

DREAMING OF DISTANT LANDS. HOW FASCISM BUILT COLONIAL WOMEN (1937-1941)

*Soñando tierras lejanas. De cómo el fascismo construyó
a las mujeres coloniales (1937-1941)*

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Abstract. When they seized power in 1922, the Fascists adopted a patriarchal stance regarding women. Adopting the pronatalist theories of Riccardo Korherr, Federico Marconcini and Ferdinando Loffredo, Fascism became a staunch defender of demographic policies relegating women exclusively to the role of wife and mother, mere breeding machines whose only job was to increase the number of Italians for the war effort and to drive colonial expansion in order to keep up with the other European nations. As a consequence of the war for the conquest of empire in East Africa, a population management strategy was conceived in which young women would be sent to produce families to re-populate Ethiopia in the name of the Fascist state. Accordingly, it became necessary to develop a different model for educating young women, to actively equip them for their new lives in Africa. With this in mind, the Fascist leadership exploited women's Fascist associations, drawing up national curricula for standardized training of these before sending them off to Africa.

This investigation explores the contemporary press such as *L'Azione Coloniale* and the training manual used in the courses preparing women for life in the African colonies. The objective was to understand whether the change in the educational policy devised for a group of young women, chosen for convenience, may have modified the overall image of women on a symbolic level in the last years of the regime.

Keywords: Fascism; Propaganda for women; Colonial imperialism; Fascist press; Italian East Africa.

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Resumen. *El fascismo había adoptado una estrategia patriarcal dirigida a las mujeres desde la toma del poder en 1922. La política natalista, de la que el fascismo fue un firme defensor por su adhesión a las teorías de Riccardo Korherr, Federico Marconcini y Ferdinando Loffredo, relegaba a las mujeres al papel exclusivo de esposa y madre, una mera máquina reproductora para aumentar el número de italianos que servirían al régimen y así establecer una estrategia bélica colonial siguiendo el ejemplo de otras naciones europeas. La guerra por la conquista del Imperio en África Oriental derivó en la necesidad de enviar mujeres jóvenes para aumentar los núcleos familiares que se crearían en Etiopía. Se puso en marcha, de esta forma, una estrategia poblacional que planteaba la necesidad de desarrollar un modelo educativo diferente para las jóvenes, con el fin de que pudieran vivir en África y así ser más activas y dinámicas. Las altas jerarquías fascistas decidieron explotar el papel de asociaciones de mujeres e impulsar un programa formativo uniforme a escala nacional antes de enviar a las jóvenes a territorios africanos.*

La investigación se lleva a cabo a través de la prensa de la época como L'Azione coloniale. Se examinará también el libro único de texto que se utilizó en los cursos de preparación para la vida en las colonias africanas. El objetivo es comprender si el cambio producido en la política educativa dirigida a un grupo de jóvenes elegidas por conveniencia puede haber transformado la imagen general de la mujer en un nivel simbólico en los últimos años del régimen.

Palabras claves: *Fascismo; Propaganda para las mujeres; Imperialismo colonial; Prensa fascista; África Oriental Italiana.*

THE AMBIGUOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN AND FASCISM

The complex relationship between women and Fascism long remained a world scarcely probed by official historiography. This situation changed in the 1970s, when research and analysis aimed at shedding light on the role that Mussolini¹ had assigned the female masses began to be published. The purpose of this research was to differentiate and

¹ The vacillating but persuasive *double-face* attitude towards women along the span of the twenty years is highlighted by various quotes, sometimes contemptuous and disparaging (as in the case of the debate on women's right to vote), sometimes aimed at placating the fairer sex, considered only in terms of its reproductive capacity, from the perspective of the demographic policies of the regime. See in this regard Benito Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi dal 1927 al 1928* (Milan: U. Hoepli, 1934-XIII): 37-77. For the aspects related to the first part of the *Discorso* see Paolo Ardali, *La politica demografica di Mussolini* (Mantua: Mussoliniana, 1929).

contextualize both the multiform approaches and the various modalities adopted in the long twenty years of the Fascist regime. The aim was to understand the divergence in the Fascist propaganda, which saw women — albeit with considerable declinations and variations — as effective tools, useful for consolidation of the regime.² Among the offerings making the most valiant attempts to plumb the depths of the ambiguous galaxy of the rather varied, and certainly not monolithic, representations of “the Fascist woman”, first and foremost there was the pioneering work by Piero Meldini,³ which appeared in 1975. This book traced the pseudoscientific ancestry of the female, in which their nature was hypostasized as inferior, irrational, and lacking in creative thought — these were the qualities that defined the world of women as a whole, with no possibility of appeal or redemption —. This stance was legitimized by the alternating and shifting synergies that shaped the relationship between Mussolini and women, made evident in several of his official speeches, not to mention the positions taken by numerous exponents of the regime, published in the mouthpiece newspapers of the party such as *Critica fascista*.

The *terminus a quo* from which to initiate a more directed intervention, framed in a wide-ranging policy, was placed by Meldini as Mussolini’s famous *Discorso dell’Ascensione* (Ascension Speech),⁴ a granitic appeal to the nation featuring a multi-hued jumble of questionable viewpoints and instances that would then be seen in action in the medium term. This speech was made at a time when the demographic ideology of the regime was being formed, and there is no doubt that the implicit recipients of the first part of the speech, dedicated “to the examination of the situation

² In this regard, scientific contributions of considerable importance include: Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *La donna “nera”. Consenso femminile e fascismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974), which confronts the problem of the lack of research in this area; Alexander J. De Grand, “Women under Italian Fascism”, *The Historical Journal* 19, no. 4 (1976): 947-968; and Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

³ Piero Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare. Ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il fascismo* (Rimini-Florence: Guaraldi Editore, 1975).

⁴ The *Discorso dell’Ascensione* deals with numerous issues that evidently lent themselves to the definitive construction of the regime after the assassination of the deputy of the Socialist Party Giacomo Matteotti in 1925. Among these I point to the relevance of the affirmation of a firmly central imperialist vision whose implementation required a different cultural and anthropological approach (compared to the embryonic period of fascism), in which the “cult of virility” was exalted and strategies for population growth were developed. See Carl Ipsen, *Dictating Demography: The Problem of Population in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

from the point of view of physical health and race”,⁵ were women, considered as an amorphous mass, with no differentiation in terms of either social status, wealth or levels of education. From that moment on, women became the target of pressing and obsessive propaganda of a distinctly pronatalist bent. With skilful and persuasive oratory technique, starting from objective premises relating to the need to proceed with rapid steps to improve the wellbeing of Italians, the argument veered towards underlining several *de facto* truths that would shape the subsequent methods of approach to the *querelles des femmes*. Rhetoric on falling birth rates, the *topos* of the “empty cradles”, the sharp criticism of the emancipationist and androgynous models from other countries (the United States in particular) were emphasized for the purposes of re-harnessing women’s bodies to the yoke of their biological function — essential for the future good of the fatherland —.⁶

However, these words alone would not be enough to produce such a radical paradigm shift: it would be necessary to construct a narrative so captivating as to penetrate the hearts and minds of its targets. Hence the symbolic imaginary was propped up by multiform and differentiated contributions: on the one hand, the bombastic and alarmist publicity flanking the regime, and on the other the creation of occasions and events of great emotional impact. Numerous volumes frequently appeared, with scientific ambitions supported by the regime’s press,⁷ as well as obsequious interviews with Mussolini himself, punctuated by highly misogynistic jabs towards those who increasingly deviated from the correct model of “exemplary wife and mother”.⁸ This negative view of

⁵ Mussolini, *Il Discorso dell’Ascensione*, 38.

⁶ For a reconstruction of the motivations that saw women in the 1920 passively accepting the anti-feminist Fascist rhetoric of a positivist cast (deriving from Cesare Lombroso and Paul Julius Moebius) see Daniela Curti, “Il fascismo e le donne: imposizione e accettazione della ‘mistica della maternità’”, *Italian Studies in Southern Africa/Studi di Italianistica nell’Africa Australe* 9, no. 2 (1996) 6-23.

⁷ The regime’s press served as a sounding board for anti-feminist theories, providing ample space for reviews, debates, and comments from party members and eminent leaders of important institutions.

⁸ Mussolini did not shy away from seizing profitable opportunities to reaffirm his personal concept of women. Proof of this lies in the numerous negative statements to this effect in *Talks with Mussolini* — a widely read and highly controversial volume compiled by the German journalist Emil Ludwig following numerous interviews with *Il Duce* — in which he is quoted as saying, for example: “Women must play a passive part. She is analytical, not synthetical. During all the centuries of civilisation has there have been a woman architect? Ask her to build you a mere hut, not even a temple; she cannot do it. She has no sense for architecture, which is the synthesis of all the arts; that is a

women was corroborated by hundreds of articles published in national newspapers.⁹

The modern reader is horror-struck at the inexhaustible continuity of the appearances of texts of this kind, their obsessive repetitiveness, the persuasive tone oscillating between pseudoscience and crude propaganda; there would be no backing down, even in the face of undeniably squalid statements. Theories that had nothing scientific in them but were framed within a well-known genealogy of misogynistic positions of long and paroxysmal duration were printed uncritically, and instrumentalized to further the Duce's demographic ambitions.¹⁰ Organic intellectuals such as Federico Marconcini¹¹ and Ferdinando Loffredo¹² completely embraced the ideology of the regime, producing writings denouncing the social factors that, in their opinion, had fuelled women's anti-procreative mentality;

symbol of her destiny. My notion of woman's role in the State is utterly opposed to feminism. Of course, I do not want women to be slaves, but here in Italy I proposed to give our women votes, they would laugh me to scorn. As far as political life is concerned, they do not count here. In England there are three million more women than men, but in Italy the numbers of the sexes are the same. Do you know where the Anglo-Saxon are likely to end? In a matriarchy", Emil Ludwig, *Talks with Mussolini* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1933), 170-171.

⁹ I refer to *Critica fascista*, *La Difesa della Razza*, and *Gerarchia*, and from 1935 onwards also to *La donna fascista*.

¹⁰ *Critica fascista* bore numerous articles that legitimized the pronatalist battle, airing arguments in favour of women returning to the home. Among the many, see: Corrado Gini, "Il numero come forza", 19 (1928): 362-363; Il Doganiere, "Donne a casa", 19 (1929): 378; Giovan Battista Pellizzi, "Alcune realtà sul problema demografico", 5 (1930): 96-98; Manlio Pompei, "Donne e culle", 6 (1930): 106-107; Redazione, "La donna madre nel Fascismo", 11 (1931): 201-202; Mario Palazzi, "Autorità dell'uomo", 10 (1933): 183-184; Argo, "Compiti della donna", 14 (1933): 266-268; and Lince, "Gli uomini e le donne", 16 (1933): 303-304. Almost entirely, the articles build on *Il Discorso dell'Ascensione* and reiterated the pervasive synergy of the emancipation-working women-falling birth rate nexus, obviously and unfailingly blaming women for the problem.

¹¹ Federico Marconcini, *Culle vuote. Rilievi e considerazioni sulla denatalità in Europa* (Como: Casa Editrice Emo Cavalleri, 1935). A second revised and updated edition was published in 1945 (Alba: Pia società San Paolo).

¹² Ferdinando Loffredo, *Politica della famiglia* (Milan: V. Bompiani, 1938). Note in particular the crude misogyny in Chapter XVI: "Restaurare la sudditanza della donna all'uomo" (345-375), in which women are explicitly accused of having destroyed the family as an institution, and having caused the demographic decline through their selfish desire to study, work and forge a career. The natural solution was to prevent women from studying by law: "nations that really want to eliminate one of the most notable causes of alteration of the family bond and therefore of demographic decadence must adopt a truly revolutionary measure: to recognize the principle of the prohibition of women's secondary and higher education and, therefore, modify education programmes so as to impart to women an education aimed at making them an excellent housewife and mother of the family", (p. 361).

Riccardo Korherr¹³ even went so far as to extend the question of the birth rate to the wider field of the global defence of the white race. The import of the statements contained in Korherr's work is widely emphasized in the cultural universe in which Fascism was nourished by Mussolini's laudatory preface, which emphasizes the extent to which the structure of modern society — by promoting gradual but chaotic abandonment of the countryside — had plunged the family into crisis; that essential institution had been progressively crumbling during the process of urbanization of the peasant masses, destined to lose their traditional moral values.

A cultural and anthropological *milieu* of such import and pervasiveness could not remain confined to the ink of the printed page or to living room debates:¹⁴ soon its declinations were visible in the decidedly more pragmatic field of norms and laws. New legislation was designed explicitly to exclude women from education, and not only that. It was a question of regulating an ideal aimed at preventing women from working, especially in those sectors in which they were in the majority, such as in the field of education.¹⁵ The project was rolled out in several phases: in a Royal Decree, n. 2480, dated 9 December 1926,¹⁶ the minister Fedele forbade female teachers from teaching humanities, following in the

¹³ Riccardo Korherr, *Regresso delle nascite: morte dei popoli* (Rome: Libreria del Littorio, 1928), with a preface by Benito Mussolini (7-23). The volume is part of the broader analysis of the socio-political consequences of the sterility of Europeans, who risked being demographically overwhelmed by populations from Africa and Asia.

¹⁴ In addition to the misogynistic ideology, also note the development of a masculine mysticism involving essential elements such as the cult of virility (youth, duty, heroism, strength, sexual power); post-war rhetoric; apocalyptic messages on decadence; positivist anthropology (deriving from Cesare Lombroso); and public modernism versus anti-modernism in the private sphere.

¹⁵ Beginning with Law n. 225 dated 4 February 1926, schools became an employment vehicle for privileged categories like, as in this case, former combatants, those injured or handicapped in the war, and war widows.

¹⁶ *Regolamento per i concorsi a cattedre nei Regi istituti medi d'istruzione e per le abilitazioni all'esercizio professionale dell'insegnamento medio*. Composed of 121 articles, this document enshrined a series of rules on secondary school teaching that strongly penalized women. See Article 11, which reads as follows: "Men and women are to be admitted to selection processes and qualifying examinations without distinction, with the exception of the selection for classes IV, V (limited to selection for technical institutes) VI and VII (limited to selections for the *liceo classico* and *liceo scientifico*) referred to in the adjoining table, which are reserved for men, and the selection and examinations for nursery school teachers in the teacher-training schools, which are reserved for women". It thereby enacted a rigid gender hierarchization, although cloaked in the regime's propaganda as "virilization of the school".

footsteps of Gentile. Classical studies were understood as the supreme ground for the formation of intellect and character, and were therefore unsuitable subjects for girls.¹⁷ This was the logic behind Gentile's *licei femminili*,¹⁸ girls' schools established in order to absorb the overflow from the *istituti magistrali* (teacher training schools) and "liberate" the *licei classici* (high school focusing on humanities and social sciences) from as many female students as possible. In 1928, a law that further tightened the educational restraints granted to young women was enacted: female students were forced to pay twice as much as their male colleagues to enrol in both high school and university. Then, the Royal Decree brought into law on 28 November 1933 established that in the notices of job vacancies in the public sector, it would be possible to exclude female applicants; this process culminated in the Decree enacted in September 1938, which reduced the recruitment of female staff in public employment to ten percent of all jobs, which had particularly serious repercussions throughout the field of teaching.

This roll-back in women's education was, however, controversial. In fact, the goal of masculinizing the school system failed, and the barriers that stood in the way of females enrolling on degree courses did not have the effect that Mussolini had hoped for. The statistics show that the number of female students enrolling in university actually continued to increase throughout the 1930s and beyond.¹⁹ The achievement of a diploma or degree was seen by the families of the petty bourgeoisie and

¹⁷ Manlio Pompeii, "Educazione virile", *Critica fascista* 16 (1932): 306-307. Moderately dissonant voices were provided by Franco Catasta, "Studentesse d'Italia: G.U.F. femminile e orientamento professionale", *Almanacco della donna italiana 1935*, (1934): 156-157; Domenico Aringoli, *La famiglia italiana attraverso i secoli* (Bologna: Coop. Tip. Azzoguidi, 1938); Giuseppe Bottai, *Prefazione* to Loffredo, *Politica*, XIV-XV.

¹⁸ On girl's schools see the study by Eleonora Guglielma, "Dalla 'scuola per signorine' alla 'scuola delle padrone': il Liceo femminile della riforma Gentile e i suoi precedenti storici", in *Da un secolo all'altro*, ed. Marco Guspini (Rome: Anicia, 2005), 155-195.

¹⁹ For an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon see the tables in Maria Castellani's book *Donne italiane di ieri e di oggi* (Florence: Bemporad, 1937), 79-82, which illustrate how there had been a decisive and unstoppable growing trend in girls' enrolment in high school and university since 1932-33. Castellani examines matriculation in all faculties (Law and Political Science, Economics and Commerce, Literature and Philosophy, Teacher Training, Medicine and Surgery, Mathematical and Physical Sciences, Pharmacy, Engineering and Architecture) for the academic years 1932-33, 1933-34, 1934-35, and 1935-36, subdividing them by gender. As far as female graduates are concerned, we have only the numbers for the year 1934-35, which show a preference for faculties geared towards teaching, i.e., Literature and Philosophy (602) and Teacher Training (341). However, the number of graduates in Pharmacy (288) and in Mathematical and Physical Sciences (174) also seems

middle classes as a goal that would allow their daughters to enter the world of work and earn a salary that, although lower, could add to that of their husband. The increasing numbers of female graduates naturally began to have a growing dignity and awareness of their own condition, which distinguished them from the masses of other women from the lower social classes. It also fuelled their desire to create a stronger, lasting bond among all those who were about to become serious professionals, and ultimately lead to burgeoning activism. The most enthusiastic among them, who looked to contemporary American experiences for a model, soon formed the Associazione Nazionale Fascista Donne Artiste e Laureate [The National Association of Professional Women and Artists].²⁰ Thereafter, women became a more determined presence in the professional and educational fields, even in areas linked to the regime, which made them icons of potential change in the collective imagination.

PREPARATION FOR COLONIAL ENTERPRISE: POLITICAL STRATEGIES AND MORAL SUASION

In Rome on 28 September 1938, Benito Mussolini solemnly inaugurated the Ara Pacis Augustae, the Altar of the Augustan Peace, which had returned to its ancient splendour after long and laborious restoration work. As usual, the event was accompanied by a complex and articulated choreography designed to link the glories of ancient imperial Rome to Fascist Italy, rightly considered the worthy heir of the effective imperialist policy of the first and second centuries. The celebration had grandiose overtones, both in the amount of people crowding the monument, and in the shrewd direction that aimed to showcase the successes of the Duce, a worthy successor to Caesar and Augustus.²¹ The regime was certainly not enjoying good health after the war in Ethiopia and the sanctions consequently imposed on Italy in 1935, and there was therefore a pressing need for events to overshadow the ongoing crisis that would

interesting. In the same academic year, the overall total of female graduates was 1698, as compared to 8327 male graduates.

²⁰ On this aspect, see the in-depth analysis by Antonella Cagnolati and Sara Follacchio, “Valorizzare, inquadrare, orientare. Il ruolo dell’Associazione nazionale fascista donne artiste e laureate”, *Annali di storia delle università italiane* 26, no. 1 (2022): 27-44.

²¹ “Giornale Luce” B1383, 28/09/1938 Rome. *Inaugurazione dell’Ara Pacis nel nuovo assetto urbanistico*. www.archivioluce.com/archivio [accessed 14/02/2022].

serve as a powerful propaganda tool for the benefit of the masses. Among the groups lined up in ordered ranks eager pay homage to Mussolini, for the first time we saw a large section of young women with very unusual clothing—safari suits and pith helmets. This display was a living representation of the new policy aimed expressly at girls that had been inaugurated in 1937. Indeed, these girls had been carefully selected for the occasion from among those who had felt the benefit of courses and camps for colonial preparation. These were set up in line with detailed programmes issued by the secretariat of the National Fascist Party, working closely with the Fasci Femminili (open to the masses since the early 1930s), and the Istituto Fascista dell’Africa Italiana. The news was given considerable prominence in the regime’s press, for example *L’Azione Coloniale*, with an abundance of commentary and photographs.²²

Analysis of this particular training process leads us to reflect on the antinomies intentionally put in place by the Fascist leaders, who felt the urgency of involving young and adolescent women in a stable and lasting way, converting them to Fascist politics. The relationship of Fascism with women had been extremely ambiguous before, and normalizing later: alongside the young Sansepolchris (so called for having taken part in the historic meeting at Piazza San Sepolcro in Milan on 23 March 1919) of the early days like Regina Terruzzi, Giselda Brebbia and Maria Bianchi Nascimbeni, women of socialist bent engaged in the struggle for women’s rights, there were the so-called *squadriste*, like the legendary Ines Donati²³ — young, exuberant women accustomed to fighting side by side with their comrades, always in the front row at demonstrations and protests, in line with the vision of a Fascism fighting against privilege and injustice —. Clearly, the model provided by these fervent young women soon fell out of favour, being entirely incompatible with the conservative and traditionalist female image codified by Mussolini once he finally ascended to power in the mid-1920s.²⁴

²² “Il saluto più ambito”, *L’Azione Coloniale*, September 29, 1938, p. 8.

²³ Alfonso D’Agostino, *Una martire in camicia nera, Ines Donati* (Milan: Garzanti, 1940).

²⁴ For an analysis of the types of women who adhered to Fascism in the early phase (*sansepolcriste*, *fumane*, *squadriste*) see Sergio Vicini, *Fasciste. La vita delle donne nel Ventennio mussoliniano* (Bresso: Hobby & Work, 2009), 181-200.

After the war of aggression against Ethiopia, which began on 3 October 1935 and ended on 5 May 1936 with General Pietro Badoglio's conquest of Addis Ababa, the regime felt the need to unite all the forces that could be considered valid supporters of imperialist policy. To this end, a widespread media campaign was launched, targeting female subjects, who should become pillars of the new image of Italian society that Mussolini wanted to portray. Large gatherings of women in the capital, creation of the so-called *Giornata della Fede* [Day of Wedding Rings],²⁵ awards to prolific mothers: they appeared more and more frequently on the front pages of newspapers, being praised for their supreme dedication to the Duce and the destiny of the fatherland. The moral fortitude and abnegation of Fascist women were exalted in their commitment to the economic battle against the embargo on foreign products, but it was with the prospect of changing the strategy in the colonies that the Fascist leaders pointed directly to the involvement of the female element as a guarantee of stability and morality.

The (re)population of Ethiopia²⁶ was becoming problematic: the men who had moved there (soldiers, farmworkers and labourers) had indulged in excesses of sexual unruliness, adopting inconvenient practices such as the *madamoto*,²⁷ the frequentation of prostitutes, or conceiving children with African women.²⁸ The regime could no longer tolerate such abuses, which did little in defence of the race, an increasingly propagated and widespread ideal. In the beginning of 1937, it was therefore decided to start a vast press campaign that spoke explicitly of "colonial women". The first phase of this project was to preach the validity and

²⁵ Inaugurated for the first time on 18 December 1935, this "Day of Wedding Rings" served to collect gold from wedding rings to counter the policy of economic sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations as a result of its aggression against Ethiopia. On this, see the detailed analysis by Petra Terhoeven published in 2003.

²⁶ Italian East Africa [*Africa Orientale Italiana*] was the official name of the Italian colonial territories in the Horn of Africa, as proclaimed by Benito Mussolini on May 9, 1936. It consisted of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. Gian Paolo Calchi Novati, *L'Africa d'Italia* (Rome: Carocci, 2011), and Simone Brioni, Bónsa Gulema Shimelis, *The Horn of Africa and Italy* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017).

²⁷ *Madamoto* was the term used to refer to a temporary conjugal relationship between a male Italian citizen and a woman native to the colonized areas, who was usually very young. Common in Italian East Africa, the practice was expressly prohibited by Royal Decree n. 880 dated April 19, 1937.

²⁸ See Alessandro Aruffo, *Il colonialismo italiano. Da Crispi a Mussolini* (Rome: DataneWS, 2010), in particular, 113-129; Giulia Barrera, "Mussolini's colonial race laws and state-settler relations in Africa Orientale Italiana (1935-1941)", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2003): 425-443.

goodness of the transfer of unmarried women to Africa in order to contract marriages with the existing settlers; the second phase, which involved a much more complex and articulated project, brimming with directives and regulations issued directly from the Fascist Party top brass, focused on the education of young women, training them for life in the colonies.

The launch of the redefinition of women's work appeared in the newspaper *L'Azione Coloniale*²⁹ on 4 February 1937. Under the pretext of providing data relating to an investigation on race carried out in Italian East Africa, the author of the article³⁰ was the spokesman for a concept that directly linked the need to relocate women to Ethiopia with the moral need to preserve the Italian lineage from dangerous mixing with the natives, in perfect correspondence with the theories espoused in the infamous "Manifesto della razza", published under the title "Il Fascismo e i problemi della razza" in *Il Giornale d'Italia* on 14 July 1938, and in the first issue of *La Difesa della Razza* on 5 August 1938.³¹

²⁹ From February 1937 to September 1942, numerous articles appeared in *L'Azione Coloniale* with considerable frequency that fully supported the Fascist regime's campaign to involve women in the colonies, first emphasizing the value of women for the stability of families, and then telling of the various preparation courses undertaken by young women in the dedicated training camps in both Italy and Libya. The articles that appeared in *L'Azione Coloniale* were intentionally chosen as the subject of analysis for this essay, as this newspaper represented the Fascist Party's political line regarding the colonies, and qualifies as an organ of diffusion of the directives issued by the Party leaders.

³⁰ "The problem of race can only be solved with Italian women in the colony. [...] Only through the woman, and consequently the family, can we arrive at an absolute continuity of orientations, at the affirmation of solid principles of life, at the conscious understanding of provisions and laws. [...] The establishment of families in the colony would naturally give a great, generous boost to the demographic problem. With regard to this problem, the policy of housing with solid foundations will have to replace the policy of tents. Where home and family are, work and life have solid laws governing the heritage of the earth, the continuity of a tradition. The woman is the most powerful affective element that binds man to the earth, she is the bond between the individual and the community, she is the cell of the family and society, she is the face on which the image of the distant homeland is reflected". Angelo Maria Galli, "La donna italiana in colonia", *L'Azione Coloniale*, February 4 (1937): 8.

³¹ *La Difesa della Razza* was founded in 1938, coinciding with the racial laws enacted by the Fascist government to exclude Jews from schools and all public employment in the Italian state coming into force (Legislative Decree November 17, 1938-XVII, n. 1728, on the defence of the Italian race). Its articles relied on a mixture of theories derived from positivism, updated by further studies carried out by scientists who adhered to racist ideals of the Fascist party. It was directed by Telesio Interlandi, who oversaw the journal from its first issue, published on August 5, 1938, until June 20, 1943, when it ceased activity. The entire collection of the journal has been digitized, and can be consulted on the websites: <http://digiteca.bsmc.it/?l=periodici&t=Difesa%20della%20razza> and <https://digital.lib.usf.edu/results/usfapi/?t=Difesa+della+razza&f=ZZ> [accessed 19/03/2022]. See also Valentina Pisanty (ed.), *La Difesa della Razza. Antologia 1938-1943* (Milan, Bompiani, 2006); and Francesco

The skilful weaving of pro-colonial propaganda is clearly visible in the article written by Alessandro Lessona, a man from the ranks of the Fascist Party apparatus with a long experience in the government of the colonies.³² With skilful rhetoric and profound knowledge of the territorial and anthropological reality of Ethiopia, Lessona began by discussing the abolition of the scandalous institution of the *madamato*, emphasizing once again the civilizing and ethical function of women who would be moving to Italian East Africa. He reiterated that this would be necessary to stabilize the settler community, which had been built on foundations that were still uncertain and extremely labile. In the background there remained the issue, only hinted at, of the defence of the race: the argument began with an analysis of issues of a demographic nature, and then in the second part moved on to an apologetic praise of the qualities of the “Italian woman”; these laudable virtues had been exhibited in the past, as well demonstrated by their emigration to distant lands such as the United States or South America, places in which they had upheld, safeguarded and passed down the Italian family traditions. However, in line with similar statements that were circulating among Fascist misogynists, it would be preferable that these women made no claims as regards employment, and would therefore not require educational pathways to emancipation. In this context, Lessona called for a purpose-designed curriculum, specifically to prepare women for the new colonial context; in his opinion, this education programme could be developed and put in place by the Fasci Femminili, thanks to their deep-rooted presence throughout the Italian territory since the beginning of the 1930s. The article closes with an exaltation of the role of women, both within the family as a fundamental cornerstone on which

Cassata, *La Difesa della Razza: politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista* (Turin, Einaudi, 2008).

³² “I am sure that the Italian woman will understand the high and noble significance, and the invitation that is addressed to her and that goes beyond an ordinary measure intended to alleviate a special lack of occupation. Her participation in colonial society will restore normality within it, giving it the opportunity, apart from the occupations to which she will be called, to express those splendid qualities of natural educator and protector of the weak and the sick, of contributor of graces and poetry, which in every woman are latent, even if they have not always had the opportunity to manifest themselves; she could have the pride of participating in the creative work of the new, great, Overseas Empire”. Alessandro Lessona, “La donna coloniale”, *L’Azione Coloniale*, March 11 (1937). Alessandro Lessona (1891-1991) had been a proponent of the Fascist cause since the March on Rome in 1922, and was among the protagonists of politics of conquest in Africa. From 1936 to 1937 he was head of the Ministry of the Colonies, which he renamed the Ministry of Italian Africa.

the ethical and affective structure of its members rests, and for the fate of the empire, in which they would now be protagonists.

Although destined to decline along with the fate of the colonies, Lessona's standpoint, though within the borders of propaganda rhetoric, was clearly that women had a central role to play in the colonies. This new protagonism, albeit cast from an unmistakably traditional mould, was leveraged by the Fascist leaders for a second, more daring piece in the complex construction of the settlement of empire: to convince young women that the enterprise entailed worthy heroism and adventure, that by leaving their families for East Africa, they would have the opportunity for fantastic, exotic experiences. As we shall see below, this stance became concretized in the girls' camps that would be set up from 1938, first in Italy and then in Libya; these camps would be given ample space in the news, described enthusiastically in both the columns of the newspapers loyal to the regime, and in documentaries by the Istituto Luce.³³

COERCION AND PROPAGANDA: THE COLONIAL CAMPS

In the summer of 1937, the resolution n. 853 broke decisively through the debate on "women in the colonies", abruptly accelerating the strategy for the preparation of Fascist youth.³⁴ A training system was established with specific courses for teaching notions of various kinds all designed to prepare young women for life in Africa. These programmes soon spread throughout Italy thanks to the far-reaching and dynamic efforts of the *Fasci Femminili*. A complex administrative machine was set in motion, articulated on several levels. In all the provinces, an already experienced Fascist fiduciary would be appointed to oversee the syllabus, which involved both theoretical and practical activities focused on the various aspects of life in the colonies; the courses were designed for a

³³ Various documentaries produced by the Istituto Luce featured realistic and enthusiastic portrayals of typical days in the colonial camps. The tone was decidedly propagandistic, so as to entice young women to sign up. Again, the virtues most praised by the voiceover in the short films are in stark contrast to the models of women that Fascism had previously adopted and promoted. See "Il campeggio coloniale delle giovani fasciste" (Lago d'Iseo), available on <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000028805/2/le-attivita-al-campeggio-pre-coloniale-giovani-fasciste-che-si-preparano-alla-vita-coloniale-africa.html&jsonVal=#n> (accessed 20 March 2022).

³⁴ "Foglio di disposizioni 853", August 9, 1937 (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Pnf, Direttorio nazionale – Servizi vari, serie I, b. 207). The text is the work of Achille Starace, at the time Secretary of the National Fascist Party (from 1931 to 1939).

select group of girls, who would receive practical training in the colonial camps in Italy; the last phase of the enterprise was departure for the camps in Libya, which would allow the would-be settlers to try out and experience life in Africa, with all its drawbacks and difficulties. The articles in *L'Azione Coloniale* enthusiastically report the involvement of these young Fascists in the life of the Empire, underscoring that the time had come for greater commitment to and participation in the imperial fate of the nation. It was now the duty of the female Fascist to rise to the occasion, making a conscious decision to undertake the role she was called upon to play; life in the colony would involve greater sacrifices and responsibilities than that in the home country, and therefore adequate preparation would be required. This was not to be divorced from healthy morality, and she would not be mixing with the native populations, nor becoming accustomed to a bourgeois existence, against which the Fascist Party had always strenuously fought.³⁵

The pace with which the project was to be implemented gives a glimpse of a concrete intention to solve once and for all the problem that the close coexistence between Italian men and African women had inevitably caused. A relentless campaign began across the nation, with conferences, articles, documentaries, courses and lectures.³⁶ This endeavour soon bore fruit; already in the spring of 1938, the first concrete tests of the strategy began to take place in Libya, as always reported faithfully in the friendly news. This heralded a turning point in the imaginary; until then the female figure privileged by fascism was not yet perceptible in theory, but soon became so in the markedly more dynamic tones with which the events and life in the camps were narrated: the “young colonial fascist women” were described, emphasizing their indomitable

³⁵ “Le donne italiane chiamate a partecipare alla vita dell’Impero”, *L’Azione Coloniale*, August 12 (1937).

³⁶ Conferences were organized by the Associazione nazionale fascista donne artiste e laureate, and autonomously by the various citizen’s groups. See, as an example of considerable value due to its content, the conference held on March 5, 1937 by Antonio Chiaromonte, “in this first meeting of the Women’s Course on Colonial Culture”, which touched clearly and convincingly on all the issues being debated at that time. The propaganda’s insistence, made at several levels depending on the context and social classes being targeted, was decidedly successful. The text of the conference was printed by the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente in *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell’Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente* 18 no. 1 (1963): 7-21. On page 18, explicit reference is made to the activity of *L’Azione Coloniale*, which “is interesting the colonialists in the country in the question of the Italian woman in the colony, and all concur and admit that it represents a necessity also, and perhaps primarily, to give strength to the recently adopted legal provisions”.

spirit, courage, will to be active in and useful to the regime, dynamic camaraderie, and desire to emulate their male colleagues in the use of weapons.

However, there was no lack of strongly polemical overtones to the debate unleashed at the national level, which in response yielded articles that decisively reiterated the Party's ideas on the social and ethical modes of life in Italian East Africa. Proof of this is a long and dense text entitled "Preparazione e funzione della donna coloniale in Africa" by the journalist Vittorio Branzoli Zoppi.³⁷ In the first part, the author lists the criticisms of the new course inaugurated by the *Foglio di disposizioni*, then a specific rebuttal is provided for each. For example, he rejects the idea of a class division in Italian society in the colonies, but at the same time vetoes all those bourgeois ladies who showed greater confidence in their indigenous servants than in the other Italians residing in villages specially built for workers; he emphasizes that women must first concentrate on the problems of other Italians, not on the indigenous children, which were the preserve of the religious missions; finally, it is stressed that colonial women must become shining examples for others at home who were still undecided about the prospect, and who must be encouraged to depart for the colonies.

In 1938, the enthusiastic descriptions of the first experiences that were implemented in Italy appeared with insistent and intentional repetitiveness in the press. News was given of the concrete training that was being offered to young Fascist women in the camps set up in various Italian cities, and space in the newspaper columns was often devoted to short accounts by the participants themselves. One example of this is a story by Angela Vella, who described in detail the entire span of a day in the pre-colonial camp at Bosco S. Pietro near Caltagirone (Catania).³⁸ The language appears strongly rhetorical, inspired by the tones used as

³⁷ Vittorio Branzoli Zoppi, "Preparazione e funzione della donna coloniale in Africa", *L'Azione Coloniale*, September 2 (1937). The role assigned to women was still wholly traditional, namely moral assistance and educational care. However, it is stressed that these functions must be primarily directed to other Italians, and not to the natives: "There is a multitude of soldiers and workers, there are beginning to be wives of workers and settlers: an immense field in which the fascist woman can carry out effective, good and patriotic work".

³⁸ Angela Vella, "I campi pre-coloniali delle giovani fasciste in Italia", *L'Azione Coloniale*, September, 1 (1938), 7.

a matter of course by the regime; however, there transpires a real and committed adherence to the project, of which the author clearly felt an integral part. The narration begins with the morning routine; she recounts that the young women came out of their tents for ablutions in order to be ready for the 7 am flag-raising and salute to the Duce. This would be followed by mass in the nearby church, and then breakfast. Each team would then begin the various tasks it had been allotted, either in the sewing workshop, laundry or kitchen. There was a specific and consistent focus on physical education, an activity that had now become a necessary feature of the model of fascist woman, being essential for eminently eugenic purposes.³⁹ No attempt was made to mitigate the inconveniences of the camp, which would probably have been very similar in Africa: the suffocating heat of the tents, the wind blowing away the tablecloths, and the need for a constant supply of fresh water. Vella's words convey a strong spirit of adaptation, and the desire to concretely embark on this adventure, which would undoubtedly open up interesting and innovative horizons for the young women soon to be bound for Italian East Africa; their anxious anticipation of the opportunity to put themselves to the test, and in the meantime to experience their ability to adapt, is perceptible. There was a constant emphasis on the importance of their commitment, which the regime required for the future fate of the empire.

The camps were set up quickly and efficiently in many Italian cities in the summer of 1938; progress in this regard was faithfully reported, highlighting that the Fasci Femminili guaranteed the seriousness and rigor of the training of young women, and there would be no distinction between North and South; the practices being adopted for the activities were the same across the entire peninsula. In the September 15, 1938 issue of *L'Azione Coloniale*, ample space is given to the description of the camps at Varese (in northern Italy) and Bari (in southern Italy), precisely to emphasize the lack of geographical discrimination, as well as the

³⁹ The physical education of girls became an additional propaganda tool in the hands of the regime. Athletes were frequently paraded on official occasions, and became a further example of how stereotypes related to the display of female bodies were being broken down. To perfect the girls' physical training, the Accademia Femminile Nazionale di Educazione Fisica [National Women's Academy of Physical Education] was founded in Orvieto, led by the "commander" Elisa Lombardi, which welcomed the most gifted in this regard. On this specific theme, see the volume Lucia Motti and Marilena Rossi Caponeri (eds.), *Accademiste a Orvieto. Donne ed educazione fisica nell'Italia fascista 1932-1943* (Perugia: Quattroemme, 1996), which makes use of and analyses the rich photograph collection left by Elisa Lombardi to the State Archives of Orvieto.

fun experience of the camp set up at Nemi, near Rome, remarking how the natural and environmental characteristics of the place were very reminiscent of the African landscape.

However, the training carried out in Italy represented only a brief step on the journey that would take the girls to Africa. After having stayed in the Italian camps for the prescribed period, the young women would be shipped to the African territories for a spell, to experience the real living conditions on the ground. From May 1938 there were reports that constitute evidence of a further important phase in the regime's project, namely the organization of structured camps in Libya, a territory that presented no problems whatsoever for the implementation of these experiences, now considered the so-called "Fourth Shore". Indeed, Libya was now a bulwark of the Italian imperial domain, thanks to robust economic and propagandistic investment by the regime. The Turin provincial section of the Fasci Femminili, after concluding the theoretical phase of preparation and having selected the 70 best students on the course, conducted them there to a camp named after Maria Brighenti⁴⁰ specially set up in western Libya, in the oasis at Tripoli, near Suk el Giurma. No information is given on the duration of the group's stay, but it is interesting to note what happened after their return to Italy. As already widely stated, these girls became the best testimonials for the burgeoning process of expansion of the imperialist projects of the regime, and the will to establish substantial colonies in Africa. The returning heroines were welcomed by the Istituto Fascista dell'Africa Italiana and received by His Excellency, Luigi Federzoni,⁴¹ who, after having soundly praised them for their courage and determination, reminded them of the tasks and duties that the regime expected them to carry out in defense of Fascist ideals.⁴²

⁴⁰ Maria Boni Brighenti became an icon and a shining example for young Fascist women. She was married to Lieutenant Costantino Brighenti, and with him had gone to Libya, precisely to Tarhuna, the military headquarters her husband had been assigned to. There she worked as a nurse in the field hospital, assisting and treating the wounded. In June 1915, during a clash with the rebels, she was mortally wounded, and her body was not found until a year later. She was the first woman to be honoured with the gold medal for military valour (in a Decree dated February 17, 1917).

⁴¹ Luigi Federzoni was Minister of the Colonies from 1926 to 1928, and at that time President of the Senate.

⁴² "There were seventy young Fascist women from Turin who, full of enthusiasm for the novelty of the initiative, spent a period of happy training in Tripolitania. Nor could one have wished for a better crowning achievement for the Courses of preparation of women for colonial life, which have had

The positions taken by Fascist leaders are of considerable importance for highlighting the transformation of the ideal woman promoted by Fascism, by now decidedly far removed from the evidently misogynistic beginnings in which women were blamed for the demographic decline (the “empty cradles” rhetoric). A much more active, committed female model was being shaped, endowed with great dynamism which, although targeted to the regime’s objectives, had a great capacity for penetrating the symbolic imaginary. The result was a female figure light years away from the mothers and grandmothers who had adhered to Fascism in its early days. The metamorphosis continued to be widely bolstered by magazines and newspapers favourable to the regime,⁴³ such as *L’Almanacco della donna italiana* and *La donna fascista*, and articles published from 1938 onwards underwent a major shift in terms of their content and iconography, greatly emphasizing the achievement and successes of women in areas traditionally thought of as a purely male prerogative.⁴⁴

From the end of 1939 until 1940, Mussolini’s strategy for young women seems evident: to give them more space within the Fascist organizations, and make them protagonists of an adventure on which the fate of the empire would rest. This agenda was to be articulated in various phases: the theoretical preparation via local courses on colonial culture, followed by participation in colony training camps in Italy, and then the departure for the camps in Libya — a prelude to the effective colonization of Italian East Africa —. This project would be interrupted on 10 June 1940, when Italy joined forces with Hitler in the Second World War, but until then it seemed to work perfectly, thanks also to external cultural and propagandistic support. An example is the talk given in 1940 by Francesco Saverio Caroselli, Governor of Somalia, at the Istituto Fascista dell’Africa Italiana at the invitation of the Unione Provinciale Fascista dei Professionisti e degli Artisti and of the Circolo romano delle donne artiste e laureate entitled “The Fascist Woman in Africa”.⁴⁵ Reiterating

great success in Turin, as indeed in every other centre”. “Il campeggio delle Giovani Fasciste torinesi in Tripolitania”, *L’Azione Coloniale*, May 19 (1938), 8.

⁴³ Simona Viviana Ruggeri. *Donne e giornali nel fascismo: dizionario storico-biografico* (San Gavino Monreale: Edizioni Fiore, 2004).

⁴⁴ Marco Innocenti. *Le Signore del Fascismo. Donne in un mondo di uomini* (Milan: Mursia, 2001).

⁴⁵ This talk, entitled *La donna fascista in Africa*, was of enormous programmatic value; it was published by the Publications and Propaganda Office of the Unione Fascista dei Professionisti e degli

that, “for the essential purposes of stabilizing the colonial population, women are the element on which the action of the Government must be able to count in order to achieve the primary political and social goal of colonization”, Caroselli proceeded to reconfigure not only the role of women in the colonies but a different model of femininity; women had to step down from their romantic and chivalrous pedestals, and instead lead an “active existence, according to the postulates of Fascist ethics:

The place that today the woman wants and knows how to occupy in the life of the nation gives rise to problems that find in the Fascist State solutions for using the fresh and characteristic feminine energies for the greater power of the Fatherland, in every sector and in harmonious and graduated cooperation with the activities of men. At every stage and every step of our national progress, we have found, in recent years, Fascist women prepared and ready for every event and every task, often, indeed, at the forefront, with an admirable spirit of youth and audacity that had to be curbed rather than pushed.⁴⁶

The talk goes on to provide a sort of genealogy of the role of women in Africa, highlighting in a heavily critical form the attitude of bourgeois women, the wives of officials, who had been tainted with the obvious guilt of replicating behaviors considered unseemly by Fascist ethics on African soil, emphasizing a hierarchical division into categories, instead of being in solidarity with the other Italians who emigrated to the colonies. In addition, some passages of Caroselli’s “*conversazione*”, emphasize the value of women’s work, now understood in a radically different way than in the past. In fact, it was hoped that more and more professional women would decide to move out to the farthest reaches of the Fascist empire, and the skills most in demand were enumerated in detail. These included “the healthcare and chemistry professions [...]. In engineering, mechanical and electrical, women graduates qualified for that professional exercise will also find a place as the plants progress”.⁴⁷ As seems evident, the assertions of an authority of such calibre in the

Artisti. The only existing copy is preserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze (location V.MIS 18544.19).

⁴⁶ Francesco Saverio Caroselli, *La donna fascista in Africa* (Roma: Tip. Coppitelli & Palazzotti, 1940), 3.

⁴⁷ Caroselli, *La donna fascista*, 14.

Fascist hierarchy, widely supported by the central bodies of the Fascist Party and the Ministry of the Colonies, could not but have a major impact on the colonial project carried out by the regime; it is no coincidence that female emigration increased significantly from 1939 onwards, as shown by the statistics for the years 1939 and 1940.⁴⁸

THEORETICAL PREPARATION: THE MANUAL FOR “COLONIAL GIRLS”

In order for the Fascist leaders to achieve the goal that they had set themselves regarding the settling of colonial territories in Italian East Africa, it would be essential for a complex and far-reaching organization to be set up and activated throughout the national territory. The various phases in which the strategy was to be rolled out had to be integrated to follow as closely as possible a very precise line that provided for the colonial education courses managed by the *Fasci Femminili*. To standardize the knowledge gained and learning achievements of the girls who participated, a manual was prepared to be used during the lessons taking place across the country.

Analysis of this manual, published by the Rome Istituto Coloniale Fascista, an institution whose exclusive task was the production of all the papers — pamphlets, speeches, conferences and frequently used materials — to be sent to the local offices of the Fascist Party, shed light on several essential elements that warrant explanation. The title itself leaves no room for doubt about its content: *Nozioni coloniali per le organizzazioni femminili del Partito nazionale fascista* [Colonial notions for women’s organizations of the National Fascist Party].⁴⁹ Divided into four

⁴⁸ “No small proportion of these Italians who chose to move to the empire was made up of women. The increase in the presence of women, taking the Italian population of Addis Ababa as a sample, was rapid and constant: at the beginning of 1937 only 101 women resided in the capital, but a year later there were already more than 4,000, and by April 30, 1940 they had reached the figure of 6,607”. Emanuele Ertola, *In terra d’Africa. Gli italiani che colonizzarono l’impero* (Bari: Laterza, 2017), 17.

⁴⁹ Istituto Coloniale Fascista, *Nozioni coloniali per le organizzazioni femminili del Partito nazionale fascista*. Volumes of this kind are extremely rare, in view of the frequent use that was made of them and the removal and destruction of pamphlets, propaganda materials, newspapers and other press of this kind from 1943 onwards, after the fall of Fascism. The text I consulted, printed in Rome by the Castaldi printing house, is the only remaining copy, and is held at the Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze (location V.BAN B.12.3.363). The title page bears the date of reception and cataloguing, December 14, 1937, while the date of its actual publication does not appear on any page of the volume. The volume consists of 170 pages, and has some useful statistical tables. At the end of the

distinct parts, the volume gives us a window onto the know-how and information that the directors of the Istituto considered essential for preparation for life in the colonies of Libya and Italian East Africa. At first glance, it is apparent that the structure of the text is quite articulated, consistent, and rich in notions from historical, geographic and scientific fields. The language used is always precise, technical, and suitable for imparting a medium-high level of education. It takes for granted several prerequisites, which, however, may not always have been covered by the previous schooling of the girls who attended the courses. Hence, it was likely that during the lessons further explanations were needed from the Party trustees who had the task of organizing and supervising the education and training of the selected girls.

Then we come to analysis of the individual sections that make up the volume. The first part, entitled “Storia dei nostri possedimenti d’oltremare” [History of Our Overseas Possessions] is a long excursus on the genesis of Italy’s colonial expansion since the late nineteenth century. The various chapters examine both the events that led Italy to become a colonial power, and the marked differences between the Italian imperialist spirit and that of the other European nations, such as Great Britain and France.⁵⁰ Indeed, the Italian governments had always favoured a policy of demographic expansion in the territories they conquered, especially to offset the copious emigration of people from the southern regions of Italy to the United States and South America. The battles won against the indigenous armies in Eritrea and Somalia are also meticulously listed: there is ample display of blatant propaganda describing the local populations as barbaric, wild, and in need of civilizing by the superior Italian settlers, in order to attain better living standards. This

colonial experience, another manual was published: Istituto fascista dell’Africa italiana, *Elementi pratici di vita coloniale per le organizzazioni femminili del Pnf e della Gil* (Rome: Scuola tipografica Pio X, 1941). Some gleanings inside the defense of the race were presented also in short essays about pediatric and puericultural notions such as Giovanni Battista Allaria, “Sunto delle lezioni di puericultura e di difesa della razza dette al Corso di perfezionamento per la preparazione della donna alla vita coloniale”, *Pediatria del medico pratico* 16, no. 1-2 (1941): 5-65.

⁵⁰ Mussolini took every official opportunity to reiterate how the Italian colonial model differed from the French and British systems. The imperialist project propagated by Fascism aimed to establish settlements in which to send the redundant population, and at the same time stimulate the economy of the conquered lands and promote exports of agricultural and mining products to Italy, which was at that time reeling from the economic sanctions imposed by the League of Nations as a result of its invasion of Ethiopia.

rhetoric clearly contributes to distorting the historical narrative, which unflinching seems to be marked by the desire to draw a rigid dividing line between peoples based on dichotomies such as progress/regression, modernity/backwardness. Thus the civilizing mission of the fatherland is legitimized, concealing the true motivations of the colonial enterprise, i.e., Mussolini's desire to have "a place in the sun"⁵¹ like other nations. It also served to meet the need to distract the masses from the economic problems that the Fascist regime was attempting to deal with — unsuccessfully — in the 1930s; the hope was that African lands could be exploited to enrich Italian companies, who would find work in abundance. Between the lines is often evident the desire to communicate the pride of belonging to a nation able to give concrete form to a project that had been proposed immediately after the Unification of Italy in 1861, but for various reasons had not been implemented with any success. Pride, a sense of belonging, confidence and nationalism: these are the main themes that underlie the text, which paints a vision of history that would provide a firm foundation for the future destiny of greatness and prosperity envisaged. The overarching revisionism was, of course, based on lies and falsehoods, albeit well constructed and legitimized by their inclusion in a credible overview in which every event was collocated within a line of progressive identification between Fascism and the imperialist destiny of the Italian nation.

After the historical narration, there is a long section⁵² that describes the geographical configuration of Libya and Italian East Africa in detail. Mountains, lakes, rivers and villages are reviewed in enthusiastic tones, aimed at allaying any fears that may have plagued those who were about to leave for the colonies. However, in listing the plentiful resources of the territories, the rhetoric underlying the description becomes increasingly imaginative and removed from reality. If the primary purpose was to convince the doubters, the picture that was painted — of a land rich in

⁵¹ See Alexander J. De Grand's careful analysis, "Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935–1940", *European History* 13, no. 2 (2004): 127–147. For an opinion piece on this project, see, among others, the article by Francis Snow, "Mussolini asks 'A Place in the Sun'", *New York Times*, December 26, 1926. His imperialist aims were already quite evident at that time, even though the circumstances would only be favourable to their realization in 1935, at the start of the war against Ethiopia.

⁵² Istituto Coloniale Fascista, *Nozioni coloniali*, Part II. "Cenni di geografia ed economia coloniale", 56–96.

water and an abundance of raw materials, akin to the territories of the fatherland — had to be as reassuring as possible, instilling considerable confidence in the unlimited potential that the colonies would be able to offer. Everything seems designed to encourage immigration, but naturally that design was not entirely black and white; proof of this is the paragraph dedicated to transport, which outlines many future projects, purportedly already at a very advanced stage, but only serves to validate the naked truth of a territory in which travel was almost impossible due to serious structural deficiencies. Blatant falsehoods mingle and overlap with the bleak reality of the facts, which are rarely outlined in their entirety.

The part in which the official Fascist agenda returns to the fore is undoubtedly the section entitled “Problemi dell’espansione coloniale e difesa della razza” [Problems of Colonial Expansion and Defence of the Race], dedicated to the anthropological difficulties that continued to hinder proper colonial expansion and call into question the ideals of civil coexistence.⁵³ After a substantial excursus on the religions practiced in Libya and Ethiopia, the still unresolved issues are presented in detail, leading up to the most serious problem of all: racial mixing and copulation with the indigenous people.⁵⁴ The priority of defending the race that had so informed the 1920s and the demographic philosophy of Fascism are taken up again in no uncertain terms. However, a slight cultural shift appears: whereas Mussolini had previously emphasized the danger of population decline within the borders of Italy, now the issue would take on different connotations. It would now be a question of preserving the purity of the Italian race, preventing the proliferation of a category of mixed-race offspring, which would be a slight to the eyes of the fatherland, as well as a social problem in Africa. An easy remedy to counter laxity, sexual promiscuity and reprehensible behaviour had been found: moving Italian women to East Africa and building cities to house

⁵³ On January 9, 1937, the Council of Ministers had approved a draft Legislative Decree to ensure the defence of the race and regulate relations between Italians and the indigenous people, which dictated clear separation, and collaboration without promiscuity.

⁵⁴ The first lines of the paragraph entitled “Pericoli dell’unione con gli indigeni” [Dangers of union with the indigenous people] reports a long list of problems that had to be solved in order for the colonial policy to begin in terms of the long-term allocation of Italians to the territories of Ethiopia. The social alarm stemmed from the negative consequences of excessive sexual freedom and the unbridled access that Italian men had to young African women.

colonial families. The need to convince women of this radical change of existential horizons led the anonymous author of the volume to praise the eternal and universal function of the female gender, no longer only in terms of prolificity and eugenics, but also for their attitude as valid companions, who would fully share the destiny of their husbands, acting at the same time as a pillar of morality.⁵⁵ It was also reiterated that women would be able to, and indeed must, practice professions that would benefit the entire colony.⁵⁶ Therefore, in the vision that Fascism had for the colonies, women would still play a role of central importance.

The remaining part of the manual covers hygiene and sanitary issues — childcare, breastfeeding, weaning, baby hygiene, house cleaning, food preparation and first aid — closely linking them to the work of nurturing, ever the province of women. These elements are explained in a detailed and pragmatic way, taking care to emphasize how the climate, soil characteristics, animals, insects, and diseases would require a very different sort of care and attention than those of the fatherland.

Even this brief analysis of the manual shows that it contained what was considered absolutely essential for a young woman who had decided to embark on this adventure to know. However, we do not really have any idea of what the teaching methods were — if, for example, there were also practical aspects and workshops during the lessons, or whether practical training was imparted solely in the colonial camps —. In any event, Italy's participation in the Second World War prevented the girls, properly prepared and eager to experience this adventure, from

⁵⁵ “But so that the incomparable gifts and qualities of the Italian people do not become denatured under the sun of Africa, the presence of women is necessary. Our most distinguished anthropologists have shown that the conservative element of blood is the woman — a constraint and almost a symbol of the continuity of the race. The woman, as the depository of ethnic characteristics, is even able to balance and neutralize the decadent and baser elements of the male, and is therefore able to restore the new generations”, Istituto Coloniale Fascista, *Nozioni coloniali*, 117.

⁵⁶ The paragraph “La donna italiana in Colonia” emphasizes the need for women's work in Africa, also taking great care not to send the “castaways of life” (the baser elements of society) to the colony (p. 116), and to take due account of the numerical proportion between women and men, until then largely unbalanced in favour of the male sex.

actually settling Italian East Africa.⁵⁷ News about the camps on the pages of newspapers became increasingly more sporadic from this point, and ceased altogether in April 1942.⁵⁸

CONCLUSIONS: IMAGE-BUILDING IN PROGRESS

The length of time that Mussolini ruled Italy (1922–1943) can certainly not be described monolithic in terms of his political and cultural choices. As the context changed, he modulated his propaganda, and better defined the social categories on which to base his leadership. His focus on women requires careful analysis, not so much as regards what the regime achieved as on the ways in which the changes were experienced by the women themselves. Let us think about what access to university education may have meant for the daughters of the middle classes, or how a strong identity consciousness spread that no longer had anything in common with the symbolic imaginary of the previous generation. This trend became even more evident after 1935, when Mussolini called Italian women together, without any class distinction, as bastions of the fight against sanctions, in the case of rural housewives, or exhorted them to become the moral pillars of the colonies, in the case of the petty bourgeoisie. New images and unusual behavioral styles were spread through the press, and thus the needs of the regime brought about a complex mutation in the model woman, who would now possess an energetic dynamism, a spirit of adventure, and the courage to face the unknown. That being said, we must also ask ourselves what proportion of young women actually enthusiastically embraced these behaviors, and who they were. Were they mainly from the city as opposed to the countryside, for example, and what level of studies did they really attain? There were undoubtedly many variables involved, and the paucity of documents does not allow us to reconstruct a detailed picture. Nonetheless, considering the numerical data relating to the schooling rates as indicators of a pathway towards the professions, we can hypothesize

⁵⁷ At the same time the camps in Libya continued to function, in particular that at Sidi Hani, already the subject of an uncritical and triumphalist article in the October 6, 1938 issue of *L'Azione Coloniale*; this camp was considered a model of excellence and Fascist organization (Manlio Dorado, "Il campo di Sidi Hani: la Città delle Donne").

⁵⁸ An account of experiences in the camps appears in Ezio Ferrari, "A proposito dei campi coloniali", *L'Azione Coloniale*, April 2 (1942).

that the metamorphosis was in progress, and that a critical awareness was building that would soon bloom into political opposition, resulting in numerous women joining the ranks of the Italian Resistance to Nazism as clearly appear in sources such as diaries and letters:

The most beautiful feelings (love of country, family, work, humanity) have disappeared under false concepts. The very freedom of thought and of the press, the most beautiful gift given by God to men, the forge in which the wits are tempered and souls are ennobled, is a meaningless word. Only one must be the subjects of books and works of art: Fascism and the leader; only one is the chorus of newspapers: flattery. The spirit is imprisoned within limits from which it cannot escape and therefore is forced either to die or to atrophy, which is almost the same. Mussolini himself, whom I once admired as the most complete genius, seems to me to have lost what balance is.⁵⁹

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⁵⁹ The quotation is taken from the diary of Maria Teresa Rossetti (Septembre 10, 1938). On this topic see the essay by Pierantonio Gros, *Il diario di Maria Teresa Rossetti. Una giovane intellettuale tra fascismo e antifascismo*, in *Sulla crisi del regime fascista, 1938-1943. La società italiana dal "consenso" alla Resistenza*, edited by Angelo Ventura (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), 421-462, 439.

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