Chapter 4

Displaced Persons and the Borders of Citizenship

The passport that you hold in your hand as you approach the immigration officer has a purpose and a coherence that is governed by its own rules. The passport chooses to tell its story about you. Is that story one of your own making? Can it ever be?

Amitava Kumar, *Passport Photos* (2000)

Crowds were walking towards the station where uniformed policemen stopped and searched them. Jama had never needed identification before, he had no paper saying who he was and where he belonged but from this point on, it would become a priority for him. In this society you were nobody unless you had been anointed with an identity by a bureaucrat.


In *Black Mamba Boy*, the fictionalized account of her father’s difficult childhood, Nadifa Mohamed’s young Somali protagonist Jama makes his way across the African continent in search of his father. He travels from Yemen to Italian East Africa to mandate Palestine and finally to Egypt, where in 1947 he is given work on a ship going from Port Said to Britain. On his journey, Jama is questioned at each turn for his papers. At a certain moment, Jama finds himself threatened with deportation from Egypt, his fate shared by many of his kinsmen. “The whole carriage was full of Somalis who had also entered Egypt illegally, all roamers who had only known porous insubstantial borders and were now confronted with countries caged behind barriers.”1 While Mohamed likely overstates the openness of colonial borders, she does capture a critical moment in time—the birth of the postwar international order—as states, borders, and citizenship regimes were redefined and solidified as a result of the Second World War, the global refugee crisis, the beginnings of decolonization, and the emergence of what would become the Cold War.
Historian Silvia Salvatici has characterized the postwar management of migratory flows of Italians from the former territories and of non-Italian displaced persons as producing a “binary regime for refugee care—[setting off] ‘nationals’ versus ‘internationals,’” a regime that reflected the broader “rescue of the nation-state” enshrined in postwar intergovernmentalism. Similarly, Italy’s loss of empire and debates over classifying displacees produced a binary citizenship regime whose primary differentiation lay between citizens and aliens. At first glance, this appears a rather commonplace and uninteresting observation. After all, isn’t the goal of citizenship to sort people into the categories of citizen and alien? In reality, however, the process of (re)making citizenship in Italy after 1945 flattened and simplified the complex hierarchical structure of citizenship that had existed during Italy’s colonial era.

In theory, the distinctions that emerged after 1945 in Italy between citizen and foreigner—like those between national refugee and international refugee—were clear. These binary distinctions implied a division of labor and entitlements. The Italian state was responsible for its own citizens and national refugees, while foreigners remained under the protection of their country of citizenship. Those foreigners with no recourse to their home governments, who were stateless or who qualified as international refugees, instead became the responsibility of the UN agencies (first UNRRA, then the IRO, and subsequently the UNHCR) or organizations like the IGCR and ICEM (later the International Organization for Migration, or IOM). As evidenced in chapter 3, however, in practice there existed a good deal of ambiguity and debate as to who should or would help Italy’s “own” refugees. These debates over assistance reflected deeper dilemmas over determining just who among the displaced counted as an Italian.

In teasing out these ambiguities and entanglements, then, Salvatici’s language of binary regimes proves most useful when we draw on the multiple meanings of the Italian term binari. Binari may refer not only to binaries and binarisms but also to tracks in both the figurative and literal sense. Like train tracks, which can run parallel, converge, or intersect at switching points, at key moments in the early postwar period the regimes of juridical classification and assistance established to manage the displaced in Italy intersected and overlapped. While in theory, for example, the Italian state ran camps for its nationals displaced from the lost possessions in Africa and the Balkans, and the intergovernmental UN agencies maintained eligible foreign refugees in IRO/UNHCR camps, in practice Italians often lived alongside foreigners in camps like that at Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste or Aversa, near Naples, or Cinecittà in Rome. Likewise, there existed a whole series
of individuals and groups whose ambiguity reflected categorical confusion and crossings and switchings across the tracks. Indeed, this book has highlighted the extensive ideological and practical labor involved not just in the bureaucratic “anointing” of identity (to return to the Black Mamba Boy’s protagonist’s assessment of the new era dawning in 1947) but also in the consolidation of truly categorical categories, that is, unambiguous and clear-cut distinctions. Though the citizen/alien distinction seems commonsensical and unremarkable today, it was rearticulated in postwar Italy through the process of reckoning with the dual displacements of decolonization and war. This chapter examines these post-1945 transformations, first offering a brief discussion of the development of Italian citizenship codes during the era of imperial expansion before turning to detailed analysis of those displaced persons whose statuses challenged and tested the limits of Italian republican citizenship, as well as the incipient category of international refugee.

Italian Mobilities and Citizenship before 1945

Most scholarly genealogies of citizenship in Italy stress how citizenship codes and related documentary instruments such as passports, entry and exit visas, and identity cards—constituting what Horng-luen Wang has deemed the “regime of mobility”—developed largely in response to the challenges of people leaving the Italian peninsula, rather than migrating to it. In his influential work on the creation of what he calls the “passport regime,” for example, John Torpey has argued that the 1901 Italian Passport Law that required transatlantic travelers to hold a valid passport before purchasing passage “arose not from an urge to choke off exit,” as many critics at the time claimed, “but rather a desire to ensure that Italian emigrants would not be denied entry into American ports.” Indeed, from the beginning of Italian statehood, Italian lawmakers repeatedly endorsed a notion of citizenship grounded in a belief that nationality (nazionalità) constituted a tenacious bond that could endure emigration and be passed down to descendants in the diaspora. As a result, after a series of parliamentary debates the new Italian state embraced a category of citizenship largely rooted in jus sanguinis, or the right of blood.

Sabina Donati has argued that, in contrast to the much better known example of Germany’s descent-based citizenship regime, the rules put in place in 1865 in Italy “endorsed a relatively inclusive definition of national citizenship that, together with the jus sanguinis rule, took into account the presumption
that birth combined with long years of settlement in the country as well as
with civil and military service rendered to the state were sufficient factors
to transform aliens into Italians.”⁶ Naturalization nonetheless came in two
forms—small or *piccola naturalizzazione* (with only local rights) and large or
*grande naturalizzazione* (full political rights). In the period between 1861 and
1912, full naturalization remained rare (with fewer than twenty cases).⁷ In
those exceptional cases where colonial subjects requested naturalization dur-
during this period, the overriding criteria determining approval appear to have
been “good conduct and the role played in serving the colonial State.”⁸ As
such comments imply, the issue of foreigners in Italy was hardly a novelty by
the twentieth century, even if foreigners turned naturalized citizens were.
Rather, “foreign residents in Italy have long been a key element in national
self-definition.”⁹

Between 1861 and 1943, Italian policies toward immigrants became
increasingly exclusive. Although groups of Hungarian and Russian refugees
in Italy had provoked some concerns during the liberal era, for example,
it was only during World War I that the Italian state began to require and
scrutinize the passports of foreigners seeking to enter the country. As Tor-
pey notes, “The papers necessary for moving around within Italy as a for-
eigner”—which included not only passports but consular visas from the
point of departure, as well as registration documents made within twenty-
four hours upon arrival in Italy—“began to multiply.”¹⁰ Despite the fact
that the number of aliens present in the country at the time of Italy’s entry
into the Great War remained small, “spy fever and Germanophobia spread
throughout the country,” with German wives the particular object of fear,
and antisemitism also figuring in nationalist propaganda. Over the course of
the conflict, the Italian government issued over thirty decrees pertaining to
“enemy aliens” and interned many of them (particularly those from Austria-
Hungary) in Sardinia.¹¹

These strictures on aliens were accompanied by increasing control over
the movements, internal and external, of Italian nationals, largely in the
attempt to prevent flight by conscription-age males. It was only in 1926,
however, that centralized supervision of immigrants—which increasingly
became bound up with other issues of public order, such as the monitor-
ing of politically “subversive” elements—received extended attention from
state authorities. In the same year, the fascist regime also passed laws that
permitted the stripping of citizenship from Italians based on their “politi-
cal character” or if they behaved abroad in a manner that diminished the
“prestige” of the Italian race, evidence of the state’s willingness to use
citizenship explicitly as cudgel. Three years later, the regime created the Central Registration Bureau for Aliens; Russians, Albanians, Spaniards, and foreign Jews constituted the primary groups of immigrants and refugees monitored by authorities. In contrast, then, to those like Torpey who see the particular dimensions of Italian citizenship as largely the product of a protective gesture prompted by Italian emigration abroad, I argue here that focusing on the dialectical articulation of inclusion-exclusion both at home and abroad (including but not limited to the metropole-colony) proves more instructive.

Italian citizens who went abroad to work had successfully lobbied for changes to the Civil Code of 1865, which ultimately resulted in the new citizenship law of 1912. This law reinforced the conception of Italian citizenship as based primarily on ancestry and stipulated that (with some exceptions) Italian nationality passed on to descendants could be lost only through choice or voluntary action. If the “spontaneous” acquisition of foreign nationality had resulted in the loss of Italian citizenship, the latter could be attained by repatriating to Italy and “‘after two years of residence in the Kingdom’ (art. 9, para. 3, Law 555/1912).” At the same time, the 1912 law also made naturalization for “aliens of non-Italian nationality” more difficult, highlighting the ways in which inclusionary and exclusionary policies remained entangled. The 1992 citizenship law repeated this pattern, facilitating acquisition of citizenship by members of the diaspora and tightening the path to naturalization. By contrast, individuals who could make some claim to Italianness and who hailed from lands viewed as “historically” Italian—such as the Veneto (under Habsburg control until 1866), Malta, Corsica, and the Republic of San Marino—had an easier time of acquiring either denizenship (residency rights) or full citizenship. The 1912 law also abolished the distinction between small and large naturalization for metropolitan citizenship, even as the acquisition of colonies from the 1880s onward made for a new hierarchy of citizenship statuses in Italia Oltremare. Valerie McGuire has noted the noncoincidental timing of the 1912 citizenship law and the acquisition of Libya and the Aegean Islands, with the law entrenching the link between notions of blood and citizenship.

Until Italy began its course of colonial expansion in Africa in the 1880s, the terms denoting Italian citizens had included cittadini (citizens), sudditi (subjects), and regnicoli (subjects of the realm). These were often used interchangeably and with relatively little precision. With the acquisition of territory in the 1880s and 1890s in what today forms parts of Eritrea and Somalia, however, the term suddito or subject became reserved for native peoples in the colonies and cittadino or citizen for the Italian in the metropole or colony.
In Eritrea, for example, the Royal Decree of 2 July 1908 (Regio Decreto 2 luglio 1908, Ordinamento giudiziario per l’Eritrea) codified these distinctions and became a foundational juridical text for questions of colonial citizenship. As Donati puts it in her pioneering study of Italian citizenship, “The notion of citizenship thereby gained its full significance and was to be used to distinguish the higher and thicker status of the Italians from the lower one held by the native subjects.”

On the one hand, then, colonialism introduced the binary logic of metropole/colony, settler/native, and citizen/subject. On the other, it led to complex differentiations between and within the populations of Italy’s overseas possessions as Italy expanded. As we know, Italy’s victory in the 1911–1912 Italo-Turkish War brought Italy two additional territories: Libya and the Dodecanese Islands. In contrast to its East African possessions, in Libya the Italian liberal regime created an intermediate form of citizenship—cittadinanza italiana in Tripolitania e Cirenaica—as a reward for loyalty and service to Italy; this contrasted with the general subject status accorded the “indigenes” of Libya. Alessia Maria Di Stefano has gone so far as to deem Libya under liberal Italy a “juridical laboratory” characterized by a multinormativity that acknowledged and recognized existing legal codes, including Ottoman regulations, Sharia, and rabbinical law. Statutes passed in 1919 promised Libyans near equal rights to Italians, as well as representation in elected assemblies. Such equality never materialized in practice, however, and under fascism, this special Italian citizenship in Libya would be reformulated as cittadinanza italiana libica, often referred to (imprecisely) as piccola cittadinanza or “little citizenship.” Small citizenship carried neither political rights, such as the right to vote, nor the obligation of military service. In 1939, a new wrinkle would be added with the possibility of cittadinanza italiana speciale for select Libyans from Cyrenaica and Tripolitania as a form of individual naturalization. Although a proposal for a similar special citizenship for Eritreans and Somalis who loyally served empire failed to come to fruition, it revealed how even within AOI the regime viewed (and sought to reward) certain populations as more loyal than others.

In the Dodecanese Islands, by contrast, Italy initially kept in place Ottoman codes of belonging, given that Italy occupied this archipelago from 1912 on but only formally acquired the islands in 1923. Beginning in the fifteenth century with the Republic of Genoa, the Sublime Porte had made a series of bilateral trading agreements with various Christian powers that provided those powers’ merchants and other agents with extraterritorial rights. This “capitulatory regime” gave rise to various groups of protégés living in
Ottoman territories but claiming the protection of foreign powers, such as France, Britain, and Italy. In the Isole Egeo, these protégés included so-called *Levantini* or Levantines who often made distant claims to Italian ancestry in the maritime Republics of Venice and Genoa. Many, but not all, of these Levantines in the Islands were Jews, and just as the Levant label gestured toward “an amorphous geographic entity” redolent of Orientalist connotations, the Levantine appellation proved at once capacious and indeterminate. The Levantines of the Dodecanese likely included “Italian” protégés expelled during the Italo-Turkish War by Ottoman authorities from Aleppo, Beirut, and Jerusalem. These *Levantini* were among those who acquired the *cittadinanza italiana egea*, or Italian Aegean citizenship, introduced in 1925. Like Italian Libyan citizenship, Italian Aegean citizenship offered a reduced or limited form of Italian citizenship that rewarded loyalty to Italy. Nonetheless, it did accord some citizenship rights, in contrast to the colonial subjecthood codified in the 1936 establishment of AOI, which joined together Eritrea and Somalia with the Ethiopian territory acquired through the brutal Abyssinian war.

Italy’s last major territorial acquisition (leaving aside the military occupation of territories during World War II) occurred in 1939, when Albania and Italy were joined in “brotherly union” and Victor Emmanuel III became “King of Italy and Albania.” In reality a protectorate, Albania retained the civil code that had governed King Zog’s monarchy. As Donati notes, while not actually acquiring full-fledged (metropolitan) citizenship, Albanians nonetheless enjoyed “the most substantial civic position, held *de jure*, by a nonmetropolitan people within Mussolini’s imperial community” in light of “the unprecedented introduction of equality of certain rights between them and the Italian metropolitan.” As we have seen elsewhere, however, there often remains a large gap between theory and practice, and the actual rights enjoyed by Albanians proved remarkably less robust than those on paper. Throughout the period of Italian colonialism, most of the citizenship benefits provided to non-Italians in the Oltremare operated less as rights and more as privileges accorded at the will (and whim) of the colonial power, giving rise to what Nicola Camilleri has deemed a form of “discretional citizenship” (*cittadinanza discrezionale*). Not surprisingly, some officials in the Ministero degli Affari Esteri (MAE) explicitly described the naturalization process in possessions like the Dodecanese as a means of “patronage,” one that operated largely on a case-by-case basis. The Aegean Islands offer a useful case study of the complexities of Italian imperial citizenship and its discretional nature in practice.
Categorical Confusion, I: The Dodecanese Islands and cittadinanza italiana egea

In her study of the Ottoman Empire’s Jewish populations, Sarah Stein highlights how “the emergence of a passport regime” transformed many “Ottoman-born extraterritorial subjects [into] . . . legally liminal subjects with ill-defined rights and responsibilities.”27 The efforts of successor states to compel these former Ottoman protégés to adopt national citizenships often failed, as in the case of Greece and the Jews of Salonica. Whether through conscious resistance of new citizenship practices or lack of understanding of their import or of the procedures by which they could be obtained, many residents and former residents of the Isole Egeo remained in such a state of legal and documentary liminality during the period of Italian control. Residents of the Ottoman Dodecanese—who included Muslims, Christians, and Jews, as well as individuals who self-identified as “ethnic” Turks, Greeks, and Italians—had proved as peripatetic as peninsular Italians, emigrating frequently in search of work and tapping into transnational kin and trade networks that spanned the Mediterranean and beyond. According to Stein, “Italian protégés from Rhodes” were almost all Jewish. Stein estimates a community as large as forty-five hundred Jews on Rhodes at the time the islands came under Italian control. With the advent of World War I, these Jews (as well as Rhodesli Jews living outside the islands) “had been ‘protégé Italians’ for but a few short years. Indeed, those who lived in émigré settings (including South Africa, Rhodesia, the Belgian Congo, Tunisia, and Egypt) received Italian protection through local consuls and representatives despite having never set foot on the island in its [Italian] incarnation.”28

By the 1930s, however, the Italian state did not necessarily recognize as its own all those who claimed status as former protégés, even if some other states like France did view those subjects as “Italian.” For those Dodecanesians living outside the islands, the Second Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 established the procedure for obtaining or retaining Italian protection. Article 34 of the treaty declared,

Turkish nationals of over eighteen years of age who are natives of a territory detached from Turkey under the present Treaty, and who on its coming into force are habitually resident abroad, may opt for the nationality of the territory of which they are natives, if they belong by race to the majority of the population of that territory, and subject to the consent of the Government exercising authority therein. This right of option must be exercised within two years from the coming into force of the present Treaty.29
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Given the extensive network of Dodecanesians, Italian officials not surprisingly found themselves deluged by requests by individuals who had been living outside the islands at the time they came under Italian sovereignty and who had not exercised their right of option within the time limit. The resulting situation of categorical confusion foreshadowed the messiness of the citizenship “option” for residents of both the Dodecanese Islands and the Istrian-Julian-Dalmatian lands laid out in article 19 of the 1947 Peace Treaty, discussed later in this chapter. It also complicates the claims by Italian officials themselves that they had largely sorted out the citizenship question in the islands by 1926. In an actual situation of continued ambiguity, administrators in the Dodecanese treated requests for entry and residence, connected to claims of belonging, in a discretionary manner.

The global Depression that began in the early 1930s heightened the desire of some former inhabitants to return to the islands, while it prompted others to leave. In 1932, for example, officials in the islands noted the movement of workers to Morocco. In that same year, the government of the Belgian Congo began pressuring Italian officials in the Dodecanese to repatriate indigent and unemployed “Italians” from Elizabethville (today Lubumbashi) and Léopoldville (present-day Kinshasa). Referring to those who claimed Italian belonging but had not opted by the terms of Lausanne for citizenship, the islands’ governor Mario Lago underlined, “The crisis of work is felt in the Possession no less than elsewhere. Rather than favor the repatriation of these islanders, it would be better for us to keep them far from the islands, where we have no interest in increasing the population.” Four months later, the secretary-general of the Italian administration in the Dodecanese noted that for reasons of subjecthood (sudditanza) and, above all, for political implications, such requests for repatriation should “be considered with extremely restrictive criteria.” In fact, the secretary continued, “many Dodecanesians resident in Belgian Congo pass for Italian subjects [passano per sudditi italiani], without being such.” Such comments perhaps encoded suspicions about the ethnic provenance of the largely Jewish populations requesting return from the Congo, although into the early 1930s both Mussolini and Lago had looked favorably upon the settlement and naturalization of Jews (in contrast to Muslims) in the islands.

In contrast, requests to emigrate to the Isole Egeo made in the same year by “Italians” in places like Turkey found a more sympathetic reception among officials in the islands. Citing high unemployment among members of the “colonia Italiane” in places like Istanbul, one observer recommended to the MAE that while such emigration must be undertaken with care, “the presence in some centers of the islands of nuclei of our co-nationals could be
considered useful to the aims of Italianization of those lands, a process that the Government of Rhodes follows with tact and prudence."  

While the precise citizenship status and religious background of these (Levantine?) “Italians” in Turkey remains unclear from the documentation, they apparently could make greater claims on the Italian state than either the Italians in Congo or other former residents of the Ottoman Dodecanese. Governor Lago contended that his administration had adopted more generous criteria for “connazionali levantini” seeking to emigrate to the islands than for “expatriate Dodecanese,” the latter term apparently referring to all non-Italian islanders abroad.  

Indeed, documents from the same time period reveal close scrutiny of ethnic “Greek” Dodecanesians and Levantines applying to return to the islands. One such case involved a Greek subject and mariner, Sotirio Sicofilo, who had previously lived in Alexandria and then in Italian Benghazi and Tripoli. Sicofilo requested a one-year visa to Kalymnos. Sicofilo had apparently entered the islands in a clandestine fashion in 1928, but this “crime” was subsequently pardoned by a general 1930 amnesty. Nonetheless, his request to stay on Kalymnos was rejected.  

Of such potential migrants to the islands, Lago cautioned, “It will be necessary to ascertain by the most rigorous means the morality of these new [Levantine] arrivals who, neither being allowed to return to Turkey nor to be expelled [my emphasis], would remain in the islands like a deadweight and discredit to the Regime.” Lago added, “Unfortunately, that little bit of the underworld that exists here is formed in large part by bad Levantine Italian elements who have infiltrated.”  

In a number of instances, requests made by “Italians” from places like İzmir/Smirne with close relatives living on Rhodes were rejected solely on the grounds that the prospects for employment of these Levantini remained dim, the implication being that idle “Levantine Italians” could create disorder.  

By contrast, Lago proposed employing a landing permit (permesso di sbarco) to surveil and regulate the arrival of less desirable Italians. The case of an Italian, Umberto Mancuso, who arrived on a three-month visa to Rhodes in 1932 and then expressed his intention to remain even if he did not secure employment, prompted discussions within the Aegean administration about strictly controlling permits. In this instance, it was urged that obtaining consular approval for a passport should not be sufficient for entry
into the islands. This highlights the ways in which the Italian state sought to employ other types of travel documents to mitigate claims made on it by “citizens” or semi-citizens. Whereas Torpey reminds us, “Formal citizenship is not necessarily the foundation of a claim to a passport for travel,” it is important to keep in mind that in this case neither a passport nor a claim to or possession of a demi-citizenship necessarily provided sufficient grounds for reentry and residence.

Nevertheless, those sudditi who possessed an Italian passport as a result of having opted for one by 1925 and who returned from places like the United States could be granted a visa to the islands without needing the government’s preventive authorization (preventiva autorizzazione)—as long as these subjects were of good moral and political conduct. This example demonstrates both the flexibility and the limits of cittadinanza italiana egea in practice, since officials continued to refer to those who possessed it as subjects and made determinations as to their moral fitness to return.

Within two years, the Italian administration had begun to liberalize its naturalization process, in part to meet the needs of Italian military conscription for an expanding imperial war machine. Despite the criticisms expressed by Governor Lago, the MAE pushed for the expansion of cittadinanza italiana egea even to ethnic Greeks from the islands resident in Egypt and facilitated the transformation of grande naturalizzazione to full metropolitan citizenship through military service. The increasingly explicit racial dimensions of citizenship and the turn toward harder Italianization policies in the islands under the governorship of Cesare Maria De Vecchi (1936–1940), however, soon prompted a bitter debate over the discreitional nature of cittadinanza italiana egea. Valerie McGuire has detailed how Governor De Vecchi zealously enforced the antisemitic legislation of 1938, which included the denaturalization of those Jews who had acquired citizenship after 1919. He did so in the face of opposition from Count Ciano, the minister of foreign affairs, who agreed with the appeals made by Dodecanesian Jews as to the non-revocability of their “small citizenship” status. De Vecchi counterargued not only that cittadinanza italiana egea occupied a place below that of piccola naturalizzazione but that its discreitional nature permitted such rapid reinterpretations and shifts in policies. As McGuire concludes, “The deployment of the anti-Semitic Racial Laws finally laid bare the lack of clarity that had always existed about the juridical construction of Dodecanese inhabitants as either colonial subjects or protected persons of the Italian nation.” Italian officials continued to debate how to operationalize citizenship as questions arose over Jews with Turkish citizenship in the islands.
The ambiguities of citizenship in this Italian possession gave rise to a new set of definitional debates after the war, prompting the creation of the label of “undetermined Dodecanese.” The option clause for the Dodecanese laid out in the 1947 Peace Treaty with Italy that created problems for UNRRA and IRO personnel avoided the language of race that had figured so prominently in the debates of the 1930s. Praising the “innovation” represented by what he called an “ethnical option,” legal scholar Josef Kunz underscored how “the Treaty of 1947 has dropped the criterium of ‘race’ and has decided the problem of ‘language’—mother tongue or customary language.” This contrasted with the vocabulary of race found, for instance, in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty’s option. Nonetheless, the 1947 treaty’s embrace of ethnic identity—which in Italy had long rested juridically on a notion of blood (jus sanguinis)—did not do away with race as completely or handily as Kunz might have wished. Although the fascist regime explicitly racialized citizenship in both the metropole and the Oltremare in the 1930s and 1940s with tragic consequences, the structures of Italy’s citizenship codes had carried racial connotations from at least the beginning of its colonial expansion. The logics of this “vincolo di sangue” (blood tie) would continue to unfold even after empire’s formal end.

Race, Citizenship, and Belonging in Italian Empire

The differing possibilities for legal belonging in Italia Oltremare reflected the differential statuses of the territories, which in turn mapped onto the racial hierarchies of Italian rule over its possessions. After 1934, for example, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania were joined together with the Fezzan as the colony of Libya and in 1939 made a direct department of Italy. The Aegean Islands possessed a similar status as province/department rather than colony, in contrast to AOI. This territorial hierarchy both reflected and refracted racial hierarchies, in particular the perceived putative racial proximity of subject peoples to Italians. As colonizers, for example, Italians often stressed their shared European heritage with the majority Greek subjects of the Dodecanese Islands, even as they pointed to the effects of centuries of Ottoman Oriental backwardness as justifying or necessitating Italy’s “benevolent” and modernizing rule in the archipelago. The recollections of many locals of that period simultaneously highlight their cultural and racial affinity with the Italians, as expressed in the popular saying, “una faccia, una razza,” or “mia
fátsa, mia rátsa” (“one face, one race”), along with the occupiers’ technological superiority.  

Italy’s appeal to Greek (Orthodox) Dodecanesians as fellow “Europeans” nonetheless did not hamper the pursuit of policies of religious and linguistic assimilation, though the governorship of Mario Lago undertook these with greater caution and much less coercion than did his successor, Cesare De Vecchi.  

Nor did this vision of a shared “razza” necessarily embrace other residents of the islands, including Muslims (some of them Turkish citizens) and Jews, as discussed in the previous section. Indeed, De Vecchi’s insistence after 1938 on revoking citizenship and expelling those Jews previously protected by cittadinanza italiana egea reflected the racial logics expressed in the pages of Difesa della Razza, where Umberto Angeli (and others) warned of the need to distinguish “true Italians” from “false Italians,” that is, “Italians in fact” from “Italians by right” (veri italiani / falsi italiani; Italiani di fatto / Italiani di diritto).  

Interestingly, at the 1938 Reale Accademia d’Italia conference on Africa, De Vecchi (like fellow colonial governor Italo Balbo) had assumed a dissident position on the racial laws that criticized the overly zealous application of German-style norms. When the Ministry of Italian Africa protested De Vecchi’s statements, De Vecchi hastily deleted them and stressed his agreement with the need to rigorously enforce antisemitic legislation.  

In the Aegean Islands he proved true to his word in a case of tragic overcompensation. This example underscores the continual push and pull between the administrative centers of power in Rome and in the possessions, as well as the specificities of each of the territories. Where De Vecchi was busily revoking Jewish citizenship and “encouraging” Muslims to emigrate from the Isole Egeo in 1938 and 1939, for example, Muslim Libyans who had served in the Ethiopian campaign instead became eligible in 1939 for a new cittadinanza italiana speciale that recognized their service to empire.  

Overall, the sharpening of racial stratifications in the second half of the 1930s found expression in antimiscegenation laws in the African colonies, the Racial Laws of 1938 that restricted the civil and political rights of Jews, and reversals on the possibilities of citizenship for mixed-race children (meticci) in AOI, all of which would continue to create definitional dilemmas around citizenship long after the regime that had enacted those policies had disappeared. Whereas in the past mixed-race children from AOI (as well as Italo-Libyans) who had been recognized by their Italian fathers could obtain full metropolitan citizenship, this became impossible after 1940. Beginning in 1936, colonial legislation had begun to erode the already limited rights of mixed-race children and their possibilities for citizenship.
No similar prohibition under fascism existed regarding offspring of mixed unions (Orthodox-Catholic or Muslim/Orthodox-Catholic, respectively) in the Aegean islands or Albania, underscoring how these Balkan possessions—and at least some, if not all, of their inhabitants—figured as racially similar to the metropole, despite religious and linguistic difference. When the issue arose after 1945 regarding the citizenship of the spouses (usually wives) of Italian citizens repatriated from these Balkan former territories, however, the similar but not quite the same quality of these subject peoples (as well as the legal status of religiously mixed weddings) opened up a space for ambiguity and even exclusion.

In highlighting these racialized hierarchies of citizenship, it should be noted that the origins, meanings, and salience of racial classifications in Italy (particularly during the fascist era) have provoked considerable, if belated, debate among scholars. For several decades after fascism’s defeat, scholars often contrasted relative Italian indifference to racialist understandings with the enthusiastic promulgation of such appeals by their Nazi allies, a thesis promoted most forcefully by Renzo De Felice. Eliding antisemitism with racialism more generally, De Felice argued that not only did the majority of Italians disagree with the Racial Laws but also that the embrace of antisemitism occurred only during the period of Salò and the German occupation. Scholars like Menachem Shelah, Jonathan Steinberg, and Susan Zuccotti emphasized Italian efforts during the war to rescue both their own Jews and those who came under their control and protection in zones of occupation in France and Dalmatia, lending further support to the widespread view that Italian antisemitism possessed shallow roots.

The careful research of scholars like Michele Sarfatti, however, has challenged the popular thesis of antisemitism as merely an “alien” imposition wrought by the alliance with Nazi Germany. Indeed, the very image of Italians (particularly soldiers and officers) as humane rescuers of Jews during World War II has come into question. Furthermore, a burgeoning body of work has examined the roots of home-grown Italian racial and eugenicist ideas, including but not limited to antisemitism, from the nineteenth century on in a wide range of contexts stretching from the peninsula to the irredentist lands to the colonies and other possessions. Admittedly, a discernible shift occurred with the official promotion from 1938 on of the line that Italians belonged to an Aryan, rather than Mediterranean, race, leading to furious and ever more tortured debates among racial thinkers within Italy. Olindo De Napoli has documented in extensive detail the legal contradictions and circularities created by the introduction of more extreme imperial racial logics into a law system whose foundations rested on Roman principles. Nonetheless,
the emerging scholarly consensus not only highlights the deep roots of racialized ideas and practices in the Italian peninsula well beyond the legal realm but also the complex intertwining of notions of race in both the metropole and overseas possessions, a point seconded by de Napoli.61

While possessing distinct histories, then, Italian stereotypes about southerners or meridionali, depictions of the eastern Adriatic’s Slavic peoples as rural savages deficient in civiltà, antisemitic tropes, Orientalist notions of backward Levantines and rootless Libyan pastoralists, and racist images of African “primitives” shared common grammars of domination and exclusion and, in the context of imperial expansion, nesting logics of social and legal alienness.62 As a result, some scholars have gone as far as to view southerners and so-called allogenous or allogen (Italian citizens of non-Italian ethnicity, such as Slovenes in Venezia Giulia and Germans in Alto Adige) as subject to mechanisms of internal Orientalism and colonialism not so different from that experienced by colonized Libyans or Ethiopians.63 Certainly, the regime itself conceived of the projects of “reclaiming” and purifying domestic and overseas spaces and peoples in quite similar terms. In Venezia Giulia, for example, the Ministry of the Interior launched a project of “bonifica nazionale” or national reclamation in 1931 that possessed many analogues to the reclamation efforts elsewhere in the peninsula and the Oltremare. In this instance, the plan called for eventual expropriation of land held by allogen (ethnic Slovenes), with redistribution to fascist veterans and agriculturalists.64

Despite the discrimination experienced by internal Others like Italian Slo- venes, it must be remembered that as citizens they could make claims on the Italian state that colonial sudditi or subjects could not. Nonetheless, the allogen remained vulnerable to the threat of denationalization in ways that citizens of the old provinces of the Regno did not. As Roberta Pergher notes, for these nonethnic Italians, “citizenship became a weapon for assimilation.”65 Indeed, in practice, the allogen became subject to intense assimilation processes, through often forcible Italianization. As Triestine journalist Ragusin-Righi put it in 1920, the allogen consisted in “new Italian citizens who still need to be cultivated/cultured [but] . . . with time . . . could become truly Italian, even in sentiment.”66 And, as occurred in 1936 when a contingent of nine families (with 180 individuals total) of woodcutters from the Alto Adige were sent to the Dodecanese, allogen could on occasion even be considered appropriate colonizers in the name of Italian empire.67 In this instance, the colonization process was likely simultaneously intended as one of Italianization and fascistization of the colonizers themselves, as was also true with ethnically Italian settlers throughout Libya and AOI.
One consequence of the extended and often fierce debates about the entangled genealogies of racialism in Italy has been to temper the myth of the “good Italian.” As occurred earlier in the context of Holocaust studies, scholars have critiqued tired notions that Italian colonialism proved more humane than that of other European powers by detailing the extreme (even genocidal) violence perpetrated in subjugating territories like Libya and Ethiopia, on the one hand, and by examining moral panics and prohibitions provoked by interracial mixing, on the other. Under fascism, the long-standing practice (indeed, norm) of Italian men in the colonists cohabiting with African women (a form of concubinage glossed in Italian as madamismo) became the object of ever more stringent prohibitions. These were formalized in antimiscegenation laws that preceded the metropolitan Racial Laws focused on Jews. Law 880 of 19 April 1937, for example, made relations of a “conjugal” nature in AOI a crime punishable by between one and five years of prison. In liberal Italy, by contrast, an Italian man could marry a native African but at the cost of a position in colonial administration; in practice, however, this depended very much on the Italian man’s position within the colonial elite. After 1914, mixed-race offspring were prohibited from serving as colonial functionaries. Within two years of the 1937 law, the regime had also begun to apply this prohibition to mixed Italo-Libyan couples. The criminalization of madamato, argues Luciano Martone, was “intended to resolve once and for all the problem of miscegenation, negating absolutely any possibility of integration and citizenship for mixed-race offspring.” Interestingly, too, the 1937 law punished the Italian citizen engaging in this practice, rather than the native, thereby reversing the laxity previously shown toward Italian men who engaged in sexual unions with African natives. The idea of a female Italian citizen pairing with an African male, by contrast, had always aroused horror.

Prior to this, children born of an Italian father and African mother automatically acquired Italian citizenship in those instances (always the exception) where the father legally recognized the child. Although even this rule did not prove straightforward in either theory or practice, the juridical status of “meticci” remained largely unchanged from 1916 until the 1930s. For most of this time, patrilineal descent trumped race in determining whether such children belonged (formally at least) to the Italian national community. In the case of the Tigrinya people of Eritrea, for instance, Giulia Barrera has identified a “‘patrilinear convergence’ between colonizers and colonized: for both groups, paternal descent defined individual identity.” Some of these children attended Catholic mission schools in the colonies in recognition that such children should be raised as Italians. Indeed, even when Italian fathers
abandoned their children, their African mothers often encouraged their offspring to identify as Italians and to practice Catholicism (as opposed to the Orthodox Christianity of the Eritrean Tigrinya), in keeping with Tigrinya conceptions of descent. By the end of the 1920s, Catholic campaigns had also begun to advocate for and draw attention to the growing problem of abandoned and impoverished meticci. As late as 1933, legislation came into effect that permitted children of mixed race in Eritrea and Somalia whose paternity remained unknown or unacknowledged to acquire Italian citizenship, under certain circumstances. The colonial authorities exercised discretionary authority in such cases. However, Law 822 of 13 May 1940, detailing “Norms Concerning Children of Mixed Race,” reversed these earlier policies by prohibiting the recognition of such children by their fathers and rendering all meticci colonial subjects or sudditi.

Parallel policies of racial exclusion converged in the increasing marginalization experienced by Jews resident in Italia Oltremare—where there lived as many or more Jews under Italian control than in the metropole—and the (slightly delayed) application of the Racial Laws there. By 1942, Italian authorities had interned approximately three thousand Cyrenaican Jews at the Tripolitanian camp of Giado (Jado, Jadu); some 560 individuals perished from malnutrition, disease, and forced labor. Others, including Jews with foreign passports, were deported to Italy and onward to Bergen-Belsen. Between 1947 and 1951 some twenty-five thousand Libyan Jews who survived the war would depart in the face of pogroms in 1945 and 1948. The majority of Rhodes’s Jews would perish at Auschwitz. Only the Falasha or Ethiopian Jews (i falascia or falascià in Italian) would escape this tragic fate as a result of AOI’s occupation by the British in 1941. Although the provisional or discretional nature of many of the Oltremare Jews’ legal statuses facilitated the nullification of protection, it must be remembered that the protection offered by the full citizenship held by metropolitan Jews ultimately proved just as precarious.

For our purposes here, then, let us sum up what the complex and multi-stranded histories of racialized categories in liberal and fascist Italy meant for citizenship in theory and practice by the time the war ended in 1945. According to Donati, the creation of a fascist empire (including the occupation of Balkan territories in World War II) had brought some thirteen million Europeans and ten million Africans into an increasingly complex citizenship system grounded in the metropolitan citizen / colonial subject binary but also characterized by many ambiguous, in-between statuses. The fragility of such statuses was revealed in the face of ever greater racialization, as well as the prerogatives exercised by local administrators like De Vecchi in the Dodecanese.
After 1945, a form of republican citizenship would emerge that reflected the new territorial configuration or truncation of the nation and that mapped citizens to national territory more tightly, albeit still imperfectly. With the loss of Italy’s overseas territories came a concomitant loss of its confusing colonial hierarchy of juridical subjecthood. There nonetheless remained problematic categories—including mixed-race children in AOI, foreign spouses, and persons of so called “undetermined” nationality from the Dodecanese Islands and Venezia Giulia—that required both ideological and actual labor to separate the tracks of citizenship (and by extension, the related ones of refugee assistance) into a binary one (citizen/alien), the topic to which I now turn. In this flattened version of republican citizenship, the principle of *jus sanguinis* would remain central, as it had from almost the beginning of Italian statehood.

**Categorical Confusion, II: The Peace Treaty with Italy and the Citizenship Option**

The 1947 Peace Treaty stipulated that individuals in former Italian territories in the Aegean, Adriatic, and the areas that Italy ceded to France could opt to retain Italian citizenship. According to article 19, all “Italians” resident in the ceded territories on or before 10 June 1940 had the legal right (though by no means the obligation) to choose Italian citizenship. Those who acquired or retained Italian citizenship were, for the most part, required to leave the former Italian territory and take up residence in a territorially reconfigured Italy. The treaty stipulated that this depended on the discretion of the state that annexed the former Italian territory. Those who did not opt for Italy instead automatically became citizens of the states that had acquired sovereignty over those territories—Greece, Yugoslavia, and France, respectively.

The principal requirements of Italianness in the case of the option were Italian as the *lingua d’uso* (language of customary use) and *domicilio* (domicile) in Italian territory on the determined date, the former standing in imperfectly for Italian identity. In the context of the Isole Egeo, domicile was more often interpreted along the lines of the Italian civil code as the place where the concerned party held the principal seat of his affairs or interest, whereas for those parts of Venezia Giulia ceded to Yugoslavia, domicile was more typically interpreted as primary residence. Evidence exists, however, for slippage between the two meanings in both contexts. In the territories ceded to France, the French government instead interpreted domicile as “effective and habitual residence.” The notes for a meeting of the Consiglio dello
Stato concerning such diverse legal interpretations of the term “domicile” voiced the pervasive resentment that the Great Powers had decided Italy’s fate at the Paris Peace Conference. The minutes of the meeting complained about the brokering of the treaty terms by “foreign politicians and diplomats belonging, for the most part, to diverse nationalities” who failed to appreciate the legal traditions and specificities of Italy; this presumably included its traditions of citizenship. It should be noted, though, that this problem was not unique to the 1947 treaty; the drafters of the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees also struggled with defining “country of [former] habitual residence.”

Enshrining the principle of reciprocity, article 20 of the 1947 Peace Treaty provided for Italian citizens domiciled in Italy and whose customary language (lingua d’uso or lingua usuale) was one of the Yugoslav languages to opt for Yugoslav citizenship. The treaty did not contain similar provisions for either Greek- or French-speaking Italian citizens in the Italian peninsula. Writing at the time of events, Josef Kunz declared this option process “theoretically correct and apt to avoid difficulties.” He could not have been more wrong. Determining Italianness on the ground proved no easy feat, either in the borderlands of the eastern Adriatic or the former Ottoman Aegean territories, albeit for somewhat different reasons. Nor was the decision as to who possessed the right to opt for Italian citizenship a unilateral one made solely by the Italian government.

In the case of Venezia Giulia, both Italian and Yugoslav governments made decisions on individual option cases, with the Yugoslav government actually rejecting or blocking a number of applications to opt for Italian citizenship. In his analysis of the option process, Kunz highlighted the discretionary power of the Yugoslav government. In those cases where Italian citizens exercised their option for Yugoslav citizenship, such optants “acquire Yugoslav nationality only if the Yugoslav authorities accept their request, which is entirely discretionary with them.” Similarly, from the Italian side, language of customary use remained a “question of fact and proof.” A memo from the Ministry of the Interior, for example, clarified that in practice “lingua d’uso” really should mean “lingua materna” or “the ‘native language,’ the ‘language of the patria,’ that is, the language of the nation to which one belongs.” For Italian authorities, then, speaking Italian in daily use constituted necessary but not sufficient proof of one’s genuine Italianness; in practice, “lingua d’uso” was often taken to imply “lingua di sentimento” or “lingua di cuore” (the language of sentiment, the language of the heart), which in turn was said to indicate the “lingua di Patria.” These glosses on “language of customary use” underscore how,
in the context of sorting out citizenship claims by residents of the former Italian lands along the eastern Adriatic, language stood in as the exterior marker of a deep and interiorized (“di cuore”) ethno-national identity. Concurrent debates in the Constituent Assembly over how to define “Italian nationality” for the case of “italiani non appartenenti alla Repubblica” (Italians outside the Republic) further reveal a (continuing) appeal to “‘origins, to ‘blood,’ to ‘tradition’ as connotative elements of ‘Italian nationality.’”86 During the drafting of article 3 of the Constitution, which guaranteed equal rights to all Italian citizens regardless of religion, sex, or race, heated demands to eliminate the vocabulary of razza or race altogether failed to produce results.87

Given the difficulties in actually determining this “lingua di cuore”—indeed, what bureaucracy has ever been able to know truly the heart of its subjects?—Italian authorities fretted that ethnic Slavs who were former Italian citizens and possessed the requisite Italian fluency were using the option process to infiltrate the border area around Gorizia and Trieste. Documents from the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale of Gorizia to the Presidenza del Consiglio claimed that as many as fifty thousand “white Slavs”—that is, opponents of Tito—were trying to reacquire citizenship, sometimes through fraudulent means such as false statements as to their lingua d’uso. Despite their opposition to Tito, these Slavs supposedly nurtured a “profound hatred of Italy.” In the border city of Gorizia, in particular, this situation appeared to pro-Italian groups to represent a “grave” danger in its potential to destabilize the relationship of the Italian majority to the autochthonous Slovene minority.88 Given the legal impossibility of refusing all such requests to opt and the practical difficulties of establishing lingua d’uso, the Italian authorities sought to transfer these Slavic Italians to other regions in Italy, far from the eastern border.89 These attempts by the Italian and Yugoslav authorities to control and regulate which optants they would recognize as citizens represented assertions of sovereignty by two young regimes still consolidating their legitimacy.

The sensitivity of the border dispute and the imprecision of the citizenship option in practice also complicated the task of the intergovernmental organizations charged with assisting refugees. UNRRA and, after 1947, the International Refugee Organization struggled to interpret whether (and if so, how) their own definitions of eligible international refugees applied to individuals coming from the formerly Italian parts of Istria and Venezia Giulia. Clearly, those individuals who presented themselves at IRO offices seeking assistance such as placement in an IRO-run camp and help to emigrate overseas considered themselves refugees and hoped that the IRO would, too. Some of these
migrants had opted for and received Italian citizenship, others had found their applications blocked, and yet others had not sought Italian citizenship and thus had become de facto Yugoslav citizens but had still made their way to Italy.\(^90\) Who, if any, among these individuals counted as international refugees according to the emerging criteria of international law?

Confronted with the growing phenomenon of “post-hostility” refugees, the IRO had embraced a definition of displaced persons different from that used by UNRRA. Essentially, the IRO narrowed UNRRA’s definition in a process that increasingly excluded those groups we might label internally displaced persons and national refugees. A June 1947 memo laid out the basic terms of eligibility:

To qualify as a person of concern to the IRO, a refugee or displaced person, as defined, must satisfy one of two conditions set up in Section C, paragraph 1 [annex 1 of the IRO constitution]. He must be either (1) a person who can be repatriated and requires the help of the Organization, or (2) a person who, in complete freedom and after receiving full knowledge of the facts, expresses “valid objections” to returning to his country of nationality. The list of objections was intended to be exclusive. However, broad discretion rests with the IRO to determine what is a “political objection.”\(^91\)

The IRO also exercised discretion to determine what constituted the “country of nationality” and whether an individual was displaced outside of it. Initially, IRO officials deemed individuals who had opted for Italian citizenship ineligible for aid. The IRO considered these optants as Italians who “remained” in Italy, despite the fact that Italy’s border had moved, and hence retaining Italian citizenship generally required moving with and to Italy. As stated in a March 1949 “Memorandum on the question of Refugees from Venezia-Giulia,”

Since it was felt by the Eligibility staff of the Italian mission that these persons who are for the most part of Italian ethnic origin, whose language is Italian and who have been Italian citizens since 1918 could have no sound grounds for declining to reacquire Italian citizenship they were declared to be outside the mandate of the organization on the grounds that they are to all intents and purposes in their country of origin and cannot be considered to be bona fide Refugees according to the terms of the IRO Constitution.\(^92\)

The IRO’s acting director-general P. Jacobsen explicitly endorsed the assumption built into article 19 of the 1947 Peace Treaty that language
proved an accurate measure of “origins”—that is, ethno-national identity. While acknowledging that Venezia Giulia proved home to many different groups, including persons of “Austrian” and “Hungarian” background, Jacobsen nonetheless contended that most of these groups would not be of Italian customary language. As a result, in his mind the Italian government bore responsibility for all Italian speakers displaced from the ceded territories. “It is our view that the problem of Italian speaking persons in Italy who have been Italian citizens only recently,” Jacobsen argued, “is at least as much a part of the Problem of the Italian population generally as the problem of the ‘Volksdeutsche’ is part of the problem of German populations.”

In advancing this position, Jacobsen ignored the earlier assessment by Italy’s IRO head, G. F. Mentz, who maintained in a letter to W. Hallam Tuck, director-general of the IRO, that comparison of the Venezia Giulia refugees to the Volksdeutsche was unwarranted. As Mentz put it, the latter category “is a very particular and negative exclusion based on racial terms, [thus] to extend it to groups other than German would be very clear violation both of the letter and of the spirit of the IRO Constitution.” Like those Italian representatives drafting the Italian Constitution in the same moment and struggling over terms such as “race,” Mentz and others in the IRO were painfully aware of the history of such racialized conceptions but nonetheless remained caught in the ethno-national logics of identity that still dominated the intergovernmental system of states after 1945.

Initially, then, IRO staff presumed or, at least, accepted the dictum that the citizenship option and its language criterion adequately mapped onto ethno-national identity. An eligibility officer in the early preparatory stages of the IRO’s work in Italy pronounced that persons of customary Yugoslav language “are to be considered as Yugoslav and cannot opt for Italian citizenship,” ignoring the ways in which individuals’ self-understandings might not match those of state authorities evaluating option requests, or applicants with Slavic customary languages might nonetheless successfully attain Italian citizenship. The Preparatory Commission for the IRO Eligibility Office in Rome, in fact, made a key distinction between “Persons of customary Yugoslav language (Slovene, Croat, or Serb)” and “Persons of customary Italian language,” with the former eligible for IRO assistance and the latter excluded. IRO interviewers in Trieste and Gorizia received instructions that optants who “i) are of Slav ethnic origin, and ii) genuine political refugees because of persecution for political opinion (or religion) be given special consideration and declared (as a group) prima facie within the mandate of IRO.” The area intake supervisor Michael Sedmak questioned whether
such displaced persons even met the criteria for opting for Italian citizen-
ship, adding, “Many of them are not only of Slav ethnic origin but of Slav
customary language (or bilingual) and thus it is doubtful whether they had
the right to opt or not.”

While the commission did recognize that some applicants were bilingual,
it still sought to identify a primary customary language. In cases of multilin-
gualism, the criteria employed to determine “customary language” included
“house language, parents’ language, family name, parish church, cultural
and political associations, etc.” In practice, however, such bilingual appli-
cants proved difficult to classify, and by May 1949, IRO personnel reported
receiving 165 applications from persons whose customary language was said
to be “Istrian dialect” or who were bilingual. One month later, the IRO was
reconsidering the applications of some five hundred individuals—previously
excluded from the IRO’s mandate—deemed bilingual or of Italian custom-
ary language.

The reconsideration of these applications points to the difficulties that
the IRO soon ran into with its exclusion from eligibility of “Italian” refugees
from Venezia Giulia, as well as with its general adherence to the linguistic
criterion of identity that had been built into the treaty’s understanding of
citizenship. Displaced persons from the ceded territories in Istria and Dal-
matia requesting help from international agencies included individuals who
had not opted for Italian citizenship (or whose options the Yugoslav govern-
ment had rejected) and therefore were considered de facto Yugoslav citizens
but whose “customary language” appeared to IRO staff to be Italian. Ini-
tially, the IRO’s policy had been to exclude any “Italian speakers,” even if
they had not opted, as they were seen to be the responsibility of the Italian
government. IRO personnel soon recognized the problems with this policy.
In a “Report on Operations of the Eligibility Division in Italy Covering the
3 months period September—October—November 1948,” I. H. D. Whigham,
chief of the Eligibility Division, commented on the fact that many of these
so-called Italians ruled ineligible were Italian only in terms of their language
of daily use:

One of the most pressing problems encountered by the Eligibility Divi-
sion is that of refugees from Italian territory ceded to Yugoslavia as a
result of the Peace Treaty, whose customary language is Italian but who
have not opted from Italian citizen(ship) within the time prescribed
by the terms of the Treaty—i.e., before September 15, 1948. Many of
these refugees are not racially Italian or of Italian ethnic origin but are
more familiar with the Italian language than with other tongues owing
to the extreme nationalist policy adopted in the now ceded territories by the Italian Government in the years between the wars (this policy included the enforced teaching of Italian in schools, etc.).

Having contended that many of these DPs were not of Italian “ethnic origin,” Whigham added that many likewise did not consider themselves Italian.

Some of these refugees have strong cultural affiliations with the Italian race, others have not. Many do not feel themselves in anyway Italian, and some have a strong hatred of Italy as a result of past persecution on racial grounds. Until September 15th some of them had been harbored in Italian Post War Assistance camps but have since been, or are about to be, ejected. Many of them, together with their families, are quite destitute, have no possibility of obtaining work and are regarded as undesirable foreigners by the Italian authorities. Some have already found their way into Italian Internment Camps for foreigners. Their disposal has been a matter of discussion between this Mission and the Italian Government and their eligibility status is at present under consideration at Geneva.

Mentz seconded this view, underlining the ways in which individuals with some markers of Italian cultural identity (e.g., language) could possess a specific, local identity that did not extend to or map onto a broader sense of “Italian nationality.”

An Italian speaking Istrian who left his country of origin because of the establishment of Tito’s regime in the State of Yugoslavia to which Istria was transferred, but who did not opt for Italian citizenship because the only strong tie he formerly had with Italy was represented by the Istrian town where he was born, is a clear case of a refugee who is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection both of the Yugoslav and the Italian government, and so he is the concern of the Organization.

As a result of these discussions over eligibility, the IRO changed its policies in early 1950 and began offering assistance to this type of Venezia Giulian refugee—that is, an individual who had not opted for Italian citizenship (and thus legally became a Yugoslav citizen), regardless of customary language. Also included in this decision were individuals who had opted but whose option the Yugoslav government had not accepted. In some instances, the Yugoslav authorities rejected option applications on the supposed grounds...
that Italian was not the language used at home, in spite of what prospective optants had declared. In Istria, authorities required an attestation before the local Comitato Popolare or People’s Committee that the language spoken by the optant was Italian. Not surprisingly, this situation made for possible intimidation and abuse. Some of these migrants who had not received the option nonetheless held provisional passports issued in Zagreb that had permitted them to cross into Italy. These provisional passports would prove to be a source of enduring controversy within the IRO. The IRO required these individuals to have “valid objections against returning to Yugoslavia.” In addition, to be considered eligible for IRO help, these DPs could not be “firmly established in Italy,” a situation that would negate the need for assistance with emigration.

In revising its eligibility policies, then, the IRO came to technically privilege the legal criterion of citizenship over that of ethnicity (as linguistic identity)—what they had initially considered to be largely coterminous. The eligibility evaluation of individual cases of Venezia Giulia from the 1950s on also reveals greater attention to the aspects of local identity highlighted by Mentz and others. IRO staff often used these as indicators of rootedness in deciding whether migrants merely sought to exploit IRO aid or if they possessed legitimate reasons for not opting for Italy. Ultimately, for those refugees who belied easy classification as either “Italian” or “Slavic,” IRO officials adopted the label “Undetermined Venezia Giulian.” The IRO, and UNRRA before it, had used the notion of “undetermined nationality” to denote a number of ambiguous situations, so the concept did not prove unique to the Italian case. A 1946 UNRRA memo, for instance, had stated that the classification “undetermined” was part of “a broader category designated as ‘others and unclassified.’” Even here, however, the Venezia Giulian case stood out for its complexity. In an interview in 1952 as the IRO was winding up its operations, the chief eligibility officer R. L. Gesner was asked, “What was the most interesting group that you had to deal with?” He responded, “As a whole the Venezia Giulians, because of the constant change of policy, commencing in 1948 right through.”

For statistical reporting on ambiguous refugees in camps or IRO intake centers, for example, Alva Simpson, chief of the Department of Health, Care and Maintenance, ordered that the nationality of such refugees should be registered as “Undetermined Venezia Giulia.” Whereas the Italian government frequently flattened ambiguity and read claims to Italian belonging by “Slavs” as akin to deception and subterfuge, then, IRO personnel instead came to recognize officially the national indeterminacy of many such refugees from Istria and the larger region of the Julian March. In addition, IRO
staff changed their policies to allow a number of these “undetermined” individuals to emigrate abroad with IRO help, thereby relieving the Italian government of some potential citizens whose “Italianness” proved questionable.

The IRO, however, would or could only go so far. The organization, for instance, refused the demand of the refugee Association for Venezia Giulia and Zara either to award the classification of “indefinite citizenship” to those whose options had not been approved or to drop any pressure “for a declaration of Yugoslav citizenship as a condition for emigration to other countries.” In 1951 and 1952, as well, the IRO revisited its eligibility decisions yet again. First, the mission excluded a number of Venezia Giulia refugees with provisional passports previously included within the mandate. Although some officials deeply regretted this shift, others adopted a much tougher line. V. A. Temnomeroff, a member of the IRO’s review board, insisted,

persons who duly opted [for Italy] in Yugoslavia are to be considered as Italian citizens as soon as their options are approved by the Yugoslav authorities—in other words, before they are issued with Italian passports by the Italian Consul in Zagreb. Therefore, the motives of the Italian consul in issuing these provisional passports are not relevant. . . . The motives of the Yugoslav authorities in approving the option are also irrelevant. It is not up to the Organization to attempt to correct the determination of the customary language made by the Yugoslav authorities, or to examine their motives in approving the options. . . . It would not be consistent to adopt other than a formal attitude towards the problem in question.

These reversals prompted numerous letters of protest by Julian refugees. With the reclassification as ineligible of certain refugees previously deemed to fall within the IRO’s mandate, a group of Julian refugees in the IRO camp at Carinaro d’Aversa sent a letter to the organization’s director-general. Many of these individuals had liquidated their savings in preparation for emigration overseas under IRO auspices. As the result, these individuals found themselves “at present in a critical material and moral position, for the prolonged stay in the camp has exhausted all their material and financial resources, because of the inadequate assistance.” Sadly, such displaced persons ultimately found their indeterminacy extended not only to their ethnicity/nationality but also to their status as international refugees.

While different from that of Venezia Giulia, the situation in the Dodecanese raised similar questions of indeterminacy. As we have seen, the primary actors involved here in repatriation of those opting to retain Italian citizenship by the terms of article 19 were officials of the British Military
Administration and the Italian government, though UNRRA/IRO and the Greek government also played significant roles. Even before VE Day, the language of indeterminacy appears to have gained salience on the ground, if the complaint of a BMA major is to be believed. In a letter dated May 1945, he wrote, “There seems to be a tendency among islanders to claim that they are no longer Italian Aegean subjects, or in some cases Italian nationals, and to call themselves Greeks or of indeterminate nationality when neither is true. This should not be countenanced in this connection.”

In contrast to the BMA, both UNRRA and the IRO took seriously such claims of indeterminacy, given that citizenship and nationality determined, in part, which persons came under the mandate of the intergovernmental bodies. In the case of UNRRA, of course, the organization focused on returning individuals to their national homes (for details, see chapter 3), while the IRO’s efforts focused on facilitating emigration for those displaced persons who could not safely be repatriated home. By October 1949, some three thousand “Dodecanese refugees” in Italy had filed applications for IRO assistance, rather than making claims on the Italian state; some documents referred instead to two thousand such individuals. Marquis Chiavari, special adviser on Italian affairs to the IRO, inquired whether the organization would honor these requests. In response, a 1949 cable from the IRO’s headquarters in Rome to Geneva clarified that there existed three primary categories of Dodecanese in postwar Italy:

FIRST NATIVES OF DODECANESI BECAME ITALIAN CITIZENS AFTER ITALO-TURKISH WAR BY LAUSANNE TREATY 1913 [sic] SECOND NATIVES OF TURKEY MOVED TO DODECANESI AND RHODES AFTER WORLD WAR II THIRD EMIGRATED FROM ITALY AFTER 1913 ON JUNE 1940 WERE RESIDENTS ON ISLANDS CEDED TO GREECE OPTED FOR ITALIAN CITIZENSHIP UNDER PARA 19 PEACE TREATY LIKE VENEZIA GIULIANI OPTION NOT REGULARLY APPROVED BY GREEK GOVERNMENT THEY WERE EVACUATED TO ITALY AFTER WORLD WAR II BY ALLIES OR ITALIAN NAVY FEARING PERSECUTION AND HOSTILITY OF GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL GREEK POPULATION APPLICANTS NOT FIRMLY ESTABLISHED IN ITALY STILL LIVING IN ITALIAN CAMPS HAVE NO RELATIVES IN ITALY REESTABLISHMENT HERE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT.

A small number of Jews from the islands who had survived Nazi concentration camps and made their way to Italy upon their liberation numbered among these “Dodecanesian refugees.”

This memo—sent to the IRO’s major players, including the acting general director Jacobsen, Myer Cohen in Health and Maintenance, and L. M. Hacking of the Historical Section—apparently raised as many questions
as it sought to answer. On this document, someone scribbled at the bottom: “this doesn’t help much,” “customary language,” “valid objection to returning to Greece—pol[itical] grounds? persn or pol grounds? pol opinion not in conflict with U.N.?” and “approved option?” In the Dodecanese case, then, the IRO was clearly experiencing dilemmas similar to that of Venezia Giulia in translating the citizenship terms laid out in the 1947 Peace Treaty into its own procedures of eligibility. Not surprisingly, in the internal IRO debates opened up by Chiavari’s request, Hacking commented, “The problem was in many respects similar to the problems raised by Venezia Giulians [sic] and particularly by that group of Venezia Giulians who opted to retain Italian citizenship while they were still in Yugoslavia.” Hacking also indicated the considerable degree of work the IRO undertook to interpret the treaty’s article 19 in relation to these displaced persons from the Isole Egeo.

We thought that in the first place it was necessary to have texts of the Greek legislation and administrative directives implementing Article 19 of the Peace Treaty which you will remember is the Article governing the citizenship of persons living in areas transferred by Italy to other countries under the Peace Treaty. It appeared that Mr. Asscher had a good text of the Greek law on the subject and that Mr. Asscher is checking this text with the original Greek one which exists in the library at the Palais des Nations. We felt, however, that it would be well to cable to Athens to ask for the Royal Decree mentioned in the law, to be sent to Geneva for examination.

Beyond the formal issue of citizenship remained the question of possible political persecution should such individuals be repatriated back to the islands. “In addition to citizenship issues,” commented Hacking, “there is of course the most important question of the validity of any objections to repatriation that may be expressed by the Aegean refugees in question.” Nonetheless, such possible objections appeared to hold little weight. Hacking admitted, “So far the Organisation has made a firm rule that it will not accept as valid objections to repatriation to Greece.”

This initial decision did not dissuade representatives of the Italian government, however, from insisting that the IRO recognize some of these migrants from the Dodecanese in Italy as bona fide international refugees, as had occurred in the Venezia Giulian case. Just a few months after the IRO’s judgment as to the noneligibility of these refugees, Prince del Drago in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pressed the case. Del Drago argued the invalidity of the Greek Law No. 517 (3 January 1949) laying out the process by which optants could make their applications to Greek consular officials, including
those in Italy. According to IRO documents, most of the nineteen hundred non-Jewish individuals from the Dodecanese in Italy had exercised the citizenship option before such consular officials on the Italian peninsula. By contrast, most of the one hundred or so Jews from the islands had not. Arguing on a technicality, Del Drago contended, “The law promulgated by the Greek Government . . . does not appear sufficient to settle the question of the nationality of the refugees from the Dodecanese who have opted in favour of Italian nationality and are at present living in Italy, inasmuch as it is a one-sided act of the Greek Government.” Del Drago added, “In the present circumstances, and since the ratification [in Italy of the Greek law] has not yet been carried out, the above refugees should be considered, from the legal point of view, in a position of undetermined nationality like the refugees from Venezia Giulia.”

In Italian eyes, at least, approval of option requests by Greek authorities did not constitute a recognition of the optant’s genuine Italian identity in terms of language or sentiment. Del Drago also claimed that the majority of these individuals had been persecuted “on account of their religion and political ideas,” implying affiliations with the former Italian regime that seemingly contradicted his statement as to their indeterminacy (unless he referred only to the small number of Jewish survivors). In language familiar from Italian authorities’ evaluations of requests to repatriate to Italy from former possessions, Del Drago also underlined the “strain on the very limited Italian assistance budget [created by these Dodecanesians], inasmuch as they have neither financial resources nor relations in Italy.”

In a certain sense, we might read the enthusiastic endorsement by Del Drago (and, by extension, the Italian government) of the “undetermined nationality” label in the Aegean case as strategic and pragmatic, an attempt merely to reduce the burden of caring for national refugees. Indeed, Del Drago made this burden explicit when he maintained, “Even if these refugees constitute a serious problem for the Italian Government, which has already to assist many of its own refugees, they would not be a heavy burden for IRO either because of their limited number (approximately 2,000) or because of their professional ability which will permit ready acceptance by the immigration countries.” In the same letter, however, Del Drago refers to the ambiguous citizenship statuses in the Dodecanese that had prevailed under fascism. “On the other hand . . . several of these refugees are in possession of the ‘little Italian citizenship’ and, even if their status is definitely established, they would be able to maintain such little citizenship but with limited rights, unless special provisions are established in their favour.” In another sense, then, Del Drago pointed to the problematic legacies of
indeterminate citizenship as embodied by the limited rights of the *piccola cittadinanza* and *cittadinanza egea*.

Although IRO staff took seriously such requests from Italian representatives, they ultimately did not accept Del Drago’s line of reasoning. In urging careful consideration of eligibility of individual cases (rather than blanket group designations), Myer Cohen stressed that for persons from the Dodecanese, “the most important criteria are their citizenship (apart from one inapplicable exception, refugees cannot be within the mandate under the IRO Constitution unless they are outside their country of citizenship) and their objection to return to the Dodecanese.” In regard to the argument that the Greek government had established a unilateral procedure for option, Cohen urged, “The Peace Treaty does not demand any agreement between the Greek or Italian Governments regularizing options, nor any acceptance by either Greek or Italian Government of such options. It demands merely the promulgation of appropriate legislation by the Greek Government or the Government to which territory has been ceded.” Acknowledging the IRO’s delicate position as an intergovernmental body operating in a world structured through and around the logics of state sovereignty, Cohen noted, “The Italian Government has a sovereign right to report as Italian citizens whomsoever it chooses. We submit, however, that this right is subject to provisions of international instruments, in particular, the Peace Treaty, which is binding on the Italian Government, and that IRO is not competent to agree to a position clearly contrary to its terms.” Cohen thus concluded, “The IRO should therefore consider as Italian citizens, all persons who have duly opted within the terms of the Peace Treaty and the appropriate implementary legislation to retain Italian citizenship. Persons who have not so opted should be considered as Greek citizens.”

In contrast to the Venezia Giulian case, then, the IRO did not reverse its initial ruling on the ineligibility of certain individuals from the Aegean who had opted for Italian citizenship. In both instances, however, the status of migrants from the former Italian territories troubled the seemingly straightforward divisions between national and international refugees that rested on understandings of citizenship, as well as persecution. Were migrants to the Italian peninsula from the ceded territories of Venezia Giulia or the Aegean to be considered to have remained within their home countries and thus under the protection of the Italian state? What about in those instances where the Italian government did not recognize the Italianness (in terms of customary sentiment and language) of those who had legally opted for Italian citizenship before either Yugoslav or Greek authorities? Just as Italy sought to assert and strengthen its sovereignty through the control of “alien
refugees” in its midst, so too did it seek to reinterpret the citizenship clause of article 19—part of a larger peace treaty over which Italians had relatively little say—by urging the IRO to facilitate the emigration of a number of individuals who could make legal claims on Italy but whose Italianness appeared questionable. In other ambiguous questions of citizenship, Italian authorities would endorse an understanding of Italianness that included not only such criteria as language as ethnicity but also blood.

Categorical Confusion, III: Mixed Unions and Their Offspring

As we have seen, from unification onward, Italian citizenship codes made naturalization cumbersome and rare. Fascism’s defeat and the establishment of the First Republic did not fundamentally alter this. In the aftermath of the Second World War and the empire’s dissolution, there arose the question of the status of “foreign” partners (many, but not all, of them colonial subjects) of Italian citizens, as well as their offspring. The files of the Archivio Centrale dello Stato and the Ministero degli Affari Esteri, for instance, contain numerous requests by “foreign” wives of Italians in the Dodecanese both to repatriate and opt for Italy. In the case of inter-confessional marriages in the Aegean, one key issue involved the type of marriage rite performed (civil or religious, and if religious which faith) and its validity under Italian law. BMA officers on Karpathos, for instance, told Greek wives seeking repatriation to Italy that neither the Vatican nor Italian civil courts recognized marriages between Catholics and Orthodox without a dispensation and the presence of a Catholic priest at the ceremony.120 These dilemmas extended to those Italian soldiers on the Greek mainland who had contracted marriages during the war. In December 1945, the Greek UNRRA mission headquartered in Athens received instructions: “It is imperative to forward the marriage certificate drawn up abroad, duly translated and legalized by the Italian consular authority.” The delays in obtaining and forwarding such documents had already created “a situation greatly prejudical [sic] to the interests of the married couples recently repatriated from Greece, as, owing to the non-recognition of the legality of their marriage by the Italian authorities, their families do not enjoy the advantages provided by the law in favour of the wives and children of the ex-service men.” Adding to the problems, “without these documents the Italian Judicial Authority is similarly unable to provide for the prosecution necessary in certain cases of bigamy.”121

Bigamy and the related problem of abandonment posed very real threats to the postwar reconstruction of the family. As UNRRA and Italy negotiated
the terms of repatriation in the early years after the war, “It was also agreed that Greek wives of Italian soldiers could be sent to Italy, but only if there was good assurance of the validity of the marriage and acceptance of the wives by their husbands.” As this last clause suggests, an important consideration appeared to be whether the Italian male wished his companion to be allowed into Italy—which would have given bigamists an easy escape clause. As a 1946 UNRRA memo noted, “The Italian government reserves its right to withhold permission of entry into Italy for these women [here, Greek wives of Italian POWs], pending definite proof that the Italian husband wishes to have his wife brought to Italy.” Dodecanesian women married to Italian POWs also made requests for help to the BMA and the Italian Committee in Rhodes run by Antonio Macchi. The BMA took a line similar to that of UNRRA, confirming that requests for the requisite marriage documents must “be initiated by the husband in each case.” One woman who appealed to the BMA for help with repatriation received the reply, “The initiation of the movement must in the first instance come from the husband, who has to state that he is able to house and feed, etc his family, before they are accepted in Italy.” In another case that did not prove at all uncommon, BMA officers on Karpathos had determined that a legal marriage between an Irene J. and Nicola G. took place in June 1944. The wife “has one small child, by her marriage, and has had no money from her husband since he went to Italy.” Fearing that her husband had remarried in Italy (thus becoming a bigamist), Irene sought only financial support for their child.

For those spouses of non-Italian citizenship from the Dodecanese Islands or the ceded areas of Venezia Giulia who succeeded in repatriating to Italy, the option process remained separate from that of their husbands. In contrast to many earlier options, the husband’s citizenship did not extend to his wife, though it did for minor children under eighteen. Still, the treaty option clauses made no provisions for a whole range of persons, including illegitimate children, nonmarried orphaned minors, and adopted children. In this, the citizenship clauses of the treaty did represent a break with earlier citizenship policies of liberal Italy that had automatically assigned married women their husbands’ nationality; fascist changes to the 1912 Citizenship Law had exerted even greater control over the citizenship of married women. In his commentary on the treaty, legal scholar Kunz lauded the lack of extension of the husband’s option to his wife as a significant “expression of the movement for the emancipation of women.” Undoubtedly, the mandating of separate options for husbands and wives helped rectify gender inequities built into previous Italian citizenship policies. This innovation provided
women resident in the former possessions who could satisfy the criteria for Italianness greater freedom to decide whether or not to opt on their own for Italian citizenship. Nonetheless, in the case of foreign wives, it appears to have given some Italian husbands the opportunity to “emancipate” themselves from their domestic partners and attendant obligations.

It should be noted, however, that not all such hesitation about whether to naturalize foreign wives came from the Italian side of the process. The attitudes of the home states of potential optants also mattered. Italian authorities received many urgent requests for assistance concerning “Yugoslav” wives of Italian citizens whose options had been repeatedly turned down in Istria, for example. Likewise, in Albania both Albanian wives and husbands of Italian citizens found their requests to go to Italy blocked by the Hoxha regime. Indeed, marriages between Italian women and Albanian men—which resulted in the wives’ automatic loss of Italian citizenship and acquisition of Albanian citizenship—proved an exception to the prevalent pattern elsewhere in which only Italian men married or cohabited with imperial subjects.

One relatively rare request for naturalization by a man originally from the former possessions who had married an Italian citizen concerned the Albanian-born Abdul Luku. Luku had served in the Austrian military in World War I, after which he moved to Rijeka/Fiume. Soon afterward, he settled in Duino Aurisina, near Trieste, and married an Italian woman by whom he had a daughter. Luku remained Muslim, though his wife and daughter practiced Catholicism. In recommending that Luku’s 1952 naturalization request be granted, the prefect of Trieste Gino Palutan asserted that Luku was “completely assimilated to our environment and while knowing numerous other languages, expresses himself correctly and prevalently in the Italian language. He does not manifest any national sentiment, however, he has never assumed an attitude contrary to Italy.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs concurred with Palutan’s assessment, characterizing Luku’s request “particularly worthy.” This example evidences how language, political sentiment, and assimilability were key in deciding which foreigners might become citizens or immigrate to Italy in the early postwar period. In this case, at least, the otherness of Islam did not appear as significant as Luku’s adaptability to an Italian way of life. Similarly, a number of Jews originally from Rhodes and resident in the Congo at the time of the 1947 option process chose Italian rather than Greek citizenship and were recognized for being “well disposed” toward Italy.

In such cases, the Europeanness of the optants—and hence their potential for assimilation—was likely assumed, even if their Italianness remained in
question. But what happened in the case of the mixed African-Italian populations in the newly independent colonies? The majority of those who lived in the colonies did not have the option to move to Europe, similar to other cases of decolonization. R. E. Ovalle-Bahamón notes of the population of former Portuguese Angola, “For the majority of people in Angola, namely 'blacks,' the exit to Europe option was nonexistent.” And, as in the Portuguese case, where no explicit reference was made to race in defining citizenship, in the case of Italy’s former colonies an implicit understanding about race nonetheless operated: as former colonial subjects, rather than Italian citizens, “black natives” acquired the citizenship of their respective countries. Such logics reflected a common colonial grammar. In the words of Ann Stoler, these policies of exclusion were “contingent on constructing categories, legal and social classifications designating who was ‘white,’ who was ‘native,’ who could become a citizen rather than a subject, which children were legitimate progeny and which were not. What mattered were not only one’s physical properties but who counted as ‘European’ and by what measure.” Silences proved critical to these exclusions, for “Skin shade was too ambiguous; bank accounts were mercurial; religious belief and education were crucial but never enough. Social and legal standing derived not only from color, but from the silences, acknowledgments, and denials of the social circumstances in which one’s parents had sex.”

In the Italian case, the meticci or persons of mixed race from the former AOI complicated this colonial grammar’s neat classificatory distinctions between citizen and (former) subject, shattering those silences and making visible the frequency of interracial relationships. Indeed, although much of the travel literature on the empire remained silent on the widespread practice of *madamismo*, these writings nonetheless expounded at length on the degenerational dangers represented by mixed-race children. These politics of nonrecognition and denial, of course, contradicted a form of citizenship based on blood. Alberto Pollera—colonial official, ethnographer, and brother of a onetime governor of Italian Eritrea—pointed this out in his appeal to Mussolini in 1939. Pollera, himself the father of six (recognized) children by two African wives, pleaded, “Our meticci children are thus by the blood of the father, by their physical being, by education, by sentiment, perfectly Italian.” In case the blood criterion seemed insufficient, then, Pollera threw in for good measure language and sentiment. In a parting shot, he asserted, “They [meticci] are officials, functionaries, professionals, traders, artisans, honest workers; and the women joined with Italian men are good mothers whose offspring for their intellectual, moral, and physical qualities are often superior to Italians of pure race [razza pura].”
As noted earlier, the increasingly stringent legislation in the late 1930s prohibiting and punishing miscegenation, as well as the stripping of citizenship from those relatively few meticci who had been formally recognized by their Italian fathers, indicated the regime’s increasing moral panic over the problem of mixed-race children. This official obsession in spite of the frequent denials of the phenomenon was evidenced by a 1938 census, which collected specific data for the AOI on “meticci per nazioni e razza della madre e il sesso per territorio”—meticci by nation and race of the mother and by sex. The statistics offered an extremely conservative figure of 2,518 meticci total for Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia combined. Of these, only 1,291 had been recognized by their fathers. Estimates by the UN and the BMA of the population of Italo-Eritreans alone in the early postwar instead give figures of around 15,000 individuals, of whom only a small fraction (some 2,750) had been recognized by their fathers.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Italian government pushed for the abolition of the fascist-era legislation prohibiting miscegenation. At the beginning of their occupation of AOI, BMA authorities had agreed, proclaiming in May 1942 the suspension of the law until the end of British rule. By June, however, the British had reverted to the Italian legislation, arguing that as a neutral occupier it would serve merely as a placeholder, including in the juridical sense. This set the stage for a long-running dispute between the British and Italians over the racial law, which Valeria Deplano has situated within the broader wrangling over the future of the territories. In preventing the (re)acquisition of citizenship by those meticci recognized by their fathers, for instance, the British sought to block the increase in “Italians” within the ex-colonies—just as they sought to do by regulating and stemming repatriation back to Italian Africa. Some Italian jurists still working in the former AOI adopted a line closer to that of the British than that of officials on the Italian peninsula. In particular, a 1949 decision by a procuratore Montefusco in Asmara rejecting an Eritrean mother’s attempts to win her son Italian citizenship prompted frustration and anger within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Italian Africa. Whereas Montefusco interpreted the question of citizenship in the colonial terms of a discretional privilege accorded to subjects, Italian officials on the mainland stressed that citizenship was a right.

In the midst of these broader geopolitical struggles over the former colonies and internal Italian debates over the meaning of citizenship, mixed-race children in AOI continued to pay the price in the form of stigma, as well as broken relationships with their parents. In a testimony given to historian Gabrielle D’Agostino, Giovanni Mazzola—born in Asmara just a few weeks
after the 1940 law went into effect—remembered how his Italian father had succeeded in registering his son and thus recognizing him (presumably after the war, although this is unclear). Mazzola recalled that the year 1949, when any hopes of an Italian trusteeship over Eritrea faded, witnessed an “exodus” of Italians back to the peninsula. His father numbered among those Italians leaving. Neither Giovanni nor his five brothers ever saw their father again, although Giovanni arrived in Italy in 1963 in search of him, only to learn he had died a week earlier. Like so many before him, the father of the Mazzola brothers had a fiancée in Italy, with whom he established a second family upon his return. Not only was Giovanni’s mother abandoned by her European partner, but she also suffered discrimination from her fellow Eritreans. “The [Eritrean] woman of that time, according to the local mentality, in the moment in which she got together with an Italian lost all her rights, she no longer had the right to own land, a house . . . she was ignored completely.”

Giovanni later married a meticcia, Maria Bertellini, who noted that other Eritrean children frequently taunted her as a “bastard.” In contrast to Giovanni’s father, Maria’s father could not recognize his children because he was already legally married in Italy. Until 1975, the Italian Civil Code prohibited both inquiries into paternity and the legal recognition of children born out of wedlock. As Barrera concludes, many of these children of mixed descent “suffered not only due to the colonial relationship, but also because of the patriarchic imprint of the Italian legislation. . . . A distinctly colonial paternity was at work in both cases.” Maria’s father, Salvatore Mauro, thus resorted to a stratagem employed by a number of Italians anxious to recognize their children: he asked another Italian (Bertellini) to give his name to his daughter and son. Salvatore Mauro remained in Asmara until the civil conflict of the 1970s, when he was assaulted and expelled to Italy. Like so many Italians who suffered from mal d’Africa, Mauro dreamed of returning. He told his daughter Maria, “‘I’m ready, I keep my passport updated, I want to return.’” Giovanni Mazzola’s father similarly waxed nostalgic. Mazzola’s relatives in Italy told his brothers that their father would occasionally go down to the seashore and murmur, “‘One day, I will return to Africa.’” Whereas the iconic fascist image featuring the pledge “We will return” had depicted a settler father (or grandfather) and son, the Italian men here instead longed for an African home in which the children they would return to were of mixed race.

Legally, the situation for meticci in Eritrea changed in 1952, when the BMA finally abolished the 1940 legislation. In that same year, Eritrea was joined in federation with Ethiopia. UN Resolution 390(V) of 2 December
1950 had laid out the plan for federation. According to the Ethiopian state’s laws on citizenship, all meticci automatically became Ethiopian citizens. Yet some meticci sought either to retain or newly acquire rights as Italian citizens—following the option for Italian citizenship laid out by the UN Resolution—by renouncing their Ethiopian citizenship. The year 1952 saw the opening of an Italian consulate in Addis Ababa, where most requests for recognition and/or citizenship arrived. Between 1952 and 1955, some 48 meticci had been recognized. A total of 1,950 meticci had opted for Italian citizenship by April 1953.\textsuperscript{146}

In the context of lingering bad feeling between Italy and Ethiopia over Italy’s crushed hopes for a trusteeship over Eritrea, the Italian government supported the right of these meticci to opt, and saw their choice of Italy as a validation of Italy’s accomplishments and civilizing mission there. The Ethiopian government responded by creating bureaucratic obstacles, such as substituting a new form for opting just three days before the closing date of the request process. The Ethiopian government also used an implicit appeal to racial solidarity in its assertion that opting for Ethiopia, rather than Italy, appeared “more just and natural.” Italian officials interpreted the Ethiopian government’s actions as motivated by a need for prestige and the wish to demonstrate that Ethiopia was more attractive to the meticci than was Italy.\textsuperscript{147} As Barrera has noted, however, this policy may have also reflected the cognatic conception of descent that prevailed among Ethiopia’s Amharic peoples; this contrasted with the patrilineal understanding of identity subscribed to by the Tigrinya of highland Eritrea, the ethnic group of most of the Eritrean women who had children by Italian men.\textsuperscript{148}

Italian diplomats went so far as to denounce as “discriminatory” the Ethiopian government’s refusal to issue visas to Italian citizens—presumably former settlers and those few meticci living in Italy as citizens—wanting to visit Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{149} Yet despite the Italian government’s seeming openness toward the meticci, a 1953 document that exulted in the meticci’s choice of Italy over Ethiopia nonetheless admitted, “If these meticci had conserved en masse federal citizenship [that of Ethiopia], it would not have been bad either for them or for us.”\textsuperscript{150} This reflected the fundamental ambivalence toward this Italo-African population and the widespread belief that such hybrid subjects could never become genuine Italian citizens in the fullest sense of social belonging. Silvana Patriarca has detected a similar ambivalence to the “brown babies,” almost all of them Italian citizens, that resulted from unions between Italian women and black Allied servicemen.\textsuperscript{151} As occurred in the former AOI, in the 1950s many of these biracial children in Italy suffered abandonment, frequently ending up in the care of Catholic institutions. Meticci children
often lived in Catholic-run schools and orphanages and sometimes went to summer camps organized by humanitarian groups like the Italian Red Cross. This entrenched the pervasive discourse that such children constituted a “problem.” The fact that the same child actor played the part of a “mulatto” and a colonial “meticcio” in the films Il Mulatto and Angelo tra la folla, respectively, symbolizes the easy slippage in the Italian imagination between these populations of mixed-race children whose histories are quite distinct.152

As the 1950s wore on, Italian officials continued to report on the numbers and conditions of both the meticci in Eritrea-Ethiopia and the “Italians” there. In some accounts, meticci and their mothers figured as problematic for their role in prompting the abandonment of “true” families in Italy. In a 1955 assessment of the “Italian collectivity in Ethiopia,” for example, the Italian consul general to Ethiopia Francesco Smergani complained, “Every day I receive letters from the most remote regions of Italy where mothers, wives and legitimate children who are now adults beg for news of their loved ones. I know where and with whom they live, how many meticci children they have as their burden and I also know that I cannot humiliate them for fear of destroying those slight vibrations of patriotism in their hearts that comprehend the bitterness of the situation from which they can longer extricate themselves.”153 Smergani went on to invert the colonial tropes of Africans as childlike naifs in need of rescue and civilizing. In his mind, Italian men had become the virtual slaves of their African partners, who established “families” that mocked the decent values of those genuine families lost back in Italy: “The piety that every one of us feels for the abandoned families in Italy is profound and it is no less for these bereaved men who labor under the exploitation of women of color, relentless in their robbery. To latch onto an Italian man is considered a feat here, because it’s known that this guarantees not only maintenance of the woman and her meticci children but also of the whole band of beggars from which she comes.”154 Just a few lines later, however, Smergani wrote of the meticci how “reasons of human piety recommend that we extend to these innocent derelicts [derelitti] our help/aid.” Smergani noted that this had to be done with great delicacy through the Italian fathers, avoiding contact with the African mothers out of political sensitivity. Unlike in the Eritrean part of the federation, where a festa della befana or celebration of the witch that delivers treats to children on the eve of the Epiphany had been held for Italian children of “any color” (qualsiasi colore), tense relations with the Ethiopians meant that a befana event could only be held there for legitimate Italian children. Given that unrecognized children typically exhibited the greatest need, such an event would only provoke resentment. Smergani’s admission of this extreme need, of course,
contradicted his claims about the children’s rapacious mothers. Smergani’s account thus exhibits toward the meticci an admixture of racism, empathy, obligation, and political opportunism that proved pervasive among Italian officials.

Ultimately, despite political posturing designed to depict Italy in a favorable light, in the period under study here, the majority of mixed-race children in the former African colonies found themselves unable to make claims as citizens on the Italian state. This did not, however, resolve the issue, and in succeeding decades meticci from both Ethiopia/Eritrea and Somalia continued to press for recognition as Italian citizens. This became particularly urgent as individuals sought to flee the violent conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea (1961–1991), the tumult of the Ethiopian Revolution with Selassie’s overthrow in 1974 by the communist military regime of the Derg, the devastation of the Ethiopian famine (1983–1985), and the atrocities of the Siad Barre regime in Somalia. Within Italy, the 1990s witnessed a flurry of largely empty political discussions and promises over Italian obligations toward these African descendants of Italian citizens. The 1992 citizenship law permitted requests by second-generation descendants (“in linea retta di secondo grado”), prompting several hundred requests for citizenship by Italo-Eritreans alone. By 2014, only eighty of these requests had been successful, with another three hundred or so pending.155

The problem of citizenship for some Italo-Somalis also remains open, particularly as there occurred a boom in births after 1949 during the period of the Italian-administered UN trusteeship. The civil war in Somalia led to the destruction of many birth records, required to establish a possible claim to citizenship. Many of the Italo-Somali children born between 1949 and 1960, the year of Somalia’s independence, were taken from their mothers and placed in special boarding schools or religious institutions in which they were educated in Italian. Those who succeeded in obtaining Italian citizenship and moved to Italy, sometimes after a period of formal statelessness, nonetheless feel set apart—what they deem “category C citizens.” As the head of the Associazione Nazionale Comunità Italo-Somala, or National Association of the Italo-Somali Community (ANCIS), Gianni Mari, put it, “We are aliens with Italian passports.”156 In June 2008, the Italian government declared it would offer compensation to several hundred such Italo-Somalis. Although groups such as ANCIS express satisfaction at the government’s pledge to offer compensation, they also want a formal apology, and continue to press their cause and work to bring it to a wider Italian audience.157 The decades-long struggle by such descendants to win recognition as essential members of the Italian national community further underscores how Italian
decolonization unfolded over a much longer arc of time than usually imagined, as well as the enduring exclusions that resulted specifically from the narrowing of Italian citizenship norms with the end of empire.

As this chapter has demonstrated, as the colonial juridical hierarchy gave way over time to a flat one of national citizenship, there was little place in Italy for those seen as indeterminate or in between. It was for precisely this reason that the Italian government had pushed the IRO to accept as eligible for emigration abroad those individuals who came to bear the label “undetermined nationality”—even in some instances where the migrant had opted successfully for Italian citizenship. Despite efforts by Italian officials or migrants themselves to claim “indefinite citizenship” for some subjects from the Dodecanese and Venezia Giulia so that those individuals could be classified as international refugees, international agencies proved wary of embracing a notion of indeterminate citizenship. In the world of the emerging international refugee regime, one either had citizenship or did not (i.e., was stateless). The pressing question for UNRRA, the IRO, and later the UNHCR centered on whether those requesting recognition as refugees who did possess citizenship resided in their country of citizenship or outside it. If the latter, did their claims merit recognition as refugees on the familiar grounds of persecution in their home countries?

For Italian authorities, the process of sorting through individuals making claims to be refugees—whether national or foreign—sharpened and tested the limits of Republican understandings of citizenship. As evidenced by debates over who from the former territories could rightfully opt to retain Italian citizenship and thus legally move to the Italian peninsula, understandings of Italian identity and belonging in the early postwar period rested explicitly on linguistic affiliation qua ethnicity and implicitly on a racialized notion of Europeanness and whiteness. In the case of those “ethnic” Greeks and Slavs excluded from opting for Italian citizenship, being a white European was necessary but not sufficient for inclusion within the Italian national community. Language of use and “Italian ancestry” were additionally required for both legal citizenship and social belonging. In this sense, understandings of Italian identity displayed considerable continuity with older understandings, even as certain aspects of identity such as race became naturalized to the point of invisibility. A patrilineal and thus consanguineal understanding of identity continued to underwrite codes of Italian citizenship after World War II, even as the citizenship of married women became independent of that of their husbands. Likewise, previously explicit understandings of race central to colonialism became muted in a context where the
“racial” identity of the “Italian” migrants was not questioned, even if their Italianness remained a question of “fact and proof.” The small numbers of meticci eligible for Italian citizenship constitute the notable exception here; among the various categories of repatriates from the former possessions, this group has, not surprisingly, faced the most daunting challenges to acceptance as Italians.

The story of citizenship recounted here does not prove a mere historical anecdote but rather an enduring legacy that continues to shape the reception of migrants to Italy. With the advent of mass immigration to Italy from the 1970s on, new migrants to the peninsula have continued to run up against the restrictive policies for Italian naturalization created by a system anchored by *jus sanguinis*. A controversial and politicized vote over whether to reform Italian citizenship law and award citizenship to those children born in Italy to noncitizens has long been postponed. At the heart of the “jus soli” debate and movement in contemporary Italy are the terms of both legal and socio-cultural belonging. After World War II, the citizenship question was settled in a distinctly exclusive and restrictive manner. Over seventy years later, it remains to be seen whether the Italian state will expand the legal boundaries of citizenship.