The World Refugees Made

Ballinger, Pamela

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“We Will Return”

The preceding chapter concluded with a caution about foreclosing alternative analyses of ruins, reminding us of the broader dangers of assuming that displaced persons necessarily or merely stand in as the human analogue of such physical relics or ruins. Throughout this study, I have aimed to consider the multiplicity of stories and meanings attached to the experiences of displacement and (re)emplacement to and from the Italian peninsula in the decade and a half following fascism’s end. Where possible, I have recovered the understandings of those who deemed themselves “refugees” (whether or not others accorded them that status) and, in particular, the complex if asymmetric negotiations between displaced persons themselves, state actors, and intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations that resulted in the codification of concepts such as international refugee and national refugee. In light of the complicated entanglements between the international and national regimes of refugee assistance, it is no coincidence that the Geneva Convention that laid out the definition of the international refugee came into being during the same period as major Italian legislation that consolidated the Italian state’s responsibilities to its own displaced citizens. Nor is it coincidence that as a signatory to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, Italy was among those few states that (initially, at least) adopted the geographic reservation exclusive to European refugees. John Alexander-Sinclair, who dreamed of the “Sardinia
plan,” was only one of many UNHCR officials who would unsuccessfully press Italy to change its policies and become permanent home to foreign refugees. As we have seen, despite Italy’s spectacular postwar economic growth, Italian officials repeatedly invoked the twin specters of Italian surplus population and the pressing needs of its “own” refugees to argue for Italy’s unsuitability as a country of permanent resettlement.

The arrival in the 1950s and 1960s of Italian refugees from the territories of other decolonizing powers—notably (formerly) British Egypt and French Tunisia and Algeria—merely reinforced the Italian government’s stance that its priorities for assistance must lie with its own citizens. These new arrivals often followed the pathways established by the profughi from Italy’s former possessions, sometimes even inhabiting the same camps previously occupied by Italians from Libya or Istria, as did foreign refugees. The “Rossi Longhi” camp in Latina (former Littoria) illustrates the long trajectories of such spaces. After housing Italian national refugees (primarily, but not exclusively, from the ceded eastern Adriatic territories), in 1957 the camp became Il Centro di Assistenza Profughi Stranieri. Until 1989, it served as a transit point for displaced foreigners awaiting emigration.

Although the “durable solutions” advocated for by the UNHCR sometimes eluded displaced persons, the labels that attached to them have demonstrated durability. The processes that gave rise to displacement in the particular case explored here—wartime defeat and decolonization—likewise possess durable afterlives in Italy and beyond, challenging claims that Italian decolonization was brief or even noneventful. Ruth Ben-Ghiat has argued that Augusto Genina’s 1942 film Bengasi, which portrayed the first Allied occupation of Cyrenaica and the region’s subsequent reconquest by the Axis powers, signals the end of the genre of fascist imperial cinema. Nonetheless, as we have seen, empire itself and its affects actually had a long fade-out.

Ben-Ghiat points out that the film Bengasi saw reissue in 1955, evidence of both continued interest and perhaps yearning within Italy for its lost possessions but also a broader “sense of an Italian imperial history that had been suspended or interrupted, rather than concluded.” As Daniela Baratieri has detailed, while the film’s re-editing as Bengasi anno ’41 downplayed the presence of fascist symbols, as well as Italian-British antagonism, it did display strong continuities in the representation of Italy’s colonial ventures. In 1955, of course, Italy and Libya were still engaged in the bilateral negotiations that would ultimately settle the status of the agricultural settlements in Tripolitania, and Italy had completed only half of its mandated decade as trusteeship administrator in Somalia. In a very literal sense, then, when
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viewers in Rome or Brindisi or Catania settled into their cinema seats in 1955 to watch the film *Bengasi anno ’41*, they were viewing past (the triumphant Italian empire) and present (the still then ongoing diplomatic questions regarding Italian colonial settlements in Libya). For some repatriates, the film also evoked a still possible future, one signaled by the famous slogan “(R)i)torneremo” (We will return). Baratieri rightfully comments that the reissue of *Bengasi* in the 1950s reveals how “the past has not been acknowledged to be past and clings onto the present.”

Even with the close of Italy’s formal decolonization in 1960, the classifications for migrants coming from the lost territories—repatriates and refugees—possessed continuing salience. Many of the individuals to whom they were applied embraced those identifications, ones that not only marked out their difference from metropolitan Italians but also left open the possibility of political and legal claims on the Italian state and the successor states in the former Italian Oltremare. Still today there exist a host of political and cultural associations for *rimpatriati* and Istriani-Giuliani-Dalmati and their descendants in many towns and cities across the Italian peninsula, as well as in the Italian diaspora. Although scholars of refugees and colonial repatriates often face challenges in locating their subjects along the archival grain, it nonetheless remains true that refugees remain a visible and marked category, in contrast to those who rejected such a label or failed to obtain any of the benefits accorded to refugees. Thus, this book has told a story of those who fought for recognition as refugees and who saw themselves as such, even when denied eligibility by intergovernmental organizations like the IRO (as occurred with many Venezia Giulians, discussed in chapter 4) or by the Italian state (like Italians from Cyrenaica in Tripolitania in the 1950s who insisted they were refugees within Libya). Given the scope of this task, I have not been able to recover the voices and stories of the many individual migrants who neither sought status as refugees nor joined a refugee association but rather merely drew on kin and friendship networks on their “return” to Italy. Having left relatively few archival traces, the stories of these displaces await their chronicler.

Likewise, for those relatively few Italians who stayed in the former territories there remains a still largely untold story of how these populations failed to become recognized minorities. Despite recent publications focused on the experience of “the Italian minority” in places like Libya, Italians retained no privileged juridical status in independent Libya or anywhere else in Africa. The only former territory where Italians did constitute a recognized and “protected” minority—with rights, among other things, to bilingualism and minority language schools—was Yugoslavia and now the successor states
Slovenia and Croatia. It would be easy to conclude that this difference reflects the fact that this was the only former Italian land where those who felt culturally Italian possessed meaningful claims to autochthony, as well as the reality that the Julian territories had been integral parts of the Italian state. Furthermore, it is tempting to locate this practice in Central European traditions of thinking about minorities. Nonetheless, there exists tantalizing evidence from other parts of the former Italian empire regarding Italians who almost became (official) minorities.

In the period leading up to Libyan independence, for example, there occurred lively discussions as to whether to accord particular rights and protections to Italians as one of Libya’s four largest minorities. An American Jewish Committee report in 1950 listed these minorities in order of their size: Italians (estimated at forty-five thousand) followed by Jews (thirteen thousand), Maltese (two thousand), and Greeks (four hundred). During the period of Adrian Pelt’s work as UN commissioner in Libya, a number of proposals—none of them successful—were advanced to provide these minorities with representation in the National Assembly and even to permit use of Italian in public offices. A representative for all the minorities did, however, sit on the Advisory Council to the UN commissioner. In his history of Libya’s Jewish populations, Renzo De Felice contends that during this period of UN tutelage, the criteria for citizenship and the role and status of the territory’s principal minorities proved among the most contentious questions. Just one year after his rise to power, Muammar Gadhafi would resolve any lingering questions or ambiguity, brutally reinforcing the binary logics of citizen/alien by expropriating the property of and expelling the approximately twenty thousand Italians in Libya. The call in chapter 4 to examine the redefinition of citizenship in Italy after the war through the dialectical articulation of inclusion-exclusion at home and abroad reminds us of the critical role also played by emergent forms of citizenship from which many Italians were excluded in the newly independent states.

In contrast to Libya, where Italians, as well as Jews, who wished to stay ultimately faced expulsion, in Albania several thousand Italians instead found themselves unable to leave Hoxha’s communist state after 1945. As discussed in chapters 2 and 3, these Italians remained immobilized in Albania either because they were deemed to possess skills essential for the reconstruction of Albania or because as Italian women married to Albanian men they had lost the protection afforded by their Italian citizenship. As the Italian and Albanian regimes wrangled over the fate of these Italians, the Circolo Garibaldi provided assistance on the ground. This Circolo soon expanded its scope beyond that of emergency provisioning and aid with repatriation, however,
and began to concern itself with a variety of questions related to the moral and spiritual health of the Italian community. In 1945, for example, the Circolo established a Scholastic Commission for Italians in Albania, forwarding offers by nuns to teach elementary school classes. These efforts, together with the organization of a variety of cultural activities, hint at the possibility that the Circolo’s leaders may have hoped it could provide the institutional basis for an Italian minority in Albania along the lines of those organized in Yugoslavia in the Istrian and Kvarner regions. A memo written in 1944, for instance, expressed the desire that “once the situation normalizes, the Circolo Garibaldi will be the Italian Association open for moral and physical assistance, for physical and intellectual culture and for a healthy democracy free of any sectarianism or violence.”

As in Libya, however, Italians in Albania never acquired status as a recognized and protected group—another story of an almost minority. With the rapid mutations in the Albanian political scene and Tirana’s shifting international alliances (from Yugoslavia to the USSR to China to isolationism), those Italians who remained in Albania found it best to hide their identities. It was only in 1992, after the collapse of state socialism in Albania, that the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized Operazione CORA (Comitato Operativo per i Rimpatriandi dall’Albania), by which the Italian military repatriated approximately eighty individuals and their families to Italy. These repatriates and their descendants, many of whom belong to the Associazione Nazionale Cittadini Italiani e Familiari Rimpatriati dall’Albania (ANCIFRA) founded in 2001, continue to press claims on the Italian state to the present day. Nor are they alone among repatriates and refugees from the former possessions. Groups like the Italo-Somali ANCIS (discussed in chapter 4) still seek an apology from the Italian state; protests over the (now invalidated) 2008 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation between Italy and Libya led to requests by Italians expelled from Libya for a meeting with Gadhafi during his 2009 visit to Rome; and some mixed-race children from former AOI still battle to attain Italian citizenship. For these groups, the dislocations of decolonization are anything but past or uneventful, even if scholars have been relatively slow to recognize this.

Of all the populations of national refugees analyzed here, the Istrian-Julian-Dalmatians have been the most successful in finding new audiences for their story and claims—among scholars, in the press, and at the level of
public commemoration. The *esuli* community has succeeded in the creation of monuments to the “martyrs” of the *foibe* (the pits in which Yugoslav partisans executed Italian soldiers and civilians) in various towns and cities scattered throughout Italy. In 2004, representatives of these communities even attained a national day of recognition. The Italian government proclaimed 10 February—the date of the signing of the 1947 Peace Treaty with Italy—a day of official remembrance of the “exodus” of Italians from the Adriatic territories ceded to Yugoslavia. The treaty, of course, also renounced Italy’s rights to its African colonies, as well as the Dodecanese Islands and Albania. Nonetheless, the “Giorno del Ricordo,” or National Memorial Day of the Exiles, exclusively commemorates the experience of Italian exiles from the Julian lands, and it has frequently reduced even that complex and varied experience to the “precipitating” violence of the *foibe*.

The exclusivity of this memory day underscores the hierarchy of national refugeedom that emerged in postwar Italy. In part because of the concentrated flows and resettlement of Italians from the Adriatic territories and in part because of the emotive resonance of losing territories “redeemed” through the sacrifice of World War I, the *profughi giuliani* sat at the apex of this hierarchy. Time and again, documents I read spoke of the risks that repatriates from Libya or AOI would not find accommodation in refugee camps, overflowing as they were with displacees from the eastern Adriatic.  

The associations of Italians from Venezia Giulia worked hard over the succeeding decades to obtain additional recognition of their status, thereby differentiating them from other Italian refugees such as the African repatriates. Situating the experiences of national refugees in this hierarchy—as well as within the broader hierarchy of international and national refugees—reminds us that national refugees did share common experiences of classification and assistance in the Italian peninsula, even if their trajectories in and out of the lost possessions proved distinct. While this finding now seems obvious and uncontroversial to me, it was not when I began the research for this project nearly a decade ago, as I noted in the preface. Both my Istrian informants and many scholarly colleagues warned me that my project dealt with distinct and incommensurable experiences—that the situation of autochthonous Italians displaced from the Venezia Giulian lands directly incorporated into the Italian state had nothing or very little in common with those of “short term” Italian colonial settlers who had left Africa or Albania or the Aegean Islands.

I had begun to seriously doubt my methodological and theoretical assumptions until I interviewed a representative from an umbrella organization for associations representing various repatriated groups from Libya,
Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. With a hint of disdain, this individual contended, “The Istrians have sought greater protections because they want to be seen as special.” This comment highlights that despite such efforts at differentiation, some colonial repatriates—moving as they did through a humanitarian infrastructure in which they rubbed elbows with and lived alongside Italians from other ex possedimenti, as well as foreign refugees—did perceive their commonalties with the Istrian-Julian-Dalmatian refugees. The desire of some representatives of the latter group to set their experiences apart reflects not only an effort to obtain more resources from the Italian state but also, I would venture, an attempt to divorce further the Istrian story from a problematic history of fascism that raises questions about complicity, as well as Italy’s historical responsibilities toward the non-Italian victims of the fascist regime. Positioning Italian refugees from the Julian region exclusively as victims of ethnic cleansing focuses on the wrongs committed by the Yugoslavs and emphasizes the role of ethno-national ideology, rather than the struggle between fascism and socialism or the broader question of fascist imperialism and its legacies.

Since I began this project, the ground has shifted both at the level of scholarship and in political discourse. Already beginning in the mid-1990s, scholars of the Italo-Yugoslav border had begun to insert the history of the exodus into a broader story of forced population transfers and movements in Central and Eastern Europe during and after the Second World War. Only in the last few years, however, have historians begun to investigate the linkages between the various groups of national refugees and the place of these Italian refugees within larger histories of refugee relief. New works on specific groups of national refugees, such as Italians from Libya, are appearing with great frequency. In light of all this, it is not surprising that a young researcher at a 2015 conference at the University of Cagliari excitedly told me, “We really need to start comparing the Istrian exiles and African repatriates!” I had to chuckle when I remembered the stubborn resistance such a suggestion had met only a few years earlier.

No doubt the “rediscovery” of this shared refugee history reflects the broader interest in refugee questions provoked by ongoing migration crises in the Mediterranean and Europe. I conducted much of my research in 2010–2011, as the events of the Arab Spring drove desperate asylum seekers across the sea, and wrote the book over long years as new refugees came to Europe from Syria, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and beyond. These events often raised pointed questions about previous waves of refugees to Italy. At many turns in my research, I had encountered these refugee pasts—like empire’s past—hiding in plain sight. Nonetheless, I was
still startled when in March 2011 I ran across a poster in the Monteverde neighborhood of Rome that explicitly fused Italy’s colonial past in Africa with its lost lands in the Adriatic. Employing the famous fascist image of the grandfather and the young boy dreaming of a return to Africa, the poster put
its theme of return in service to the Giorno del Ricordo honoring the victims of the foibe and the Adriatic exodus. The placard bore one of two captions that had accompanied the original wartime image: “There where we were, there where our dead await us, there where we left powerful and indestructible traces of our civilization, there we will return.” The poster thus explicitly joined the dreams of “return” long shared by Adriatic exiles and African repatriates, even as it privileged the former. Such traces of conflict and displacement possess what Rebecca Bryant deems a latent “‘potentiality’... a temporal dynamism capable of exploding, twisting, or braiding the past.”

In February 2018, the Giorno del Ricordo events braided together past and present in particularly explosive ways. In the context of an electoral campaign that had put front and center questions of Italy’s fascist past and its migration present, large antifascist protests turned out in some 150 Italian cities including Turin, Milan, Macerta, and Piacenza. These encounters with the police and with groups commemorating foibe victims turned violent in several instances. Antifascist supporters carried signs that linked historical fascism, neo or “crypto” fascism, and xenophobia against migrants in contemporary Italy. As I have evidenced here, such entanglements should not surprise us. Though frequently kept apart, the histories explored in this book were neither repressed nor entirely forgotten. The dream of return, then, does not signal a return—rather, it is a sign of an ongoing, if uneven and always contested, reckoning with Italy’s long decolonization.