The World Refugees Made

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Chapter 5

Reclaiming Fascism, Housing the Nation

Today there are eucalyptus trees all over Italy, whole forests of them, or rows and windbreaks stretching far as the eye can see. But every eucalyptus in the land—even in the most desolate, lonely uplands in Sicily or Sardinia—is a permanent and tangible sign of what at the time was called the “Fascist Era.” Some legacy, some damnatio memoriae. If you really wanted to root out all memory of that period, come 25 July 1943, you wouldn’t just have gone round removing all the Fascist symbols and inscriptions from the walls and towers. If you wanted to make a thorough-going job of things, you’d also have had to go and pull every eucalyptus tree up by the roots, ab radicibus, as Cato put it, to rid our native soil of them.


It is a society’s aspirations for peacetime that determine whether a ruin is rebuilt, replaced, or preserved—or, rather, the ruler’s interpretations of society’s wishes.

Christopher Woodward, In Ruins (2001)

During the period of Italy’s long decolonization, the migrations of settlers from former Italian territories proved multidirectional, as we have seen in chapter 3. Some displaced colonists sought to return to their homes in places like Rhodes, Tripoli, and Mogadishu; others “repatriated” to Italy (sometimes arriving in their putative homeland for the first time); others joined kin in centers of Levantine Italian life like Alexandria or İzmir; and yet others emigrated to the New World or the Antipodes. Even as the Italian government struck agreements with UNRRA, then the IRO, and later the UNHCR and ICEM that essentially created a division of labor, there remained troublesome categories (mixed-race children, foreign spouses, and persons of undetermined ethnicity and citizenship from Venezia Giulia and the Aegean Islands), as detailed in chapter 4. Furthermore, the assistance provided by religious organizations such as the World Council of Churches, the Catholic Relief Services, the National Catholic
Welfare Council, and the PCA/POA to both foreign and national refugees in Italy at times blurred the categorical distinctions between these tracks of assistance. Ultimately, however, these exceptions proved the rule that Italy’s “national refugees” were ineligible for aid as bona fide international refugees. Yet even after the long and complex process of consolidating these categories of national refugees and international refugees had been completed, there remained the pressing challenge of just what to do with these human remnants and reminders of empire, many of whom arrived on the Italian peninsula with few prospects of housing or stable employment. Rightly or wrongly, metropolitan Italians often saw these migrants as willing participants in the fascist project, interpreting their displacement as symbolic not only of Italy’s humiliation but also the consequence of complicity with the former regime.  

The efforts by the Italian state at certain moments to slow processes of repatriation by requiring guarantees of work and housing proved merely stopgap measures. Despite worries about the potentially destabilizing effect of introducing impoverished Italian repatriates and refugees into an Italian peninsula devastated by the war, the Italian government worried equally about the corrosive consequences of lengthy residence in refugee camps on its inhabitants, as well as for neighboring communities. This prospect carried with it the risks of ruination not only of the generation of adults displaced by the war and the collapse of fascist empire but also of succeeding generations raised in the camps. Examining debates about how to reclaim the children of Italy’s lost empire for the nation after 1945, this chapter explores such questions through the prism of resettlement policies and refugee housing. In particular, I ask whether we can read these efforts as instantiations of the famous fascist projects of land reclamation or *bonifiche integrali*—what Ruth Ben-Ghiat has identified as the unifying trope of fascism—and thus as attempts to reclaim and render productive the ruins of the fascist project. In turning my gaze to imperial aftermaths in the metropole, I focus on what Stoler signals as “sites of decomposition that fall outside historical interest and preservation, of those places that are not honored as ruins of empire proper and go by other names.”

**Housing the Nation**

In both the popular and scholarly imaginations, 1945 figures as “year zero” in Western Europe, a label signaling both the ruins and devastation wrought by the war and the potential for a rupture with that past. In Italy, this understanding of “anno zero” remains indelibly associated with the school of neorealist
filmmakers and their vision of a new cinema for a new Italy. In 1948 Roberto Rossellini released *Germania anno zero*, his dark Berlin rubble film depicting a family destroyed by the still-toxic influence of Nazism. As Noa Steimatsky has demonstrated, the film displaces the Italian “Fascist presence-of-the-past to German soil.” Working out of the literal ruins of the Cinecittà studio, Rossellini and his fellow neorealist filmmakers further displaced the legacies of what was both a fascist and imperial present-past when they made Italy’s streets and working-class neighborhoods the subjects of gritty authenticity and hopeful renewal and ignored the refugee camp that had arisen in the former fascist studio. As Steimatsky puts it, “Neorealist culture could not tackle the ironic implications of a refugee camp being situated within the entity that was Cinecittà.” This camp—like that of Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste and others scattered throughout the Italian peninsula in which the national and international assistance tracks converged—housed both Italian citizens/former citizens from the lost territories and foreign displaced persons. Steimatsky makes a powerful case for Cinecittà as a very particular type of ruin of the fascist “state apparatus,” a ruin that is at once both literal and figurative. Steimatsky contends that despite the neorealist disavowal of the refugees in their midst, “reality was being constructed, quite literally, out of the colossal sets and the ruinous remains of that apparatus, and in Cinecittà.”

In this chapter, I examine how key aspects of Italy’s reconstruction—notably the settling of citizens migrating from the ex possedimenti, many of whom lived in Cinecittà and similar camps on their arrival in the Italian peninsula—built on, rather than dismantled or erased, the literal and figurative ruins of fascist empire. In this process of reconstruction, national refugees/repatriates became critical agents. Although the 1950s are often remembered as the takeoff years of the postwar “economic miracle,” the benefits of that boom were unequally distributed. Italians who made applications to repatriate to Italy from former possessions often found themselves living in shabby refugee camps, as earlier arrivals in the 1940s had. Government officials fretted that potential repatriates nurtured unrealistic expectations “of finding an optimal placement and easier living in the Patria.” These fears reflected the problems of housing shortage and surplus population that persisted despite the development of a variety of housing schemes. A 1953 study offered a statistic that 2.8 million families (24.1 percent of the population) lived in overcrowded conditions, with 870,000 (7.5 percent) struggling with four or more persons per room and living in inadequate housing. The situation was most acute in the south, particularly Campania, Calabria, Puglia, and Basilicata. The 1950 Fanfani Plan, which tasked the Istituto Nazionale Assicurazione (INA)
with the provision of working-class housing through INA-CASA, and the 1955 Vanoni Plan (a larger program for the Mezzogiorno or the south that contained provisions for housing construction) numbered among the initiatives designed to address these housing problems. In addition, the Comitato Amministrativo Soccorso ai Senzatetto (CASAS), created under the aegis of UNRRA, continued its existence long after UNRRA itself ceased to exist in 1947. Combining unused UNRRA monies with those from the European Recovery Plan (i.e., Marshall Plan monies), the Fondo Lire partially financed the work of both UNRRA-CASAS and INA-CASA.  

The vast majority of housing built by these two entities did not go to profughi nazionali, and, indeed, available documentation suggests a perpetual battle to hold UNRRA-CASAS to its promises of refugee housing. By 1957, however, UNRRA-CASAS had built fourteen villaggi (villages or small housing settlements) specifically for Italian refugees from the lost Adriatic territories. The majority of these were sited in the border region or neighboring Veneto (Gorizia, Udine, Monfalcone, Ronchi, Grado, Gradisca, S. Giorgio Nogaro, Venezia Marghera), but some construction also took place further afield at Brescia, La Spezia, Taranto, Rovereto, Trento, and Fertilia. These activities formed a small, if highly publicized, part of the broader recovery program of UNRRA-CASAS, which built some one thousand villages throughout Italy. The “ideal house type” (casa-tipo) promoted by UNRRA-CASAS consisted in small-scale units conceived of as the “antithesis to the large agglomerates of mortifying buildings devoid of any expression of personality.” An UNRRA-CASAS building would ideally have no more than four apartments, each with separate entrances, and a small garden attached to the apartment to “develop a sense of property ownership.” Ironically, this was one of the same goals of those villages built for Italian settlers in Libya, suggesting how “problems” targeted by fascist ruralist and colonial policies persisted in the postwar era. Despite the claims to housing with individual personality, “the board of UNRRA-CASAS came to develop prototypes for standardized houses whose almost imperceptible elements of differentiation were represented by the slope of the roof and other minor details. . . . In this way, the UNRRA-CASAS programme pronounced an architectural language inspired by a generic regional re-reading of the local vernacular tradition.”

These seemingly traditional views of the home, however, also refracted changing notions of the private sphere as both the refuge of the family from the state (a rejection of fascism’s attempts to collapse the private and the public spheres) and the site of new forms of consumer citizenship enacted
through performances of domesticity in kitchens and living rooms. Marshall Plan or ERP programs, in particular, stressed the necessity and right of each family to a home; these ambitious building plans were intended to both stimulate the construction industry and forge community. These visions of home and community drew not only on ideas imported from the United States but also traditions like the prewar European municipal movement, in which Italian industrialists Adriano Olivetti (who became vice president of UNRRA-CASAS in 1958) and socialists like Alessandro Schiavi played an important role. As Betts and Crowley have noted, after the war “the power of the emotion-laden home took on heightened significance amid the impoverished conditions in which many Europeans now found themselves.” Not surprisingly, housing became “the centre of social policy in every European country after the war.”

Programs like UNRRA-CASAS and ERP-CASE thus addressed Italy’s (and Europe’s) much broader housing problems after 1945, the result (at least in part) of both Allied and Axis bombing. Many Italians residing on the peninsula had found themselves displaced by the conflict, as over a million homes were destroyed. In some instances, these sinistrati (“bomb-damaged” persons) and sfollati (displaced) found temporary refuge in camps and shelters before returning to their homes; in other cases they no longer had homes to which they could return. As late as 1959, for example, populations displaced by fighting in Anzio and Cassino remained in precarious shantytowns at the edge of Rome in the areas that would be developed for the Summer Olympics held in the city the following year. With their removal of unsightly reminders of the war (squatters), on the one hand, and the recovery of an imperial Roman past appropriated and abused by the fascist regime, on the other, the 1960 Rome Olympics symbolized a broader process of national reclamation that acquired particular intensity in the years between 1945 and 1960.

In Rome, the Olympic Committee repurposed, expanded, and redesigned spaces that Mussolini’s regime had built for the staging of mass spectacles. Foro Mussolini became Stadio Olimpico, and the EUR zone, built in 1942 for the intended but never realized Esposizione Universale di Roma, became home to the Palazzo dello Sport and Velodrome. Rather than destroying these monuments of a ruined ideology and regime, then, planners “quite deliberately marshaled 2,713 years of the city’s history,” thereby epurating and reclaiming a built environment that bore the unmistakable imprint of fascist monumentalism and modernism. A similar process occurred at Cinecittà, restored as a film studio as the refugees were moved out. The
construction of EUR, in particular, had never been completed, owing to the interruptions of the war. It was only after 1945 that EUR properly came into being as a usable built environment.

Like other urban peripheries in Italy, EUR became home to new apartment buildings that, together with the completion of grand ministry buildings, actually realized the fascist dream for a new Rome. The new housing at EUR features prominently in Michelangelo Antonioni’s acclaimed 1962 film *L’eclisse*. Karen Pinkus has read the film as symbolic of the displacement of memories of colonialism onto Italy’s postwar “conquest” of its urban peripheries with their transformation into residential neighborhoods. In one sense, this reading is apt, as the realization of sites like EUR represented a ghostly continuation of imperial building projects halted by the war and fascism’s defeat. Mia Fuller has detailed the dialogic relationship between the colonial city plan for Addis Ababa and that of EUR, contending that, although located in the metropole, the latter “most thoroughly fulfilled the agendas of Italian colonial city planning.” In another sense, however, Pinkus misses the fact that displaced Italians from the African colonies and other possessions lost after World War II were among those groups for whom the new neighborhoods featured in Antonioni’s film were built. Individuals literally displaced with the collapse of empire arrived to inhabit what Pinkus characterizes solely as sites of psychological displacement for the memories of empire. An entire neighborhood of EUR, for example, became the Villaggio Giuliano Dalmata—still in existence today—for resettlement of refugees from Italy’s lost eastern Adriatic territories. Some repatriates from Africa also came to live alongside their fellow national refugees from Istria and Dalmatia in the EUR quarter. This neighborhood was constructed under the auspices of the parastatal entity Opera per l’Assistenza ai Profughi Giuliani e Dalmati.

Although refugees/repatriates from the lost possessions settled throughout Italy in a variety of locales and settings, I will focus in this chapter on those instances where resettlements arose on the remnants of fascist architectural showpieces such as the Sardinian “new town” (*città di fondazione*) of Fertilia, which became home to Istrian-Julian-Dalmatians, as well as some repatriates from Africa and the Aegean. Like EUR, these sites remained inextricably associated with the fascist political project. How are we to interpret these double displacements of the past, as problematic memories of fascism became literally mapped onto those populations who lost their homes as a result of fascism’s defeat? On the one hand, the refugees’ putative complicity with fascism assumed cartographic form with their resettlement in landscapes saturated with fascist imagery. On the other, the refugees’ status
as symbols of Italianness opened up the possibility (however incomplete or problematic) of reclaiming spaces contaminated by fascism for a notion of nation now severed from fascist imperialism.

The Politics of Reclamation

The fascist regime’s policies of land reclamation profoundly transformed the Italian landscape. Although projects of integral reclamation—particularly those designed to drain malarial swamps—were not new in Italy, the scale of investment under fascism was. Rooted in fascist ideologies of ruralism, corporatism, and autarchy, many but not all of the reclamation projects took place under the aegis of the veterans’ organization Opera Nazionale Combatenti (ONC). In addition to taming the lands and waters where popes and princes had failed to do so, these schemes were designed to put veterans to work as agriculturalists. With the conquest of nature followed the establishment of rural towns and settlements designed to fashion ideal fascist subjects. Pioneered first on the Italian peninsula in the Pontine region, Sicily, Sardinia, and Puglia, as well as in the Dodecanese Islands and Istria, this model of bonifica integrale was exported to Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Libya after 1936 and Albania after 1939.  

Settlers (colonii) brought to work these lands included not only veterans but families of peasants and day laborers (braccianti) from overpopulated and impoverished regions, notably the Veneto and Emilia-Romagna.

The “new towns” (città di fondazione) and village settlements (borghi) built on reclaimed land in the Italian peninsula and its overseas possessions shared a common logic that rested on the myth of conquering virgin land. The conceptualization and execution of these projects revealed the ways in which, under fascism, processes of formal colonization and internal colonization became entangled. As we have seen, the desire to redirect emigration abroad to Italian colonies provided a key ideological justification for fascist imperialism; likewise, the regime aimed to diminish rural-urban migration on the peninsula by sending colonists from impoverished and overpopulated regions to those in need of agricultural reclamation. From 1930 onward, a General Commissariat for Migration and Internal Colonization regulated these movements. In many ways, then, the new towns that remained within the confines of the reconfigured Italian state after 1947 may be understood as colonial traces. For a long time after the war’s end, though, they merely appeared as ugly reminders of the fascist past. Italian philosopher Lucio Caracciolo captures the distaste many Italians felt for these settlements when he recalls his parents’ responses to Latina, one of
the Pontine towns: “On one point . . . my father and mother never budged. Latina disgusted them. They found it vapid.”

With the broader cultural turn in fascist studies that took off in the 1980s, scholars belatedly reclaimed these new towns as objects of academic study, situating them within fascism’s cultural logics. Nonetheless, studies of these settlements have tended to remain restricted to more formalist architectural accounts of the built environment or analyses of the mediatic nature of these schemes. Both approaches frequently focus on the utopian aspects of these projects, a perspective that tends to remove them from the realm of everyday life and into the space of fantasy and projection. In her analysis of the Pontine projects, for example, Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg emphasizes the links between these reclamations and fascist use of film (both cinema and newsreels), arguing that these towns were conceived of as grand stage sets. While this may be true, such an analysis (like those focused on the formal aspects of the architecture) obscures the fact that these spaces were inhabited—and continued to be inhabited long after their “director” and “star” (the Duce) had disappeared from the scene. Pinkus’s discussion of EUR as one of decolonization’s “empty spaces” replicates such omissions. Only a few scholars, notably anthropologists Mia Fuller and Joshua Samuels, have taken up the question of what it actually meant—and means today—to live in these spaces stamped with the brand of fascism. Keeping in mind Stewart-Steinberg’s comments, too, we might note that no one actually lives on a stage set, with the exception of the repatriates and refugees who lived in the camp at Cinecittà! Viewing these sites exclusively as dead ruins of fascist colonialism ignores their long afterlives and the ways in which many of these sites were completed or enlarged only after the fall of fascism. As Frank Biess has argued in his reframing of the notion of the “postwar,” such an approach “does not see the war merely as the ‘prehistory’ to the postwar period but seeks to unearth and render visible the persistent hidden—and sometimes not-so-hidden—traces of the Second World War [and the fascist ventennio, I would add] within postwar societies.”

Even as these new towns hide in plain sight, their precise number and definitional criteria remain disputed. Antonio Pennacchi, born to a family that migrated from the Veneto to the new town of Littoria (rechristened Latina after the war) has counted at least 160 such new settlements scattered throughout Italy and the parts of Venezia Giulia annexed to Yugoslavia. Writing against a body of scholarly work that recognized only twelve such “new towns,” Pennacchi has revealed just how extensive was the intervention made by such reclamation of the Italian landscape. Indeed, many of the areas of swampy marshland reclaimed along Italy’s shores became sites
of the postwar boom in seaside tourism and development; this radically altered the relationship between land and sea in places like Calabria and Puglia, where for centuries malaria (as well as the threat of piracy) had hindered the development of large population centers on the coast. How are we to understand the lack of recognition of most of these fascist settlements? On the one hand, it would appear that certain towns—particularly those close to Rome, like Latina and Sabaudia—came to stand in for the broader project of fascist reclamation, the process of ruination being displaced onto these specific sites. On the other hand, it suggests that much of the broader space of reclamation has been so naturalized as to be detached from its fascist origins and reclaimed as part of the post-fascist nation. In this sense, we might think of these “ruins” as laying the foundations for the postwar nation in a manner akin to those eucalyptus trees planted all over Italy during the fascist era. Though often taken for granted, the trees (like the relocations) are recognizable markers of a superseded era.

The process of reclaiming these spaces for the democratic nation, rather than fascist empire, required a new form of redemption, distinct from the rite of redenzione della terra or redemption of the land that had characterized the fascist projects. In referring to this broader process as postimperial reclamation, or bonifica post-imperiale, I distinguish it from the related notion of bonifica nazionale. The fascist regime had undertaken “national reclamation” in those newly “redeemed” territories that became integral parts of Italy after World War I. In Venezia Giulia, for example, national reclamation entailed projects of cultural Italianization (particularly in the realm of language policies) and expropriations from small-scale cultivators (for the most part, ethnic Slovenes and Croats) to provide land for migrants from the old provinces of Italy. In his groundbreaking study of the politics of the resettlement of Istrian-Julian-Dalmatian refugees in the region around Trieste, Sandi Volk has evidenced the deliberate postwar continuation of these policies of bonifica nazionale. The territorial dispute between Italy and Yugoslavia occasioned a mass migration of individuals out of the territories that became part of Yugoslavia, as we have seen. Approximately one-third of those migrants settled in and around the border city of Trieste. With the support of the OAPGD, the parastatal entity created to assist refugees from Italy’s eastern territories and whose remit later came to include repatriates from the colonies, local communes expropriated land from ethnic Slovenes (citizens of Italy) in order to build housing complexes for “Italian” refugees from the Istrian peninsula.

The explicit justification for such actions was the need for a bonifica nazionale that would Italianize the corridor between the cities of Trieste and Monfalcone largely inhabited by Italy’s autochthonous Slovene populations.
In addition, the creation of the *Villaggio del pescatore*—a settlement for refugee fishermen—at Duino Aurisina on land expropriated from Slovene fishermen aimed to stake an Italian claim to a coastline historically fished by ethnic Slovenes. In this case, the continuation of fascist projects of ethnic reengineering was intended to nationalize a historically mixed border territory. Volk acknowledges the success of this policy, given that “in the arc of only 20–30 years from the end of the war, the ‘Slovene coast’ became, in fact, ‘Italian.’ And here this transformation was obtained almost exclusively thanks to the mass settlement of Istrian and Dalmatian refugees.”

I have not found evidence for a *bonifica nazionale* with a clear-cut ethnic design in other parts of postwar Italy where refugees from the former possessions settled. This likely reflects the peculiarity of the ethnic situation along Italy’s eastern border. That there were explicit designs to settle national refugees in the zones of fascist *bonifica integrale* that awaited completion, however, is clear. Two socialist members of the Italian Constituent Assembly tasked with creating a constitution for the nascent Italian First Republic, Antonio De Berti and Angelo Corsi, proposed the resettlement of such refugees in areas where the work of reclamation remained incomplete. In the contested region around Trieste, displaced Italian citizens from Istria and Dalmatia were the means by which local administrations sought to cleanse and purify the “contamination” represented by ethnic Slavs. These Slavs represented the human analogue, in nationalist rhetoric, of the murky swamps and their disease-bearing mosquitoes cleansed through the *bonifica*. Elsewhere, as at Fertilia, Italian refugees and repatriates instead became the means to reclaim spaces and practices associated with fascism, even as these human reminders of fascism’s failure were removed to peripheral spaces within Italy. As a 1955 pamphlet describing the creation of the settlement of Gebelia near Anzio for Italian refugees from Libya put it, “This is an appeal to social reconstruction, to a *bonifica* that is not only rural but civil and human.”

**Fertile Grounds**

The town of Fertilia, today practically a suburb of the town of Alghero in northwest Sardinia, possesses multiple origin stories. Technically, it was founded on 8 March 1936, intended to serve as the urban heart of the reclamation zone on the marshy Nurra plain. In contrast to many other such *città di fondazione*, the settlement of Fertilia developed with the intention of settling not veterans of the ONC but colonists from Ferrara selected by the Ente ferrarese di colonizzazione (EFC). The EFC had obtained the concession on land from the Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale in
1933, and in 1934 took over the former penal colony of Cuguttu (rechristened "L’azienda agricola Maria Pia").\textsuperscript{36} An initial master plan by the architect Arturo Miraglia in 1935 was largely abandoned in 1937 in favor of the new design drawn up by the Roman architecture group 2PST.\textsuperscript{37} Despite high hopes and the fanfare of the ceremony in which the first stones for the church and the youth organization were laid, many of the EFC’s plans never materialized.

Still, the EFC did undertake a number of interventions onto the terrain, including the creation of a water system (aqueduct, wells, canals, cisterns) and sixty-five homes for settlers (\textit{case coloniche}), as well as the planting of pines along the dunes of Maria Pia. Nonetheless, malaria continued to make regular appearances during the summer months. By 1942, Fertilia itself consisted of a cinema, post office, buildings for police and customs personnel, the fascist youth headquarters (Opera Nazionale Balilla), a hotel, and town hall. Construction had begun but not been completed on the church and Casa Doria, the latter which would become a dormitory for refugees after the war. A 1943 Allied bombing raid left the military airport of Fertilia in ruins, and the use of various buildings to house troops and later interned civilians from Yugoslavia further degraded what remained.\textsuperscript{38} The city of Alghero also sustained considerable damage.

\textbf{Figure 10.} Former refugee dormitory at Casa Doria, Fertilia, Sardinia. Photo by author, June 2012.
After the war, the incomplete and half-ruined Fertilia became the site for another origin story. A newspaper article in *La Nuova Sardegna* described the visit by a governmental-sponsored commission to assess Fertilia’s suitability for resettling Istrian-Julian-Dalmatian refugees in terms that replicated the fascist regime’s rhetoric of virgin territory, even if the abandonment of this site owed more to the pernicious acts of man, rather than nature: “In the zone there was no human presence. Not even shepherds, who instead lived in the zone opposite the Nurra. And it was precisely that loneliness, that sense of abandonment, that convinced the commission that this would be the new city of the Julian refugees. No one would have looked at them badly, because there was no one to look at them.”

In this telling, refugees from Italy’s lost lands became positioned as colonial pioneers, taking the places left by the Ferrarese settlers who had preceded them. This omitted the reality, of course, that approximately one hundred colonists from Ferrara continued to live around Fertilia. The plans to realize Fertilia as a kind of refugee “new town” coalesced with the negotiations for the 1947 Peace Treaty with Italy, which awarded a large swath of territory to Yugoslavia and laid out the terms by which Italians resident in those territories could opt to retain their citizenship, an act that required moving to the now territorially reduced Italy (discussed at length in chapters 3 and 4). As Italians began to opt and leave the Istrian towns of Pula/Pola, Rovinj/Rovigno, and Vrsar/Orsera en masse, the prime minister at the time, Alcide De Gasperi, invited Monsignor Raffaele Radossi, the bishop of Porec/Parenzo and Pula/Pola, to help convene the commission of experts that would visit Fertilia in February 1947. Radossi sent Don Francesco Dapiran, the exiled parish priest of Vrsar/Orsera, to represent the church. Only thirty-two when he first visited Fertilia, Dapiran would remain there as its parish priest from 1948 to 1992.

In a testimony given toward the end of his life, Dapiran recalled his first encounter with Fertilia: “The condition in which we found the town was frightening: there weren’t any roads, just a stony track where now lies Via Cherso. . . . Despite these conditions, our report was not negative. The place had potential, as long as streets, sewers, and houses would be built, as well as the purchase of nets for the fishermen from Istria.”

Dapiran returned to Fertilia for good soon after this initial visit, arriving in the nearly deserted town on the cold and dark evening of 18 February 1947. Refugees from Italy’s lost lands on the eastern Adriatic had already begun to make their way to Sardinia by this point, some on the mistaken information from the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale dell’Istria that at Fertilia they would find ready-made accommodations. Some fifty-three or fifty-four
of these refugees were subsequently sent on to either Alghero or Sassari. Others found accommodation in the barracks at Fertilia’s airport. To some degree, the movement of these refugees toward Fertilia and Alghero propelled the state to formalize a resettlement plan, even if the skills of many of these initial arrivals did not match up with the recommendations that fishing families be brought.  

Fertilia’s gradual transformation over the next decade into a habitable town for Italian refugees involved many actors: the Italian state, local and regional authorities in Sardinia, the church, UNRRA, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ente di Trasformazione Fondiaria della Sardegna (EFTAS), the Ufficio per le Zone di Conflitto (a state organization under the prime minister’s oversight), entities created specifically for Fertilia like the Ente Giuliano Autonomo di Sardegna or EGAS, and the refugees themselves. At the most fundamental level, the development of the region required the eradication of malaria. Between 1946 and 1948, a DDT campaign sponsored by UNRRA and the Rockefeller Foundation and channeled through the Ente Regionale per la Lotta Anti Anofelica in Sardegna (ERLAAS) achieved what fascism had not. UNRRA and Rockefeller made similar interventions on the Italian peninsula, notably in the Pontine marsh area where retreating German troops had destroyed the waterworks that had permitted fascism to claim its premature victory over mosquitoes.  

Despite this reclamation of the land, the initial plans to develop Fertilia as a new home for Italian refugees rested on a vision of Fertilia as a fishing village, in part because of the sea’s proximity. The report of the commission sent to Sardinia concluded, “Given the distance of the agricultural land [from Fertilia] and the immediate proximity of the sea, the settlement should welcome only families of fishermen, some artisans and some office workers.”  

In a much-publicized event, the crews of thirteen Istrian fishing boats that had escaped sequestration in Yugoslavia took the vessels from Chioggia (near Venice) through the Adriatic, around the boot of Italy and up the Tyrrhenian Sea to Sardinia. The Luce Institute dedicated one short film and a newsreel to this voyage. The 1949 short, Fertilia dei Giuliani (alternatively titled Giuliani in Sardegna), captured the boats on their journey with Dapiran at their head. Describing the fishermen as “modern Ulysses,” the film depicted the “small incomplete city” (piccola città incompiuta) that awaited the refugees. The gaze of the film lingers on the ruins of the city—at once spectral and deserted but possessed of “good foundations” (buone fondamenti). Portraying the arduous work of reclaiming Fertilia in order to render it habitable, the film then cuts to the joyous arrival of a truck with the men’s wives and children. Although the short film shows refugees engaged in a variety of economic activities—including
farming, cultivation of vegetable hemp, and shopkeeping—the focus remains on fishing. “To say Istrian is like saying man of the sea” quips the voiceover, closing with a shot of Istrians fishing a new sea in their sturdy wooden boats.46

The initial plans to recast Fertilia as a fishing center, rather than an agricultural one, ultimately failed. Some of the earliest refugees who had preceded the fishermen, including miners from the Istrian new town of Raša/Arsia, migrated once again.47 Some of the original refugees at Fertilia later migrated to the United States through the IRO, included among those exceptions discussed in the previous chapter. By the 1950s, a “second exodus” out of Fertilia to the cities of the mainland, particularly the industrial center of Turin, began.48 The story of Lidia M. is a fairly typical one. Born in Vodnjan/Dignano (Istria), Lidia and her family migrated to Italy when she was just six months old. Her family passed through several refugee camps (including that at Cinecittà) before ending up at the IRO camps in Bagnoli and then Pagano. When her father was rejected for emigration abroad because of his health, the family moved to Fertilia in 1953. In 1960, however, Lidia migrated to Turin, where she lived for thirty-eight years before returning to Sardinia.

One explanation for Fertilia’s initial failure as a fishing hub and the subsequent re-migration of refugees there pointed to the undeveloped nature of the fishing market and distribution networks in Sardinia at the time. Piero Massarotto, who led a group of four boats to Fertilia in 1948, later remembered, “We used our own fishing methods [in Sardinia], those which in Rovigno allowed us to provide the factory for tinned fish with a continuous supply. Our ‘sacca a leva’ net closed and brought aboard an incredible quantity of fish. . . . The catch was great but nobody wanted our fish. We had to go around the villages trying to sell it, and after a few days, without refrigeration it would start to rot.”49 Whereas Massarotto eventually abandoned fishing and turned to construction work, some of his fellow fishermen left Fertilia and joined those who had headed to the mainland.

Without a doubt, the Istrians found underdeveloped markets for their fish in Sardinia, and their technology likely outmatched that of local fishers. Istrians had migrated to an island with relatively underdeveloped maritime traditions, owing to centuries of malaria and piracy that encouraged pastoralism and small-scale agriculture away from the coasts. Yet Istrians also appear to have endorsed, consciously or not, a long-standing rhetoric that depicted southern Italy in general and Sardinia in particular as backward. Such a rhetoric would be invoked, as we shall see, to justify further refugee settlement on the island, with displaced persons cast as agents of modernity and civilization.
In reality, then, the obstacles to establishing Fertilia as a fishing village proved political and organizational in ways that extended far beyond the limited capacities of local markets. The Unione Pescatori Giuliani, an entity founded in Venice in 1947 to assist Istrian-Julian-Dalmatian refugees, had—with the Italian state’s generous contribution of 20 million lire—helped to equip and organize the fishing boats immortalized in the Luce Institute film. Contrary to the heroic rhetoric of the film (a mythic narrative that I often heard repeated by informants in Fertilia), refugees at the time accused the Unione Pescatori of corruption. A 1952 document from the then-undersecretary of state Giulio Andreotti summarizes the gist of these charges, the most egregious being that the founding journey of the fishing boats to Fertilia “ended with the general sale [of those boats] to the profit of the participants who had received the outfitted boats on concession in Venice. The poorest refugees were then abandoned to themselves in Fertilia until the Presidency [PCM] assumed the management of the colony; the directors of the Unione . . . returned to Venice with no interest in the fate of their needy companions.” Andreotti went on to lay out several other charges, including the Unione’s request for a merchant marine ship said to be for the refugees’ use but actually intended to enrich the Unione’s administrators.

Other entities that took up the question of fishing at Fertilia—most notably the Ente Giuliano Autonomo di Sardegna (EGAS), formed in 1949 with the remit of overseeing the development of Fertilia—likewise encountered problems. Only dissolved in 1979, EGAS has proven a source of continuing controversy. Some scholars and residents of Fertilia view it as having served as a positive agent for the improvement of the refugees’ lives; others instead see it as a source of division and even exploitation of the refugees. A 1948 note from the exile organization Associazione Nazionale Venezia Giulia e Dalmazia (ANVGD) to the Ufficio per le Zone di Confine urged the necessity of establishing EGAS: “One must use all means to prevent the locality [i.e., Fertilia], built with such noble intentions, from itself becoming a refugee camp.” Ten years later, however, the ANVGD’s Sassari branch called for the incorporation of EGAS into the OAPGD. In the letter, the ANVGD’s president and executive committee noted that while the government had created EGAS with an initial six-month mandate, it had continued to prolong that mandate. Administration of EGAS had passed to non-refugees who did not represent the interests of Fertilia’s inhabitants. Even esuli who had played significant roles in EGAS, like Dario Manni, criticized the fact that Istrians and Dalmatians almost never held the key positions. My informants also differed in their assessments of the role played by the priest Don Francesco
Dapiran, some claiming he had been scapegoated for Fertilia’s problems, others complaining that he acted like a “boss.”

Under the direction of EGAS and with assistance from UNRRA-CASAS and the OAPGD, among others, Fertilia developed a mixed economy based on agriculture, cultivation and processing of vegetable hemp, fishing (organized through the Nazario Sauro Cooperative), artisanal trades, tourism, and employment at the nearby airport. A handful of Italian refugees from Africa (Libya, Eritrea), Rhodes, and Romania arrived to live alongside the Istrian-Julian-Dalmatians in Fertilia. In 1957, UNRRA-CASAS built forty-seven houses—referred to colloquially as “Case Canada” (Canadian homes) for refugees in Fertilia. The OAPGD built another four.54

The development of Fertilia’s agricultural potential followed out of the agrarian reforms of the mid-1950s, as some refugees moved out of the center of Fertilia to tame the nearby rocky, macchia-covered area known as Lazzaretto. Over time, these labors transformed the area, today known as Maristella and made up of tidy homes and vineyards. By 1961, forty Istrian and sixteen Sardinian families had obtained thirty-year mortgage contracts for these lands.55 When I visited Lidia M. and Marisa B. in their homes in Maristella in 2012, they showed me photos of the formerly barren landscape that their parents encountered there. “It was a desert. . . . My parents went on foot from Fertilia to the countryside. . . . At that time, it was all ugly—there weren’t any trees. . . . My parents had to take out all the rocks from the soil.” These women also repeated a story I heard repeatedly about how in the 1940s and 1950s the backward local Sardinians were shocked by the emancipated nature of the Istrian women, who ventured out on their own on bicycles and to the beach.56 This account thus offered a gendered take on the civilizational rhetoric that characterizes the tale of Istrians’ reclamation of the “wild” zone of Fertilia.

As such comments suggest, the story of Fertilia consists in a multilayered narrative of ruination and redemption/reclamation. Although Fertilia’s literal reclamation (physical and moral) lay in the hands of the refugees and their representatives—and received considerable financial inputs from intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations such as UNRRA and the Rockefeller Foundation—ultimately it was the Italian state that provided much of the land and the means for such a reclamation. This underscores the state’s increasing assertion of control over questions of assistance to national refugees, with the limited capacities of the Italian government in the period 1945–1947 a distant memory by this point. Whether or not the “statization” of assistance advocated by AAI head Lodovico Montini (see chapter 3) had been achieved is debatable. What appeared incontestable, though, is that
by the 1950s the Italian state had affirmed its national “right” to regulate flows of displaced persons into its territory and provide assistance to those who met the criteria of citizenship and refugeedom it established. This had occurred in the wider context of an Italian rearticulation of assistance and welfare, one in which the very constitution “treats relief as a duty of the State and therefore something to which the citizen is entitled,” contended Montini in his role as vice president for the Parliamentary Inquiry into Destitution in Italy. Italy’s success, however mixed, in resettling national refugees and exiles in places like Fertilia nonetheless opened it up to questions of whether foreign refugees might also become agents of reconstruction and reclamation.

Did these foreign DPs have some rights to relief from the host state in which they found themselves, or were such rights reserved exclusively for those who had lost their homes in Italy’s Oltremare and their fellow metropolitan citizens? This was precisely the question that John Alexander-Sinclair, head of the UNHCR’s Rome office and later a staff member of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), asked in 1953 when he began to promote a plan to permanently settle refugees in Sardinia. Inspired in part by the success of Fertilia, Alexander-Sinclair included Sardinia as a potential site in UNHCR’s then emerging “permanent solutions” program.

“Everybody Here Is for Sardinia”

As we have seen, Italian leaders had successfully argued again and again that Italy’s economic weakness—as well as its pressing obligations to its own refugees—made it unsuitable for large-scale resettlement by foreign refugees. In 1948, Lodovico Montini had recommended to the Chamber of Deputies that Italy should join the International Refugee Organization in order to “defend” Italian interests, which in his mind included seeking the extension of IRO help to Italian refugees. He noted, in particular, the “sad contrast in the treatment, on the same Italian territory, given to United Nations refugees versus Italian refugees.” Sympathetic observers agreed regarding the burden presented by Italy’s own refugees, as well as the victim status of such repatriates. Looking back on her experiences in postwar Italy, Eileen Egan of Catholic Relief Services recalled,

Into a country unable to feed itself, came 510,000 Italians from the ceded territories outside the peninsula. They streamed back from Venezia Giulia, from Dalmatia ceded to Yugoslavia, from the Dodecanese Islands restored to Greece, and from Africa. . . . From Libya,
Somaliland, and Ethiopia came poor and hardworking colonists who were themselves victims, like the sons of the poor Irish in the lower ranks of British colonial forces, of colonial incursions in whose planning they had no part.⁶⁰

Egan described the sad encampments in which Italian “returnees” lived and then repeated a line of argumentation that had already become common sense by the 1950s: “The ‘overseas Italians’ who were dumped on the ravaged peninsula, besides needing shelter, exacerbated an unemployment situation of almost unimaginable proportions.”⁶¹ As evidenced by the use of the passive voice (“were dumped”) that denied any agency to these overseas Italians, Egan left unquestioned the possibility that refugees (whether national or foreign) could be anything other than a burden on the fragile postwar Italian economy. Such a view accorded with the opinion of those like Montini who cited population pressure owing to lack of emigration possibilities as a fundamental problem in large cities like Naples.⁶² Nonetheless, some Italian authorities had instead begun to reposition national refugees as agents of positive changes in places where the work of fascist bonifica remained incomplete. Like Fertilia, many though not all these sites were also in those areas considered culturally as belonging to the south, and hence part of the “Southern Question.”

Fascism had marked a rupture or, perhaps, a temporary hiatus in understandings of meridionalismo within Italy. As Mariella Pandolfi has argued, “This ‘auto-orientalist’ construction of a double Italian identity was overcome only for the briefest moment when the Fascist regime proclaimed its agenda of transforming Italy into a late colonial empire.”⁶³ In keeping with this, fascist patterns of land reclamation did not single out the south as a privileged space of intervention but instead addressed pressing issues from Istria to the Veneto to Puglia to Sardinia, as well as the overseas territories. Within the fascist colonial imaginary, the south thus occupied the simultaneous position of colonizing and colonized subject, as notions of southernness were projected onto overseas lands to be settled by both Italian southerners and northerners alike. The reemergence of discourses pathologizing “the Southern Problem” after 1945 thanks in part to the 1951 sociological study of the “cave dwellers” of Matera and the Parliamentary Inquiry into Destitution, together with a host of proffered political and economic solutions, transformed the once capacious and diffused notion of bonifica under fascism into a distinctly southern concern. Edmondo Cancellieri’s 1953 documentary L’ora del Sud mocked this development with its “claim” that in southern Italy belief in the “legend” of bonifica had supplanted belief in fairies.⁶⁴
Other documentary films took *bonifica* more seriously, however. As Paola Bonifazio has pointed out,

In democratic Italy, to inform viewers about the success of the *bonifica* projects meant to spread knowledge about the success of Italian workers and also to enlighten them with the technical knowledge of modern times. The older opposition between an idle southern soul and a working northern soul was replaced by two newer oppositions: one between those who worked towards and participated in the solution of the Southern Question and those who remained idle, and another between those who could see the results and the implementation of the reconstruction and were, therefore, knowledgeable about modern technology against those who still reasoned according to common sense.  

Within this reconfiguration of the Southern Question, Sardinia figured as a prime object for intervention. In a 1953 publication that drew heavily on the Parliamentary Inquiry into Destitution, Giovanni Spagnolli of UNRRA-CASAS lamented that “in Sardinia, misery and destitution is reflected in the inert, atavistic ignorance of the population that perpetuates this situation in a truly worrisome manner. The condition of the accommodations of people on the edges of the cities and of fishermen presents startling characteristics.”  

Such comments drew on pervasive stereotypes of Sardinia as an untamed landscape marked by banditry and savage pastoralists, what Tracey Heatherington has called a “dark frontier.” As Dario Gaggio notes, “Sardinia was at times perceived as utterly different and remote, and at others as intimately familiar and as the possible stage for dreams of redemption.” A 1955 American Universities Field Staff report titled *Everybody Here Is for Sardinia* emphasized the island’s “quasi-colonial” character within Italy but nonetheless saw great opportunity as the result of the successful antimalarial campaign and the infrastructural investments in the region made by the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno. In contrast to Sicily (the Mediterranean’s largest island), which possessed a high population density, Sardinia (the Mediterranean’s second-largest island) remained underpopulated, and refugees were imagined as useful agents of development, rather than drains on the economy or competitors for jobs. With the flurry of interest in and proposals for resettlement of refugees in Sardinia in the 1950s, then, we find a convergence of multiple interests: those of Italian authorities keen on developing and disciplining the “backward” island of Sardinia; individuals and groups seeking homes for national refugees; and non-Italians in international agencies hoping that foreign refugees might also find durable resettlement solutions in Italy.
As early as the mid-1950s, officials within UNHCR like Alexander-Sinclair had begun urging Italy to accept some foreign refugees for resettlement given the poor prospects for emigration for many of the hard-core refugees, on the one hand, and the opportunities presented by the country’s postwar economic boom, on the other. Alexander-Sinclair also dared to question the usual assumptions about the problem of surplus population in Italy. Drawing on demographic and statistical projections, Alexander-Sinclair argued that by 1980 Italy would actually suffer from negative population growth. He also diagnosed contemporary Italy’s problems as ones of maldistribution of capital and “under-capitalisation” rather than overpopulation per se. Maintaining that “Europes [sic] empty spaces must be filled, before additional burdens are assumed in overseas countries,” Alexander-Sinclair wrote to a US State Department official in 1953 that the initial idea for placing refugees in Sardinia developed out of a discussion with Bartolomeo Migone in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Minister Migone “then suggested that use should be made of the principal Mediterranean islands which happen to be the possessions of different European countries and which, being near enough to the Iron Curtain [which was generating migrant flows], might provide useful centres for selection for emigration, for local integration etc. He mentioned Corsica, Sardinia (Sicily is too close to the mainland) Crete and Cyprus.”

Migone no doubt had in mind the efforts already undertaken by the Italian state to settle its national refugees on the island. The initial seed for Fertilia’s reconstruction as a refugee town had been laid not just by the pioneer priest Dapiran and enterprising exiles who made their way to the town, as discussed in the previous section, but also by two socialist members of the Italian Constituent Assembly, Antonio De Berti and Angelo Corsi, who proposed that Italian refugees be placed in areas where the work of bonifica or land reclamation awaited completion. Corsi, himself a Sard, took particular interest in developing his home island through refugee resettlement. As president of the INPS from 1946 to 1966, he confronted head-on the challenges of repatriating Italian settlers from the villages the INPS had administered in Tripolitania. In the mind of Corsi and many others, Fertilia was not a unique or singular experiment in refugee placement. In fact, the 1947 commission of governmental experts that visited Fertilia had also traveled to Castiadas (a former penal colony in southwest Sardinia) to evaluate its potential. In the mid-1950s, Castiadas would become home to many Italians leaving Tunisia. Foreign entities had also eyed Sardinia for refugee resettlement, with Aide Suisse purchasing land to create a model farm at Siniscola. In 1952, Aide Suisse had also floated a plan to work with the AAI and UNRRA-CASAS to settle foreign refugees at Nurra, just north of Fertilia.
Drawing on these precedents, in May 1957 an initial “Sardinia plan” developed by Migone, Alexander-Sinclair, and others was presented formally at the International Conference on Refugee Problems Today and Tomorrow. The project envisioned the resettlement of twenty thousand families and called for the provision of homes and necessary infrastructure. Entities expressing interest in sponsoring the scheme included the World Bank, the Council of Europe, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC), and Aide Suisse. In order to gain the support of the Italian state, the plan provided for resettling both “alien” or foreign refugees and national refugees, as well as some impoverished Sardinians. Another iteration of the plan called for fifty thousand individuals, including ten thousand Sards, fifteen thousand continental Italians, and twenty-five thousand alien refugees; “continental Italians” presumably referred here to displaced Italians (sinistrati) or national refugees, since this particular proposal for the Sardinia plan acknowledged, “To this day no Italian willingly leave the continent—as they call the mainland of Italy—and live in Sardinia.” Earlier discussions of the plan had highlighted that the only real obstacles to Sardinia as a site of resettlement existed in the minds of continental Italians “and not in the minds of Italian refugees from the Balkans, or from the ex-Italian colonies, nor indeed in the minds of alien refugees in Italy or other countries of Western Europe.” One projection claimed Sardinia could support double its population.

The proposed project called for refugees to engage in a range of industrial, agricultural, and fishing activities (particularly lobsters for export). Italian prime minister Antonio Segni, himself a Sard, was said to have expressed interest in the plan, though Segni’s resignation in 1957 rendered this support less significant. Whereas some of the project’s international backers saw this as a potential model to deal with a “new emergency of the Hungarian Revolution type,” others—like one skeptic in the International Rescue Committee (IRC)—wondered aloud, “If this idea is sound, why don’t Italians do it for their own surplus population?” Such a question hinted at the ambivalence of Italian authorities to the plan. As Alexander-Sinclair’s personal papers reveal, the project ultimately foundered on Italian indifference.

Whereas Lodovico Montini (at that time a member of both the Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, as well as head of the AAI) first asked for a delay in discussing the plan, he then failed to turn up at scheduled meetings held in July and September 1958 with the Council of Europe. This provoked frustration and irritation among council members. Alexander-Sinclair claimed that the reluctance came from above, thereby excusing Montini, who he claimed
was “most embarrassed and as charming as usual, but he was simply power- less.” 85 A note to Montini in July 1958 indicates that a discussion on the plan “was cancelled at the request of the Italian authorities, who are not open to examining such plan.” Montini then replied confidentially that “the project of Mr. Alexander Sinclair is seen with some diffidence. In particular, this project was seen in absolutely negative terms by the Sardinian representatives at the Council of Europe: by our colleague Azzara, above all.” 86 In addition, strong opposition to the plan existed within the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In a June 1958 internal MAE memo, an official named Pescatori within the “Emigration” section complained, “These vague proposals [for Sardinia] have for years been presented, in the most disparate circumstances, by Mr. John Alexander-Sinclair (who is well known and not in a positive way, by this Ministry).” Pescatori fretted that successful implementation of the plan threatened to “confirm the legend of the inexhaustible and virgin possibilities for insertion—even of foreign refugees—in Sardinia.” Furthermore, claimed this official, the plan could imperil Italian efforts to obtain financial assistance from the United States in settling Italian emigrants in “ethnographic settlements” abroad (in Brazil, Chile, and Costa Rica). 87

Giovanni Vassallo in the “Profughi Stranieri” section of the MAE went even further in his criticism. Seconding Pescatori about the “disfavor” (sfavore) with which Alexander-Sinclair was seen within the MAE, Vassallo added in a letter to Montini, “The impression that I took away [in various meetings with Alexander-Sinclair] was that this project concealed some hidden interests, political more than financial, of groups that are not identified but are probably British.” Just in case such suspicions weren’t sufficient to damn the project, Vassallo concluded, “The project is extremely absurd and utopian.” 88 Regardless of whether members of the Council of Europe proved aware of such controversies behind the scenes, they quickly turned their attention to other potential underdeveloped sites for similar resettlement, including the Landes in southwest France. Alexander-Sinclair’s efforts thus failed to produce concrete results in resettling foreign refugees in Sardinia. 89

During the same time period, the Homeless European Land Program (HELP) established in Simaxis (a hamlet on the edge of Oristano) offered an important exception to the rule that Italy would serve only as a transit country for alien refugees. Alexander-Sinclair proved well aware of HELP’s work; discussions of the Sardinia plan even referred to it as a positive model. 90 Pescatori, the critic in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, instead dismissed it as “a simple private entity [azienda], a source perhaps of publicity but irrelevant on the international scene.” 91 Though HELP’s genesis paralleled that of the Sardinia plan in time, it was a more organic, bottom-up scheme formulated by
two young Americans, Belden Paulson and film actor Don Murray. Paulson and Murray had become friends as social workers at the Casa Mia project in Naples in the early 1950s. Distressed by the enduring problem of hard-core refugees languishing in camps in Italy, Murray and Paulson hatched a plan to resettle some of these longtime foreign refugees in Italy. After an initial but fruitless scouting visit to Calabria in early 1957, Paulson met with the head of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno (Fund for the South). Paulson wrote home in a letter to his family, “We were almost lifted out of our chairs when the director, Engineer Orcel, told us that if we wanted favorable conditions . . . the place to go was Sardinia. . . . La Cassa would be prepared to help financially and would provide experts.”

Belden and Murray thus conceived of a small resettlement project of about twenty-five families in the “historically depressed area” of Sardinia. With the support of the Cassa, UNHCR, the AAI, and EFTAS, as well as Murray’s own money from his movie salaries and funds raised through a direct appeal on US television (with Murray surprising Paulson with a This Is Your Life episode), Paulson and Murray obtained a piece of land for the project in 1957 and began to tour camps on the mainland, recruiting refugees.

As had occurred with Alexander-Sinclair’s project, however, the Italian government sent mixed messages, at best. “Only later did we learn why our dealings with AAI, the Italian Government refugee authority, were so difficult,” confessed Paulson. “The government was convinced our project would fail ‘because these refugees will never make it.’ Further, if we did succeed, it would be too expensive, since it would lead to other, similar efforts. Even more basic, the Ministry of Interior really didn’t want these refugees integrated into the Italian economy. On the surface, however, AAI had to cooperate in order to receive international support.”

The comments made by the UNHCR representative Ernest Schlatter who attended the inauguration of the first house on the project in July 1958 must have confirmed the worst fears of these Italian critics. Schlatter—the same UNHCR official urging Italy to accept foreign refugees for permanent settlement whom we encountered in the introduction—lauded HELP as “a pilot project, an important experiment.” Underlining the project’s uniqueness in the Italian context, Schlatter continued,

May I confirm that the UNHCR, with the means at its disposal, will do everything possible to help assure the success of this project. In a country like Italy, traditionally one of migration, for a refugee to achieve integration and work here is nearly impossible. It is therefore all the more interesting that precisely in Italy, in Sardinia, a project is
being created which can serve as an example for the world. Of necessity, this experiment will be duplicated elsewhere, and we hope also in other parts of Europe.\textsuperscript{94}

Despite such hopes, the project appears to have been an outlier in the Italian landscape. The gains of HELP were modest, settling at most fifteen refugees. All the refugees were men, and they included a Spaniard who had been a refugee since the Spanish Civil War, a Czech who had collaborated with the Nazis, a Slovene, and a Serb. The inclusion of Yugoslavs into the project was significant, since on the Sardinian project proposed by Alexander-Sinclair, Minister Migone had sought to “swap out” or replace Yugoslav refugees with displacees from other parts of Eastern Europe. As Alexander-Sinclair noted in one of his memos on the failed project, “The only condition he [Migone] put was that Yugoslav refugees should be housed in islands other than Sardinia so that Italy could avoid complications with her eastern neighbour.”\textsuperscript{95} While Migone phrased this demand in the name of good relations with Yugoslavia, there also existed considerable hostility toward and suspicion of Yugoslav refugees within Italy, even when those refugees opposed Tito and communism (see chapter 4). Ironically, HELP organizers instead worried about anti-Tito Yugoslav refugees resettling near a town—Oristano—at that point in time dominated by the Italian Communist Party.\textsuperscript{96}

In December 1958 Paulson and Murray established the Don Murray Agricultural Cooperative (Cooperativa Agricola e Responsabilità Limitata Don Murray), which gave the project a firm legal footing. By the late 1950s, the refugees-turned-farmers were even hiring local laborers. They worked alongside volunteers (mostly young Americans and Europeans) from the Brethren Christian Service. The project was economically viable and made a small but positive contribution to the local economy, seen in the existence of a hen and egg farm still in operation today.

From the start, Paulson and Murray had conceived of the HELP project as one of rehabilitation for the refugees and reconstruction and development for Sardinia. In regard to the latter, the refugees were to constitute a valuable labor force, and, in reality, the families of HELP completed work of land reclamation, clearing agricultural land and producing crops such as tomatoes, melon, and eggplants. In presentations to the local audiences, one refugee who had no previous agricultural experience proudly recounted “how he had become a peasant.”\textsuperscript{97} The descendant of one refugee noted that the painstaking work of reclamation had been mostly done by hand. “Bonifica! Bonifica!” she exclaimed, pointing to the capaciousness of the \textit{bonifica} notion to include, at least in this singular instance, foreigners as both agents
of Italian modernization and actors worthy of reclamation themselves. In this project, then, we find on the terrain of underdeveloped Sardinia the literal intersection of the Italian metaphor of *bonifica* with the UN agencies’ remit to facilitate rehabilitation, that is, to “help refugees help themselves.”

Paulson had explicitly aimed to combat the apathy and distrust created by long years in refugee camps. He argued that Italy’s “rigid social structure” and the typical closure of the islanders toward outsiders (their literal insularity) reinforced a necessary sense of refugee community. In a report on “refugee attitudes,” Paulson asserted, “The values being nurtured on the project are beginning to create more mutual trust among themselves than with anyone outside. They now see the desirability of inviting over more refugees—and if possible some of the best elements in the camp—to make the growing community more substantial.” At the same time, he acknowledged that a number of the more educated refugees viewed themselves as superior to the local Sards, an attitude that provoked resentment. As occurred at Fertilia with the “emancipated” Julians and Istrians, the HELP refugees became “extremely critical of local customs centered in the Church, social conformity, rigid ideas about women, and lack of outside contact. . . . [Refugee] ‘worldliness’ is often distant from views found in Sardinian villages. Moreover the refugees are franker than local people steeped in ‘face’ and at times they are insensitive to local feelings.”

In the end, though, such differences appear to have been overcome, as at least six of the original refugees married local women and established families. In 2015, I interviewed a group of the widows (none of the refugees is living today) and their children. Though bearing names like Vlada, the descendants possess a stronger identity as Italians and Sards than as Italo-Slovenes or *figli di profughi* (children of refugees). The traces of the HELP project remain, then, in both infrastructure like homes and the hen operation, as well as kin. Contrary to the fears of Italian officials that such refugees would “never make it,” the foreigners settled by HELP contributed to the reclamation of Sardinia and the postwar Italian nation. Although rather tellingly none of the refugees themselves ever obtained Italian citizenship, their children have been “claimed” for the postwar Italian nation, suggesting that Italy could have potentially played a larger role as a place for foreign refugee resettlement after World War II had there existed the political will to do so.

The history of schemes to settle refugees (foreign and Italian) in Sardinia underscores, yet again, the entangled nature *in practice* of assistance to these two populations—that is, the intertwined threads of international (intergovernmental and nongovernmental) and national relief. Placing refugees in either Fertilia or Simaxis would not have been possible without the initial
joint efforts of the Rockefeller Foundation and EFTAS to rid the island of malaria, for instance. Likewise, the AAI worked (if at times grudgingly) with UNRRA-CASAS and the UNHCR, among others, to find such durable solutions for the displaced. In one version of the Sardinia project, there was even stipulated a head-to-head plan, suggesting that the earlier lessons of BMA efforts to control migratory movements had not been lost on those national and international actors dealing with refugees. In a missive written on the letterhead of the “Special Committee on Long Term Integration Projects” and sent by Alexander-Sinclair to Migone, it was noted, “On the Italian side it might be stipulated . . . that alien refugees in Italy should have absolute priority for resettlement and that any alien refugees moved to Italy from other European countries for resettlement should be exchange[d] on a ‘one-for-one’ basis against refugees in Italy as far as this may be humanly possible and practicable.”

Beyond Sardinia, refugee policy experts engaged in transnational conversations designed to solve pressing problems of both national and international refugees in mainland Italy and, more broadly, Europe. In a 1958 letter to Alexander-Sinclair (at that point an employee of the IRC), for instance, C. Balmelli of the NGO Aide Suisse suggested that the Sardinian plan might

**Figure 11.** Wives of HELP refugees, Simaxis, Sardinia, 30 June 2015. Photo by author.
be put on the back burner. Instead, he saw a more effective model in Gebelia, a rural settlement near Anzio-Nettuno created in 1955 for repatriates from Italian Cyrenaica. Although largely an Italian project that drew on significant state help, Gebelia and its associated agricultural cooperative—the Società Cooperativa Agricola fra i Colonizzatori Italiani d’Africa, or SACIDA—also received loans from Aide Suisse, highlighting the ways in which the tracks of domestic and international relief frequently crossed and intersected. Ironically, Balmelli discounted the prospects for Sardinian projects because “the island actually permits only actions of a pioneering character [carattere pionieristico].” It was precisely, in fact, this pioneering quality of reclamation that provided the moral and political impetus for projects like those at Fertilia and Simaxis, as well as that of Gebelia on the mainland. These projects re-inscribed and reclaimed reclamation from a failed fascist state project, rendering refugees (including former colonial settlers) the new pioneers of postwar and postimperial bonifica.

New Pioneers, New Foundations?

In contrast to Fertilia, the village of Gebelia arose not on the incomplete foundations of a fascist new town but rather on land yet to be reclaimed. In this instance, we find a project whose guiding spirit replicated many of the principles of fascist colonialism, even as it transformed them in the new conditions of postimperial life in the metropole of a now democratic country. The very name of the project established an explicit genealogical link to fascism’s colonization projects in Libya’s Gebel plain. A pamphlet published on the inauguration of the settlement opens with a foundational scene: four men begin the backbreaking task of clearing forest and building a barrack and stables in order to house the eighty-two family heads who would complete this work as part of a cooperative (SACIDA). “Those who happened to see in those days, those 82 men of SACIDA . . . won’t easily forget the spectacle, one that seems to renew the deeds and enterprise of pioneers in far-off lands,” asserted the publication. “However, this was at the gates of Rome; these were Italian colonists, whom the war had driven out of Africa and now came to plow and transform another desert.”

Distancing the settlers from a common image of the repatriates as nostalgic and unrepentant fascists, the text continued, “Gebelia: a memory with a touch of bitterness but no nostalgia for the Cyrenaican hills to the east of Benghazi. . . . There, on the Gebel, thousands of Italian colonists, in the course of a few years, sowed wheat. Even the English called that a miracle.” The origin story laid out in this publication attributes the initiative
for the project to a refugee from Africa, lawyer Enrico Barra, who founded SACIDA in 1946. The text claims that the refugees placed their faith in the Italian state but instead found only hardship. “Only refugee camps [awaited them]: it seemed that agrarian reforms, reformed institutions, new social structures in agriculture weren’t intended for them.”

This narrative depicts SACIDA as the product of these refugees’ agency, the passive inhabitants of the camps now transformed into pioneers of the land. Doing this distances these “new” settlers from their past lives as fascist colonial settlers, who went as agents of the state-backed colonial entities and found everything provided (homes, tools, seeds, etc.). Whereas in Libya these colonists took their directions from the fascist state and its agents, at Gebelia they controlled their own fate through a cooperative.

Balmelli of Aide Suisse later highlighted the agency of the former refugees for having obtained, “after courageous and gigantic works of bonifica and division of land [appoderamento], a stable insertion into agriculture.” Such language fused long-standing images of colonial settlers as pioneers with a rehabilitative idiom that sought to transform refugees into masters of their own destiny.

In actuality, as the inaugural text for the project later acknowledges, the creation of SACIDA—like the reconstruction of Fertilia—required substantial state assistance from a number of entities, as well as private help and support from the Catholic Church. Crucially, too, the Marquise Donna Elena Dusmet Borghese donated the original plot of land. The INPS, which had administered one of two colonial entities in Libya, contributed monies to the project and claimed SACIDA as one of the most successful of its attempts to settle its former colonists in the metropole. As an internal document noted, “The work of S.A.C.I.D.A. is of notable interest to the Institute given that the former facilitates the definitive settling of the repatriating colonists, thereby preventing these refugees from turning to the Institute for subsidies and requests for accommodation.”

Refugees settled at SACIDA came from camps located throughout the Italian peninsula, including those at Aversa, Bari, Brescia, Centocelle (Rome), Cibali, Civitavecchia, Laterina, Marina di Carrara, Nesima Superiore, and Termini Imerese.

Despite the celebration of Gebelia/SACIDA as entailing a successful reclamation of both land and individuals previously abandoned to the “promiscuity” and disorder of the refugee camps, protagonists and their descendants whom I interviewed in May 2011 told a somewhat different story. Most of those I spoke with had come through the refugee camp at the former military barracks at Aversa (province of Caserta in Campania), where they lived alongside Istrian-Julian-Dalmatian refugees. “We all knew each other from the camp,” quipped one man, who then mentioned the “multicultural”
nature of Aversa, which housed Italians from various lost possessions. My interlocutors described the devastation to Anzio created by the war, in particular the protracted and bloody battle after the Allied landing at Anzio-Nettuno in January 1944, which displaced many inhabitants to the outskirts of Rome where the Olympic structures later arose. Into the 1950s, the towns of Anzio and Nettuno remained half abandoned, increasing the sense of isolation among the settlers at nearby Gebelia. The land given to them proved difficult to work, in contrast to the fertile soil of Cyrenaica.

Mauro (pseudonym), born in 1937 in the colonial village of Luigi di Savoia in Derna, described the “alarming” (spaventoso) condition of Gebelia when he arrived there at age fourteen with his family. After the Allied occupation(s) of Cyrenaica, his family had relocated first to Tripoli and then made their way to Aversa after the war before joining the community near Anzio. Conditions in Gebelia remained rudimentary through the 1950s, with limited electricity and one television, housed at the cooperative’s office, for the entire community. In his hatred of agricultural work, Mauro typified many of the young people at Gebelia. A good number of them emigrated to the industrial cities of northern Italy (as also occurred at Fertilia), rejecting their parents’ agricultural vocation. The construction of a Colgate Palmolive factory on Anzio’s outskirts in 1957, however, provided new opportunities for the young people who remained. In the opinion of Mauro, who worked there for forty years as a technical assistant, “Palmolive saved us.” Enrico Barra, the lawyer who helped conceive of Gebelia, apparently agreed, as by 1958 he urged the need for further projects “of prevalently industrial character” to assist national refugees. Balmelli of Aide-Suisse had apparently read these proposals when he recommended Barra’s work as a model superior to that of the Sardinia plan. Today, the zone formerly known as Gebelia is a suburb of Anzio. The neighborhood now goes by the name of Sacida (not Gebelia), despite the cooperative having closed decades earlier. Apart from the refugees and their descendants, only a few individuals know the history of the area or what “Sacida” (transformed from an acronym into a toponym) signifies, suggesting how once distinct agricultural settlements have been gradually absorbed and naturalized in a manner not unlike that of the eucalyptus trees planted by the regime as part of its efforts to reclaim marshy land.

Rethinking Ruinology

When I learned that sites such as Fertilia and processes (bonifica) inextricably associated with fascism had been employed in the resettling of refugees and repatriates from the territories that Italy lost after World War II, my
first inclination was to read them through the lens of contemporary ruinology and its focus on spaces devastated by warfare, postindustrial decay, and imperial decline. Indeed, much of the burgeoning literature on ruin draws a sharp distinction between the picturesque ruins favored by the Romantics—who treated them as sites of both pleasure and gloom, as well as allegories for the limits of man's control over nature—and those created by modern forms of violence. The latter become metonyms for a view of history as catastrophe. As Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle put it, “When history piles wreckage upon wreckage, ruins evoke not only the buildings from which they hail but also a transhistorical iconography of decay and catastrophe, a vast visual archive of ruination.” Such an understanding accords with the notion of colonialism as entailing a corrosive and open-ended process of ruination, one whose variable effects persist in both the metropole and former colonies. It also maps onto problematic but pervasive views of refugees and repatriates as “human relics.”

While such a take on ruins possesses utility for my analysis here of the resettlement of Italian national refugees, viewing these sites exclusively through such a prism proves overly reductive. Indeed, the limits of such an understanding become evident in those accounts of fascist new towns that focus on their formalist, architectural elements—treating them as empty repositories of past ideological formations—rather than their continued existence as lived spaces. In turn, the neglect and even abandonment of parts of Fertilia and Sacida visible to a contemporary visitor could easily lead one to wrongly attribute that decay directly to the collapse of fascism’s empire. In reality, these places expanded (or, like Gebelia, were created) after 1945 and the years of the postwar economic takeoff. Their relative decline in more recent decades is another story that I cannot detail here. As I have argued, despite the literal collapse of the fascist regime and its ideology, some of its most visible material expressions—such as vast tracts of reclaimed land and the new towns built on that terrain—not only remained largely intact after 1945 but, in many instances, were only fully realized after the destruction of the fascist regime and with the support of the new republican government. In places like Fertilia and Gebelia, the agents of their realization were migrants from the regime’s overseas colonies and Adriatic territories. In the Italian peninsula, these refugees and repatriates often completed the work of internal colonization spearheaded by the regime in the 1930s, albeit through different means. As occurred in the former colonies, then, in the metropole itself the process of decolonization proved protracted and profound, rather than abrupt and transitory. In this sense, sites like Fertilia and Gebelia serve as “foundational ruins,” repurposed ruins that helped form the basis of
the postwar, postimperial nation. This selective and strategic re(use) of literal and figurative ruins—even of something as discredited as fascism and colonialism—should not strike us as overly remarkable on the Italian peninsula, where the salvaging and bricolage of strata from previous historical formations has long been the norm.

In arguing this, however, I do not wish to foreclose the multiple meanings of ruins and ruination at work in places like Fertilia and Gebelia. Here, I heed Tim Edensor’s caution about overinterpreting or offering the definitive reading of ruins: “There is an excess of meaning in the remains: a plenitude of fragmented stories, elisions, fantasies, inexplicable objects and possible events.”¹¹⁹ The memories of my interlocutors in Fertilia and Gebelia hint at the plenitude of stories and meanings attached to those former refugees who lived, worked, and built upon these productive ruins.