe alla montagna (Italian mountain command troops) within the Albanian National Liberation Front. Members of various former Italian regiments also came together in the Gramsci Battalion, the only Italian military formation directly incorporated into the Albanian partisan forces.

Against this backdrop of confusion and shifting alliances, Italian civilians in Albania faced increasing hostility on the part of the German occupiers and their Albanian allies in the anticommunist, monarchist Balli Kombëtar (National Front) movement. The Provisional Executive Committee that administered Albania in this period required Italian citizens to obtain residence permits. Many Italian state and parastatal employees lost their jobs. As a result, some Italians sought to return to Italy across the Adriatic in clandestine fashion, paralleling the makeshift voyages from the Aegean Islands to Turkey. On the night of 25 October 1943, for instance, a group of twenty-six
individuals that included thirteen soldiers, two policemen, a painter, a driver, and an employee of the Banco di Napoli made the crossing on a small fishing boat.  

In the hopes of exerting greater control over the movements and activities of Italian civilians, the German command permitted the operation of an assistance committee run and financed by local Italians, the Comitato d’assistenza tra gli italiani (alternatively, Comitato d’assistenza fra italiani). This committee walked a tenuous line, seeking to help Italians within the strictures of German occupation. The committee organized approximately a dozen repatriation convoys of Italians that made their way to Italy through Axis-controlled territories: first to Yugoslavia and then to either Hungary or Austria. Members of this group soon ran afoul of the Germans, with its president and two other members arrested by the SS on the charge of sabotage. A former soldier claims the committee furnished as many as four thousand military personnel with identity cards that enabled them to pass as civilians and thus escape deportation to Germany. In Tirana, the cultural organization Società Dante Alighieri likewise helped Italian soldiers elude the Germans. Despite these varied efforts, the British Military Mission estimated in February 1944 that at least twenty thousand Italian soldiers remained in Albania.

In November of that year, Tirana was liberated, and the nascent communist regime of Enver Hoxha moved from Berat to Tirana. Members of the Gramsci Battalion featured in the military parades celebrating the country’s liberation, symbolizing an Italo-Albanian antifascist brotherhood given considerable emphasis by the Albanian partisans. At this point, however, the Italian government under Badoglio in the south had no formal diplomatic relations with Albania, complicating questions of assistance to Italian civilians and soldiers alike. In negotiating the repatriation of Italians still in Albania, the Italian government appointed General Gino Piccini, former commanding officer of the Firenze Division who had gone over to the partisans as part of the Gramsci. In spite of Piccini’s antifascist credentials and the sad condition of many Italian soldiers, the Albanian authorities created numerous obstacles to a mass repatriation of soldiers and civilians. As the war drew to a close, the regime confiscated much of the property of Italian firms and arrested and executed a number of Italians on the charge of sabotage.

Just one month before VE Day, the Italian undersecretary of war and member of the Italian Communist Party Mario Palermo traveled to Albania. This visit resulted in the Hoxha-Palermo Accord, five of whose twelve clauses addressed repatriation. Insisting that Italy and Albania had never officially been at war, the Italians sought—to no avail—to keep their requests
for repatriation separate from Albanian demands for restitution of properties seized during the Italian occupation. This accord reveals the difficulties in practice of isolating repatriation as an exclusively “humanitarian” question, distinct from larger political contentions between Italy and its former protectorate. Ultimately, the agreement guaranteed the urgent need to repatriate all Italians who desired it, regardless of their status as military personnel or civilians. Italy assumed sole responsibility for effecting repatriation, which created many practical difficulties. Although the Albanian government reserved the right to retain Italian specialists needed for critical reconstruction projects, the accord stipulated that these specialists be replaced over time by personnel voluntarily sent from Italy on specific work contracts. Such an agreement was not without precedent in the recent history of former Italian territories. In 1941, for example, the Ethiopian government of Haile Selassie had requested that the British authorities in Ethiopia there retain as many as four thousand Italian workers with critical industrial expertise.

In July 1945, the Italian government followed up its efforts to facilitate repatriation by sending the consul Ugo Turcato to Tirana. Sent without an official notification of appointment (lettera d’accreditamento), Turcato found himself stonewalled by the Albanian authorities until he returned to Rome to obtain the necessary credentials. Turcato’s mission unfolded within a rapidly mutating political climate in Albania, as the regime drew closer to both the Soviet Union and a Yugoslavia eager to incorporate Albania within a Yugoslav-led Balkan Federation. As the United States and Britain dragged their feet on the question of recognizing Albania, the regime had shut down the Banco di Napoli and the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (the only foreign banks operating in the country at that time), expropriated the goods of several Italian firms, and initiated an anti-Italian campaign in the press that took many of its cues from Yugoslav propaganda. In this climate of growing tension, the Albanian authorities ordered Turcato to quit Albania; he did so on 21 January 1946. Before leaving, Turcato entrusted responsibility for documenting Italian repatriates to two of his secretaries, who worked alongside UNRRA staff. UNRRA had taken over a building previously occupied by the Italian mission and in which some Italian civilians stored personal property. A few weeks after Turcato’s forced departure, Albanian military police carried out a raid on the UNRRA premises in which, according to an UNRRA report, “No reason was given for this apparently unjustified invasion of the private property of UNRRA and no apologies were offered.”

In the interstices of these negotiations between states and intergovernmental organizations like UNRRA there also operated local committees
that furnished assistance to Italians in Albania. In order to fill the vacuum on the ground and aid impoverished Italians, for instance, a Comitato Antifascista Italiano had come into existence in 1944, apparently taking over with the approval of the new Albanian communist authorities from the older Comitato d’assistenza fra italiani. At different points this antifascist committee was referred to as the Gruppo Democratico-Popolare Italiano or, alternatively, the Circolo Democratico Popolare. An internal document from the latter states that the Comitato Italiano Antifascista later dissolved, in the face of the fusion of the Gruppo Democratico Popolare Italiano with the “Circolo Garibaldi.”

Branches of the Circolo Garibaldi existed in Tirana, Shkodër/Scutari, Durrës/Durazzo, Vlorë/Valona, Berat/Berati, and Korçë/Koritza. Members of the Circolo communicated with UNRRA, the ICRC, and the Italian and Albanian governments, suggesting this organization played an important but sometimes slippery role, not only as an advocate of the Italians in Albania but also mediator between very different actors and interests. In the autumn of 1945 and into 1946, for example, the Circolo Garibaldi actively petitioned UNRRA to expedite the repatriation of Italian women and children, as well as needy soldiers, camped out at Durrës/Durazzo, and to supplement the rapidly dwindling food rations handled by the Circolo.

Analysis of documentation contained at the Central State Archive in Albania indicates that although the Circolo may have been born out of the need to provide immediate aid to Italians in Albania (particularly those seeking repatriation), it quickly expanded its scope. Critical gaps in humanitarian assistance thus made for a generative space in which the Circolo could extend its influence and create new kinds of connections between Italians (civilians and ex-military) in Albania. The Circolo contained diverse sectors assigned political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian tasks and framed in terms that proved common to socialist institutions: discipline and control; critique and self-critique; treasury/finances; theater and music; sport; work/labor; press and propaganda; and assistance. Though its statute stated that it remained an apolitical association, the organization not surprisingly stressed an antifascist line and solidarity with Albanians in the partisan fight. Nonetheless, the Circolo declared that it would provide assistance to any and all Italians, including those who had not fought with the partisans. This assistance included food and housing for needy soldiers and civilians, including some Italian women married to Albanian men. Soldiers without shoes also received particular attention in 1944 and 1945. In 1945, the Circolo began to distribute treats to needy children on Epiphany, taking on the role of the traditional witch or befana said to fill children’s stockings.
The Circolo also served as a social center for those Italians still in Albania. Doctor Vittorio Bruschi, who had worked with the partisans after the dissolution of the Parma Division, found himself employed in a Tirana hospital as a result of being deemed a “necessary” worker according to the language of the Hoxha-Palermo accord. The Circolo Garibaldi in that city provided him with a place to socialize and eat with fellow Italians, as well as listen to the radio—a “lifeline” connecting Italians to the mother country. Among other things, the Circolo hosted dances, which served as fund-raisers. Indeed, the Circolo had semi-autonomy in the financial realm, as many documents mention donations by Italian companies in Albania and private citizens. The Italian government also provided monies, although this created its own difficulties. The Turcato mission, for instance, had provided subsidies to members of the Circolo under the table. After the expulsion of the mission and the (illegal) opening of a diplomatic pouch containing receipts of the sums distributed, the Albanian government confiscated these monies.

Whereas mass repatriation of soldiers—including members of the Gramsci Brigade—began almost immediately at war’s end in May 1945, the majority of nonmilitary Italians did not return home until 1946 at the earliest. Some, detained as useful workers, would never return to Italy or would repatriate only in the 1990s after the collapse of state socialism in Albania. In these instances, links between family members in Italy and Albania remained attenuated at best and were frequently severed altogether. This situation echoed that between the armistice and war’s end, when most Italians in Albania neither received news from nor successfully communicated with their families abroad. The Central State Archives in Tirana contain a collection of letters sent to Italians in Albania that never reached their intended recipients. Although the majority of the letters were sent by family members to soldiers in Albania, a number were directed to Italian civilians. One letter sent in June 1945 complains, “Why didn’t they repatriate civilians instead of military personnel? At least these [soldiers] are given food to eat by the government and their families receive a subsidy. And you other poor creatures, how do you make it without work or means?” This plaintive cry highlighted the challenges faced by those Italian citizens in Albania and their families whose experience of decolonization was not one of forced migration but forced immobility.

Civilians in the Italian Empire at the Conclusion of World War II

Some Italian settlers who wished to repatriate found themselves unable to or only did so after many years or, as in the case of some Italians in Albania,
decades. As will be explored in the next chapter, however, others tried to return to or remain in the former possessions and build new lives in changed circumstances. In some instances, these individuals subsequently re-migrated to Italy or abroad only after trying to reestablish themselves in the former Italian possession. When the global conflict ended in 1945, then, what remained of Italy’s overseas territories? As detailed in this chapter, military control over Italian East Africa had been definitively lost as early as 1941. At war’s end, the British administered most of the former AOI under the BMA. Although Emperor Haile Selassie had returned to power in Ethiopia in 1941, four years later the British Military Mission in Ethiopia continued to operate in limited areas. In Libya, the British administered Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, whereas the Fezzan fell under French control. In Italy’s former Balkan territories, the BMA oversaw the Aegean Islands. Together with US forces, the British also administered an Allied Military Government over Zone A of the contested region of the Julian March, whose ultimate fate would only be settled de facto by the 1954 Memorandum of Understanding and de jure by the belated 1975 Treaty of Osimo. Although the Dalmatian city of Zadar/Zara became part of Yugoslavia with the Peace Treaty of 1947, Italy had lost effective control over it after September 1943, and Yugoslav authorities governed it in practice from 1944 onward. Finally, in Albania the 1943 armistice meant the end of Italian rule, and a little over one year later the socialist regime of Enver Hoxha had assumed power.

It was within this highly varied landscape that Italian civilians who had inhabited Italia Oltremare, as well as those parts of the Julian March contested and ultimately annexed by Yugoslavia, made decisions—or had decisions made for them—about whether to remain in those territories or migrate. Although Italy’s inability to guarantee the rights of its citizens in these territories seems obvious in hindsight, it did not necessarily appear to be a foregone conclusion in 1945. Even after the 1947 Peace Treaty with Italy renounced Italy’s right to its colonies and ceded the Dodecanese Islands and large areas of Zone B in Venezia Giulia, Italian politicians on both the right and the left continued to argue for a truncated version of greater Italy, whether it consisted in permitting Italy to retain its pre-1922 colonies (Eritrea and Somalia) or proposals for Italian-administered UN trusteeships over parts of Libya (unsuccessful) or Somalia (achieved). Many Italians who had made their lives in these territories nurtured hope that conditions would permit them to remain where they had built homes, established farms and businesses, buried their dead, and raised their children. Yet others desperately sought to migrate to Italy but found themselves blocked by the authorities of the new states in which they found
themselves (as in the case of socialist Albania and, in some instances, socialist Yugoslavia) or, even, by the Italian government itself.

In the complicated and protracted negotiations over final disposition of (former) Italian territories, the Italian government advanced a number of arguments for retaining some of those possessions. These claims ranged from those of historic right and highly debatable assertions of a majority ethnic Italian population in the case of the Julian territories, to the positive benefits of Italy’s “civilizing mission” and the desirability of paternal(istic) guidance on the road to self-rule for colonized populations (an argument made about most of Italy’s African territories), to Italy’s perennial problems of overpopulation and the necessity of suitable outlets for emigration. While these arguments reflected continuities in Italian colonial thinking that extended from the liberal era through fascism to the First Republic, they also resonated with the belief of many postwar planners that problems of surplus population had contributed to the economic and social problems culminating in the two world wars. As various largely unrealized schemes to relieve population pressure by resettling post–World War II European refugees in parts of Africa and South America reveal, many experts in refugee management viewed the question through the lens of European overpopulation. The Italian government also used this argument, to great effect, to resist any large-scale permanent resettlement of foreign refugees on its territory.

This fear of the danger of surplus population coexisted with a persistent belief that heterogeneity in Central and Eastern Europe—particularly the existence of large ethnic German and Jewish minority populations—had facilitated Nazi territorial aggrandizement. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, at Yalta the Allies sanctioned the expulsions of Volksdeutsche (historic communities of ethnic Germans living outside the Reich). Together with the Nazi policy of Jewish extermination, this postwar “ethnic cleansing” violently unmixed much of the Eastern European borderlands. In this line of thinking, the presence of minorities (especially those with neighboring kin states, like Germany) opened the door to the risk of irredentist instrumentalization; European and global peace would best be served by homogenization, on the one hand, and a broader system of rights protections directed at the individual, rather than collective categories like minorities, on the other. Italians who remained in former territories failed to become a recognized and protected minority with one critical exception—in the socialist republic of Yugoslavia. This reflected socialist Yugoslavia’s delicate balancing of ethno-linguistic diversity together with the politics of bilateral reciprocity, with Yugoslavia’s official stance on Italians in its state conditioned by its desire to protect autochthonous Slovenes within Italy.
From the point of view of the British administrators who at war’s end controlled most of the former Italian overseas possessions in Africa and the Aegean, permitting significant numbers of Italians to remain in those territories—or, worse, amplifying those numbers through return migrations by those Italians evacuated to the peninsula during the war—could potentially create a troublesome minority within the eventual new states. Such a policy would also strengthen Italian demographic claims in the still open debates over the territories’ fate, run the risk of antagonizing the majority (indigenous) populations of the possessions, and challenge British ambitions to assert dominance in the Mediterranean. In light of this, the British favored a policy of one-way repatriation out of the former possessions, even as they teased proposals for international trusteeships over Italy’s African territories. The most well known was the unsuccessful 1949 Bevin-Sforza Plan, which called for a partition of Libya into various trusteeships (with the British administering Cyrenaica, the Italians Tripolitania, and the French the Fezzan); the partition of Eritrea between Ethiopia and Sudan; and the creation of an Italian trusteeship over Somalia. Various British Military Administrations nonetheless had to balance their policy objectives with the desire of the Italian state to regulate carefully the flows of Italian repatriates and refugees into the metropole. Furthermore, the British occupiers had to at least pay lip service to wider humanitarian concerns, notably requests by spouses and children to repatriate back to the former possessions in the name of family reunification.

Just as frequently, however, non-state actors like the ICRC used humanitarian considerations to pressure the Italian government to facilitate return migrations to the peninsula by these civilians. According to one ICRC report, for example, in May 1946 there remained in Eritrea 37,787 Italians. That population included 1,685 unaccompanied women, another 13,557 women and children, and 18,058 single men. Many of these individuals lived in what the report deemed “evacuation camps” (campo di sfollamento). Located at Toselli, Godofolassi/Godofellasie, Ghinda, and Addi Cajee / Adi Caieh, these camps were presumably similar to the one at Dire Daua inhabited by those who, between 1941 and 1943, had awaited their departure on the navi bianche. Postwar migrants sought homeward passage on some of those very same ships. The author of the report concluded that, in light of the uncertainty of how long British assistance to these individuals would continue, “it would be extremely desirable that the Italian government proceed with the repatriation of these persons.” This recommendation points to the frequent foot-dragging by the Italian government on repatriation, which reflected both concerns about the future fate of the possessions and worries about further
destabilizing a peninsula devastated by warfare. Although civilians seeking repatriation included men, women, and children, those advocating for them frequently resorted to gendered and emotive appeals that highlighted the particular vulnerability of women and minors.

Complex debates over and processes of repatriation in practice unfolded in the context of a dramatically altered geopolitical scene, one in which Italy occupied a peculiar position. As the only one of the three major Axis powers to have achieved the status of Allied co-belligerent with the creation of the Badoglio government in the south after September 1943, Italy could make a claim to sharing in the victorious war effort even as it simultaneously suffered treatment as a defeated power. Italian nationals within the former possessions would negotiate their conditions of mobility within the constraints set by Italy’s categorical ambiguity, themselves coming to embody the liminal space between refugee and repatriate, refugee and citizen.