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Abstract:

This article explores the contradictions in Italy's relationship with the Mediterranean basin, taking Tunisia as a focal point. Tunisia was a paradoxical case at the intersection of Italy's foreign policy: it was a former Roman imperial colony with a strategic location, but it also possessed a large and vibrant Italian emigrant settlement, like the Italian "colonies" of Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, New York, and San Francisco. This situation caused much confusion in debates over how Italy should develop its international influence. Faced with a choice of priorities, the Italians of Tunisia called for Italy to concentrate on establishing territorial colonies in the Mediterranean, rather than cultivating Italian emigration worldwide. In 1881, France surprised Italy by seizing control of Tunisia, skewing Italian policy and fomenting a sense of weakness and insecurity. Italy's "loss" of Tunisia encouraged the belief that Italian imperial motives were more deserving and more sincere, and Nationalists used the wealthy and successful Italian community of Tunisia as

a model of what Italians would be able to achieve in neighboring Libya. Fascist representations of Italians in Tunisia, however, finally discredited the Italian expatriates' claims to rights and representation under French colonial rule. This case study thus illustrates how Mediterranean Europe and North Africa became enmeshed in multiple layers of competition and integration through trends in colonialism, migration, and the formation of transnational communities.



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Tunisia, Contested: Italian Nationalism, French Imperial Rule, and Migration in the Mediterranean Basin

Mark I. Choate

How does mass migration interact with nationalism and imperialism? Scholars have recently viewed “diasporas” as non-national, global movements that undermine the structures of nation-states. Arjun Appadurai, for example, writes:

The nation-state, as a complex modern political form, is on its last legs . . . This system (even when seen as a system of differences) appears poorly equipped to deal with the interlinked diasporas of people and images that mark the here and now. Nation-states, as units in a complex interactive system, are not very likely to be the long-term arbiters of the relationship between globality and modernity . . . Diasporic public spheres, diverse among themselves, are the crucibles of a postnational political order.¹

Appadurai takes the perspective of immigration states in North America, which in theory could be culturally unraveled as each immigrant group links itself to a global diasporic community. But the United States has never been a nation-state. On the contrary, nation-states that sent out large emigration populations stand to benefit from transnational cultural and economic ties to expatriates worldwide. Italy a century ago was a newly created nation-state, keen to build an international reputation based upon colonial expansion and also international emigration. Unlike the Irish, Jews, Poles, and other groups who emigrated from multinational empires under British, Russian, and Austrian rule, Italians departed from an Italian state that identified strongly with its “Italians abroad.”² This category included all Italian expatriates, emigrants, and exiles, glossing over the very different economic conditions and motivations of individual emigrants and their families and their location, whether in the Mediterranean, the Americas, or in Europe. Colonial settlements of Europeans abroad, to include the Italian, French, Portuguese, and German cases, are crucial to understanding European imperialism but nonetheless are neglected in many colonial studies, including the brilliant works of Edward Said.³ This article focuses upon a single case study to approach Italian nationalism and colonialism from a different angle.

The colonial status of Tunisia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became crucial to the ongoing “Italian question”: how would a united Italy define itself and how would Italy project its

¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 19, 22-23. See also Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, eds. *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992).

² Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995).

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

influence in the world?⁴ Geography drove much of Italy's interest; a distance of only 90 miles (145 km) separates Italy and Tunisia at the Strait of Sicily in the center of the Mediterranean. Tunisia seemed a necessary possession if Italy were ever to cast itself as a credible empire. Italy developed elaborate social, economic, and political ties to the territory, but France seized Tunisia for itself in 1881. Ongoing competition for influence in Tunisia goes to the heart of Italy's contested role within the Mediterranean world. Studying Tunisia, on the geographic margins between Europe and Africa, illuminates Italy's conflicted colonial aspirations and reveals inherent contradictions at the limits of European political culture in the communities of North Africa. Although a neglected case, Tunisia's unique situation and potent symbolism are a key to understanding the international history of contemporary Italy.

As a colony, Tunisia contradicted much received wisdom about European empires at the time. Italians there far outnumbered the French, yet the colony fell under French control. Ideally located for European settlement on the Mediterranean, France nonetheless defined Tunisia as a "colony of exploitation," administered by the French Foreign Ministry, instead of a "colony of settlement" like neighboring Algeria.⁵ And, as Italy pursued formal colonialism in the tradition of ancient Rome, as well as informal colonialism in the tradition of medieval Genoa and Venice, Tunisia was stubbornly stuck in the middle. Italians there remained both colonizers and colonized.⁶ Like Libya and Albania, Tunisia had been ruled by ancient Rome. Tunisia's large Italian community, however, resembled the Italian "colonies" of Buenos Aires, Sao Paolo, New York, and San Francisco, under foreign rule yet closely tied to Italy by a web of trade, culture, and social communications. Conceptualizing Tunisia's colonial status in its Mediterranean and global contexts meant defining Italy's strategic goals for empire.

Italy's contradictory foreign policy grew in complexity because of its resonance at home. Although Italy's Risorgimento between 1859 and 1871 seemed to have resolved the "Italian question," unification was just the beginning of Italy's domestic debates over the future of the new nation-state. Expectations were high. Vincenzo Gioberti had waxed lyrical over Italy's "primacy" in his three-volume *Of the moral and civil primacy of the Italians* (1843).⁷ In his view, Italy deserved to be a nation-state because of the promise of immense benefit for all mankind. Gioberti's tomes gained a political stamp of approval when he was appointed prime minister by the King of Piedmont-Sardinia from 1848 to 1849, making Italy's cultural mission a political mission as well. The republican visionary Giuseppe Mazzini pressed for just as high and noble a calling, promising that Italy's unification would supercede the French Revolution in its

⁴ Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, ed., *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Carla Ghezzi, *Colonie, coloniali. Storie di donne, uomini e istituti fra Italia e Africa* (Roma: Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2003); Mary Dewhurst Lewis, "Geographies of Power: The Tunisian Civic Order, Jurisdictional Politics, and Imperial Rivalry in the Mediterranean, 1881–1935," *Journal of Modern History* 80:4 (2008): 791–830.

⁵ Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, *L'Algérie et la Tunisie* 2d ed. (Paris: Guillaumin, 1897); Raouf Ressaissi, *Settlement Colonization and Transnational Labor Emigrations in the Maghreb: A Comparative Study of Algeria and Tunisia* (Lund: Ekonomisk-historiska foreningen, 1984).

⁶ Lucia Re, "Alexandria Revisited: Colonialism and the Egyptian Works of Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti," in Patrizia Palumbo, ed., *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-unification to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 163–96; Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 4, 13, 17; Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Luigi Einaudi, *Un principe mercante. Studio sulla espansione coloniale italiana* (Torino: Fratelli Bocca, 1900).

⁷ Vincenzo Gioberti, *Del primato morale e civile degli Italiani* (Torino: UTET, 1920–1932).

benefits for the world.⁸ With all this rhetoric, Italy could never be content within its own borders.

Italy's high expectations included colonial expansion. In 1871, Mazzini himself called for Italy to share in Europe's civilizing mission by establishing its society and governance in North Africa.⁹ Much of this was sheer bravado. Italy had trouble even balancing its budget after fighting the wars of unification, creating the rudiments of national government, and moving the national capital in 1865 and again in 1871. The imposition of Piedmontese institutions upon the nine existing Italian states had sparked a civil war of brigandage in the South; literacy was low and poverty high countrywide; Italy's civil society had but shallow roots. From a fiscal and organizational standpoint, adding imperial obligations to Italy's existing burdens would be ill-advised. Nonetheless, unwisely and hypocritically, the Italian government felt obliged to demonstrate its strength at home by conquering abroad. This paradox would eventually expose Italy to public ridicule: for example, *The Nation*, a liberal British paper, editorialized in 1911 that "a nation which numbers Calabria and Apulia amongst its provinces need not go abroad for a civilizing mission. Italy has an Africa at home."¹⁰ Italy's foreign minister, Antonino Di San Giuliano, made a special point to rebuke the British ambassador. Such comments, especially coming from abroad, cut to the quick.¹¹

The limits of Italian power increased the attractiveness of Tunisia as a potential colony. The distances seemed surmountable and the inhabitants sympathetic. Tens of thousands of Italians had already settled in Tunisia's cities by the late 1870s, developing an urban economy without dispossessing Arabs and Berbers engaged in Tunisian agriculture. Venetian merchants arriving in Tunis since the twelfth century were followed by Jews and Christians from Livorno and other parts of Tuscany, and fishermen, minters, shopkeepers, and laborers from Sicily and Sardinia.¹² By conquering Tunisia, modern Italy would be following in ancient pathways. Rome had destroyed the city of Carthage on Lake Tunis in 146 B.C., following countless obsessive speeches by Cato the Elder in the Roman Senate repeating that "Carthage must be destroyed." United Italy could gain some of the historical legacy and legitimacy it so desperately craved.

⁸ Giuseppe Mazzini, *The Duties of Man and Other Essays* ([1907] London, New York: Dent, Dutton, 1966). Mazzini began publishing these essays in the 1840s.

⁹ See Giuseppe Mazzini, *Scritti Editi ed Inediti di Giuseppe Mazzini*, ed. Mario Menghini (Imola: Paolo Galeati, 1906-1943), 86:6-7, 89:56, 92:166-70; see discussion in Denis Mack Smith, *Mazzini* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 218-21.

¹⁰ William Askew, *Europe and Italy's Acquisition of Libya* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1942), 69-70.

¹¹ Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007); Sergio Romano, "L'ideologia del colonialismo italiano," in *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana. Atti del convegno, 23-29 ottobre 1989, Taormina-Messina*, ed. Carla Ghezzi (Roma: Ministero per I Beni culturali e ambientali, Ufficio centrale per I Beni archivistici, 1996); R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy Before the First World War* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹² Julia Clancy-Smith, "Gender in the City: Women, Migration, and Contested Spaces in Tunis, c.1830-1881," in *Africa's Urban Past*, ed. David Anderson and Richard Rathbone (Oxford and Portsmouth, New Hampshire: James Currey and Heinemann, 2000); Clancy-Smith, "Marginality and Migration: Europe's Social Outcasts in Pre-Colonial Tunisia, 1830-81," in *Outside In: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East*, edited by Eugene Rogan (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 149-82; Silvia Marsans-Sakly, "The Tunisian Revolt of 1864: Popular Uprising, Governmentality, and Colonial Incursion" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2009); Paul Sebag, *Tunis: Histoire d'une ville* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); Anna Maria Medici, "L'occupazione francese di Sfax e la comunità italiana," *Africa [Italy]* 46:2 (1991): 262-73; Lorenzo Del Piano, *La penetrazione italiana in Tunisia, 1861-1881* (Padua: CEDAM, 1964); Jean Ganiage, *Les origines du Protectorat français en Tunisie (1861-1891)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959).

France, however, would act first.

Tunisia as a Colonial Possession

The seizure of Tunisia in 1881 launched Europe's Scramble for Africa, a movement without precedent in world history. France's bold move against Tunisia was followed by Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882 and the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which formally partitioned Africa among the countries of Europe. By 1913, only Ethiopia and Liberia remained independent of European control.¹³ France's motivations in the Mediterranean thus carried much wider implications and global consequences.

Reworking the map of Africa was not France's original intent; the government planned to consolidate French Algeria's eastern frontier and counter the new Kingdom of Italy's possible plans. Emperor Napoleon III of France had not wanted the Italian peninsula to join together under a single monarch, changing the Mediterranean balance of power forever. His secret agreement of 1858 with Count Camillo Benso di Cavour, the prime minister of Piedmont-Savoy, was limited in its offer of French help against Austria, in exchange for Piedmont giving up Nice and Savoy. But in 1859 and 1860, Cavour arranged for Piedmontese troops to march well past Austrian territory, and he succeeded in taking over all the peninsula except for the regions around Rome and Venice.¹⁴ The French felt they had been manipulated, and they likewise planned to surprise their newly unified neighbor with a *fait accompli*. Even though Benedetto Cairoli, a Francophile, governed as prime minister between 1878 and 1881, France did not trust Italy in the long term.¹⁵

The resulting diplomatic confrontation played out at the Berlin Congress of 1878, convened by Otto von Bismarck ostensibly to stabilize Ottoman borders in Eastern Europe. One secondary objective was to involve the Third Republic of France in African colonialism, to distract Germany's rival from seeking revenge for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. Without giving away any German interests, Bismarck steered France toward the Kingdom of Tunis, under Ottoman imperial suzerainty. French diplomats took the bait, supported by Britain as well. Despite close relations with Italy, British statesmen preferred French control of Tunisia, not trusting Italy enough to support its control of both sides of the Strait of Sicily.¹⁶ Italy already possessed the island of Pantelleria in the middle of the strait, and adding Tunisia to Italy's portfolio would have established a decisive chokehold at the center of the Mediterranean. The British diplomats' strategic foresight was rewarded in World War II. Fascist control of British communications through the central Mediterranean Sea would have debilitated the British empire between 1940 and 1942.

¹³ Andrew Porter, *European Imperialism, 1860-1914* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1994).

¹⁴ Denis Mack Smith, *Victor Emanuel, Cavour and the Risorgimento* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹⁵ Jean Ganiage, *Les origines du Protectorat français en Tunisie (1861-1891)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959); Enrico Serra, "L'accordo italo-francese del 1896 sulla Tunisia," *Rivista storica italiana* 73:3 (1961): 473-512; William I. Shorrock, "The Tunisian Question in French Policy Toward Italy, 1881-1940," *International Journal of African Studies* 16:4 (1983): 631-51.

¹⁶ Klaus J. Bade, "Imperial Germany and West Africa: Colonial Movement, Business Interests, and Bismarck's 'Colonial Policies,'" in *Bismarck, Europe and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition*, ed. Stig Förster, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, and Ronald Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 121-147; Federico Curato, "La politica estera di Francesco Crispi," *Archivio storico siciliano* 11, 4th series (1985): 27-61; Teobaldo Filesi, *L'Italia e la conferenza di Berlino (1882-1885)* (Roma: Istituto Italo-Africano, 1985).

Italy's Liberal government during the Berlin Congress could not have been more different from the Fascist politicians that would later follow. Pleased to have been invited to the Congress in 1878 as befitting one of Europe's Great Powers, Italy's prime minister Benedetto Cairoli followed a far-sighted, rigorously anti-imperialist policy of "clean hands." He refused to stake claims to Ottoman territories in Europe or Africa. For twenty years, Cairoli had fought for freedom from the Austrian Empire, in the 1848 Milan uprising and with Garibaldi's volunteers in 1859, 1860, 1866, and 1867.¹⁷ In the best traditions of the Risorgimento, Cairoli believed that each nation in Europe or in Africa had the right to self-determination. Like later scholars, he saw the Mediterranean as "the corrupting sea."¹⁸

But Cairoli was ridiculed as a *naïf* after the French army marched into Tunis in March of 1881. After having waited nearly three years for public support to build gradually, French imperialists acted quickly and without advance notice. Faced with military occupation, the Bey of Tunis, Muhammad III al-Sadiq, was forced to sign the Treaty of Bardo relinquishing his state to French protection. Italians were shocked by the news. Cairoli fell from power, but his successors were equally flummoxed. To answer France's seizure of Tunisia, Italy's foreign minister Pasquale Stanislao Mancini took over Assab on the Red Sea in December 1881, forming the basis for the future colony of Eritrea.¹⁹ This imperial outpost was far less propitious than Tunisia, but still cost Mancini his integrity. He had devoted his career to promoting national self-determination and international liberty, co-founding and serving as the first president of the Institut de droit international (Institute of International Law), a nongovernmental organization that was awarded the fourth Nobel Prize for Peace in 1904. Despite his scruples, as foreign minister Mancini chose to impose imperialism rather than pursue world peace.

In justifying its unification and expansion, Italy had claimed the mantle of the Roman Empire, yet so did Britain, Russia, Austria, Germany, and France: all the Great Powers of Europe. Italy had no primacy after all. National embarrassment over Tunisia in 1881 thus became a watershed moment. In diplomacy, Italy turned away from its relationship with Republican France to join Bismarck's anti-French Triple Alliance in 1882.²⁰ Italy also engaged in a futile, destructive trade war with France.

France reworked its colonial ideology as well. The leading French colonial theorist, Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, had distinguished between colonies of "[European] population," such as Algeria, and colonies of "exploitation," such as Vietnam or French West Africa. The success of colonization depended upon the emigration of humans or capital from the metropole to the colonies. But French Tunisia broke down Leroy-Beaulieu's neatly rational categories because its European population was Italian, not French! He adjusted his definition of "settlement colonies" to insist that Tunisia was a "colony of exploitation," like central Africa, rather than neighboring

¹⁷ Gianfranco E. De Paoli, *Benedetto Cairoli. La formazione etico-politica di un protagonista del Risorgimento* (Pavia: G. Iuculano, 1989).

¹⁸ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

¹⁹ Atti Parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, Leg. XIV, 1a sessione, Discussioni, tornata 7 December 1881, pp. 7587-7588. The Rubattino Steamer Company had leased Assab in 1869. See Giacomo Gorrini, "I primi tentativi e le prime ricerche di una Colonia in Italia (1861-1882)," in *Biblioteca di scienze politiche e amministrative*, ed. Attilio Brunialti (2d series, vol. 9. Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice, 1897); Giorgio Doria, *Debiti e navi. La compagnia di Rubattino, 1839-1881* (Genova: Marietti, 1990).

²⁰ Federico Chabod, *Italian Foreign Policy: The Statecraft of the Founders, 1870-1896*. trans. William McCraig (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Algeria.²¹ To divert Italian interests away from Tunisia, Leroy-Beaulieu recommended Libya as the ideal location for the colonization of Italy's overflowing population.²²

Still the numbers of Italians in Tunisia continued to grow through immigration and natural increase. By 1900, Italians made up approximately seven-eighths of the colony's European population of 80,000 people. In 1903, the Italian consul made a careful calculation of the Italian population at 80,000. Some rounded up the number of Italians to 100,000, which the consul considered plausible, but the Paris newspaper *La Politique Coloniale* exaggerated the number at 120,000.²³ Leroy-Beaulieu made a frightened projection that in fifty years the Italian population would stand at 800,000.²⁴ To set artificial limits on Italian influence, the French administration barred immigrants from employment on public works and in the colonial government, unless they adopted French citizenship. Italy later responded by offering automatic renewal of Italian citizenship after any of its emigrants returned home to Italy.²⁵

Italy refused to recognize the existence of the French protectorate in Tunisia until after suffering the century's worst defeat of any European power in Africa. In March 1896, Cairoli's longtime opponent, the Germanophile Francesco Crispi, cajoled Italian generals into attacking Ethiopian forces at Adwa, leading to the death of 5,000 Italian and 1,700 Eritrean soldiers. Crispi fell dramatically from power, and his political collapse opened a new era of good relations between Italy and France. A commercial treaty later in the year formally ended the tariff war. Italy's treaty with the Bey of Tunis from 1868 was renegotiated in 1896 with nearly identical terms, recognizing the rights of Italian citizenship and institutions, including the Italian hospital, and granting Italy most favored nation trading status.²⁶ France guaranteed its protection of existing Italian schools in Tunis, Bizerte, Goletta, Sfax, and Susa (Sousse); Italy recognized France's possession of the Regency of Tunisia. Despite the limitations of these diplomatic agreements, the development of the Italian "colony" of Tunisia would continue.

Tunisia as an Italian Colony under French Rule

With the Adwa defeat of 1896, Crispi's Triple Alliance and colonial visions were completely discredited in Italy, leading to a fundamental reevaluation of colonial aims. Settlements of Italian expatriates, called *colonie*, now appeared more valid and useful than the expensive, bloody failures of East Africa. Motivated by the possible rewards from an international network of Italians abroad, ministries of the Italian government worked with nongovernmental organizations to bolster Italian identity outside the state's borders and outside the traditional channels of international diplomacy. For example, Italy's Foreign Ministry carefully compiled its consuls' responses to the 1901 worldwide Census of Italians Abroad, published as a nine-volume study,

²¹ See Paul Leroy-Beaulieu's articles in *L'Economiste français* July 14, 1900 and *Le Journal des Debats* July 10, 1900, 1-2. Archive du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris [hereafter MAE], NS Tunisie vol. 318, p. 74.

²² Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, *De la Colonisation chez les Peuples modernes* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1874).

²³ T. Carletti, "La Tunisia e l'emigrazione italiana," in *Emigrazione e colonia. Raccolta di rapporti dei rr. agenti diplomatici e consolari*, ed. Ministero degli affari esteri, Commissariato dell'Emigrazione (Roma: Tip. Nazionale di G. Bertero & C., 1906), 297-393.

²⁴ "Les Italiens en Tunisie," in *La Quinzaine coloniale*, 10 June 1905. MAE, NS Tunisie 323, ff. 2-3.

²⁵ Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 203-07.

²⁶ Enrico Serra, *La questione tunisina da Crispi a Rudinì ed il «colpo di timone» alla politica estera dell'Italia* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1967).

Emigrazione e colonie.²⁷ The detailed descriptions openly designated the Italian expatriates in Tunisia as a “permanent” Italian colony, despite French rule.²⁸ Italy’s consul in Tunis was also responsible for helping to organize local Italian charities, fraternal orders, and service organizations, in part to replace the Italian missionaries forced out of the colony following the declaration of the French protectorate.²⁹ In the capital city of Tunis, the Società Internazionale Juvenes Carthaginis (International Society of Youth of Carthage) sponsored drama, dancing, and concerts and dropped the “International” moniker in its name to be more overtly Italian in 1894.³⁰ Accompanied by their 57-piece musical band, “Star of Italy,” the Pro-Patria Gymnastic Society in Tunis practiced fencing and juggling and competed in Italian national gymnastics competitions.³¹

The oldest and wealthiest sector of the Italian community banded together in an Italian Chamber of Commerce, subsidized by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce. Italian chambers of commerce evoked considerable patriotism in Italy’s urban colonies, as when the Italian Chamber of Montevideo, Uruguay, was founded in 1883:

We are revindicating our Nation’s colonizing traditions, which made it great in all ages, especially in the great history of the Republics – especially Venice which made her flag wave gloriously in the most distant seas. England and France impose their civilization with cannon shot [for example, in North Africa], but Italy presents itself with a peaceful mission, seeking only to expand its vitality in distant countries.³²

Claiming moral superiority over the better-funded but violently imposed British and French regimes, the Italian Chambers of Commerce drew upon dedicated volunteerism, competitive group solidarity, and clear economic interests. In Tunis, the Italian Chamber published a biweekly newspaper, *L’Unione. Organo della Colonia e della Camera Italiana di Commercio ed arti*, to inspire the Italian community, unite the Italian elites, and project a permanent Italian identity.³³

Attacking this chamber, the French colonial paper *La Quinzaine coloniale* revived discussion of “the Italian peril” in 1905, even while noting that attention had turned to the “black

²⁷ Ministero di Agricoltura Industria e Commercio, Direzione Generale della Statistica, *Censimento della popolazione del Regno d’Italia al 10 febbraio 1901* (Roma: Tipografia Nazionale di G. Bertero, 1901-1904), 5:1; Ministero degli affari esteri, Commissariato dell’Emigrazione, *Emigrazione e colonie. Raccolta di rapporti dei rr. agenti diplomatici e consolari*, 7 vols. (Roma: Tip. Nazionale di G. Bertero & C., 1903-1909).

²⁸ *Emigrazione e colonie*, 2:2:331, 3:2:209.

²⁹ Bishop G. B. Scalabrini to Cardinal Simeoni, Prefect General of Propaganda Fide, 18 July 1891. Cited in Mario Francesconi, *Giovanni Battista Scalabrini vescovo di Piacenza e degli emigrati* (Roma: Città Nuova Editrice, 1985), 1032.

³⁰ T. Carletti, “La Tunisia e l’emigrazione italiana,” in *Emigrazione e colonie. Raccolta di rapporti dei rr. agenti diplomatici e consolari*, ed. Ministero degli affari esteri. Commissariato dell’Emigrazione, vol. 2 (Roma: Tip. Nazionale di G. Bertero & C., 1906), 375-378.

³¹ Comitato della Camera Italiana di Commercio ed Arti, *Gli Italiani in Tunisia* (Tunis: Imprimerie Typo-Lithographique de l’Association Ouvrière, Frédéric Weber, 1906), 101-103.

³² “La Camera di Commercio,” *L’Indipendente* (Montevideo), yr 1. n. 50, 2 October 1883. Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, MAIC Div. Ind. e Commercio b. 477.

³³ France’s documentation of the Chamber’s activities are in MAE, NS Tunisie 385, f. 34-50.

peril, red peril, yellow peril . . . what a dreadful polychromy!”³⁴ Colonialists agreed that the Sicilian immigrants from Palermo and Trapani were useful in constructing Tunisia’s infrastructure, but their compatriots posed a problem for France:

Above the workers and farmers, organizing them and trying to lead them, there is an Italian bourgeoisie at Tunis of industrialists, merchants, lawyers, doctors, engineers, professors, and architects, who comprise the *professionisti* class. . . . Shorn of political influence and excluded little by little from all public functions, they wanted to form and have attempted to maintain an Italian group, impenetrable to French influence. To accomplish this aim, they have gathered themselves in a Chamber of Commerce, intended to guard their common interests, and have created numerous educational and welfare services.³⁵

Resisting social and political pressure to assimilate as French citizens, members of the Italian Chamber of Commerce together preserved their ethnic niche market and ethnic identity, separate from the interests of their French colonial masters.³⁶

Despite this success, Italian colonialists worried a great deal about the future of the second and third generation of Italian expatriates. Would they even learn to speak Italian if they did not attend Italian schools? The cause of Italian-language education was taken up by the Dante Alighieri Society for Italian Language and Culture outside the Kingdom. As its president, Senator Pasquale Villari expanded the society’s mission beyond its traditional focus on Austria-Hungary.³⁷ Villari warned that Italians must not become “indifferent to the future destiny of their fatherland, of their race.”³⁸ The stakes were global: emigrants speaking Italian dialects around the world needed to learn standard Italian, “the language of Dante,” whether in Tunisia, the Americas, or Switzerland.³⁹ “Are not these also unredeemed lands?” he queried. “Are not these our brothers?”⁴⁰ His expansive irredentism faced stiff resistance from the French government, however. Inspired by Jules Ferry, who served as education minister and later as prime minister, France did not permit Italy to open more schools in Tunisia beyond those allowed under the

³⁴ “Les Italiens en Tunisie,” in *La Quinzaine coloniale*, 10 June 1905. MAE, NS Tunisie 323, ff 2-3.

³⁵ “Les Italiens en Tunisie,” in *La Quinzaine coloniale*, 25 June 1905. MAE, NS Tunisie 323, ff. 4-8.

³⁶ Mark I. Choate, “Identity Politics and Political Perception in the European Settlement of Tunisia: The French Colony vs. The Italian Colony,” *French Colonial History* 8 (2007): 97-109.

³⁷ Pasquale Villari, “Discorso, VIII Congresso dei rappresentanti dei comitati in Milano (30 October - 1 November 1897),” *Atti della Società “Dante Alighieri” per la diffusione della lingua e della coltura italiana fuori del regno*, no. 7, February (1898): 9-18.

³⁸ “I Tedeschi e gli Slavi fanno il proprio dovere. Tocca agl’Italiani imitarli, se non sono divenuti affatto indifferenti al futuro destino della loro patria, della loro razza.” Pasquale Villari, “Discorso, X Congresso dei rappresentanti dei comitati in Messina (24-26 October 1899).” *Atti della Società “Dante Alighieri” per la diffusione della lingua e della cultura italiana fuori del Regno*, no. 9, March (1900): 10-11.

³⁹ Pasquale Villari, “Discorso, X Congresso dei rappresentanti dei comitati in Messina (24-26 October 1899),” *Atti della Società “Dante Alighieri” per la diffusione della lingua e della cultura italiana fuori del Regno*, no. 9, March (1900): 6-21.

⁴⁰ “Io vorrei qui chiedere a color che ci rimproverano d’occuparci della emigrazione: Non sono anche queste, terre irredente? Non sono anche questi nostri fraelli? E non dobbiamo occuparcene?” Pasquale Villari, “Discorso, XII Congresso dei rappresentanti dei comitati a Verona (26-29 September 1901),” *Atti della Società “Dante Alighieri” per la lingua e per la cultura italiana fuori del regno. Bollettino Trimestrale*, no. 5, December (1901): 8.

treaty of 1896, although the Italian population had tripled in size.⁴¹ Similarly, on the northern coast of the Mediterranean, the French government would not allow an Italian primary school to open in Marseille, where more than 100,000 Italians of all ages lived. Italy could sponsor only a kindergarten or an evening school for adults.⁴² Primary education was to remain in the hands of the French state.

The diplomatic agreements of 1896 between Paris and Rome preserved other concessions. France fixed letter postage between Tunisia and Italy at twenty centimes, the same price as Italian domestic mail, instead of the standard twenty-five centimes for international mail. In 1906, Italy lowered the cost of its domestic mail to fifteen centimes and, in turn, requested France to lower the cost of postage from Italy to Tunis.⁴³ The French government was mortified to contemplate the Italian ambassador's request:

There are two kinds of problems with accepting the Italian proposal: First, we would give the impression to the Italian population of Tunisia, and we would help strengthen the feeling among Italians in Italy, that Tunisia, from a territorial point of view as well as a postal point of view, is in some way an annex of Italy. The consul has pointed out a very convincing example of this: the day after the new [lower] Italian domestic tariff went in force, almost all the letters brought to Tunisia by the Palermo courier on 6 September 1905 were stamped Of.,15 instead of Of.,20. Undoubtedly, whatever we do to facilitate exchanges between the Italians of Tunisia and those of the peninsula will strengthen the already close ties between the immigrants and their country of origin.⁴⁴

The French foreign ministry emphasized that the 100,000 Italians living in Tunisia paid most of the colony's taxes, and if France lowered postal rates on the 860,000 letters sent each year from Tunisia to Italy, the colonial administration would lose 43,000 francs a year and become insolvent for its rulers.⁴⁵ This would be an intolerable concession. After all, was Tunisia Italian or French?

Conflict over the Future of Colonialism

Informal imperialism in Tunisia had strong implications for Italian colonial relations worldwide. Would Italy expend its resources to develop Italian expatriate communities in the Americas and elsewhere or to prepare the foundations for future colonization in the Mediterranean basin? Tunisia crossed both sides of this dichotomy. But the leaders of Tunisia's Italian community chose to favor traditional, territorial colonialism in the Mediterranean basin, rather than Italian

⁴¹ Serra, *La questione tunisina*, 428-430; Yves Déloye, *Ecole et citoyenneté. L'individualisme républicain de Jules Ferry à Vichy: controverses* ([Paris]: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1994)..

⁴² Pasquale Villari, "Discorso, XIV Congresso dei rappresentanti dei comitati a Udine (24-26 September 1903)," *Atti della Società "Dante Alighieri" per la lingua e per la cultura italiana fuori del regno. Bollettino Trimestrale*, no. 13, December (1903): 2-7.

⁴³ For postal rates, see ISTAT – Istituto centrale di statistica, *Sommario di statistiche storiche italiane 1861-1955* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1958), 203.

⁴⁴ Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Direction des Affaires politiques. Note pour le ministre, 2 April 1906. MAE, NS Tunisie 437, f. 18-19.

⁴⁵ Choate, "Identity Politics and Political Perception," 97-109; Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Direction des Affaires politiques. Note pour le ministre, 15 October 1907. MAE, NS Tunisie 437, f. 33-34.

state subsidies based upon where Italians abroad actually lived. Formal political control became a fundamental trope of Italian perspectives on the Mediterranean's past, present, and future, and the development of the Italian Tunisian community was explained according to an imperialist narrative. The expatriates' solidarity, industry, and loyalty were hailed by nationalists and Fascists as a template for Italian domination of *mare nostrum*, and many Italian Tunisians welcomed Fascist rule in 1942. But drawing support from the Fascists was a dangerous path and ultimately discredited the political and cultural claims of the Italian community in Tunisia.

Some Italian Liberals pressed instead for a much broader, peaceful colonial program to embrace the "spontaneous colonies" of Italians settled worldwide. Pasquale Villari and the Dante Alighieri Society in Rome proposed that the Italian state reallocate its resources dedicated to Italian-language schools abroad. There simply was not enough money to subsidize schools on every continent, and most of the money went to Italian state-owned schools in Mediterranean cities. Prime Minister Crispi had set up the expensive schools to boost Italy's imperialist interests in Tunisia, Egypt, Greece and Tripolitania, Albania, and Turkey under Ottoman rule. Italy thus spent hundreds of thousands of lire annually on expensive state schools to teach Arab, Jewish, Greek, Turkish, and Albanian children, while many Italians at home and abroad remained illiterate.⁴⁶ Someday, Crispi hoped, Italy would possess or control these territories, and Italy's investment in the schools' alumni would repay itself in local support and collaboration. In the meantime, however, aside from Tunisia, there were few Italian expatriate children in these strategic Mediterranean cities. Should not Italy, Pasquale Villari argued, instead spend money to educate illiterate Italians abroad? In 1901, from the government's foreign schools budget of one million lire, one-tenth was going to subsidies for Italian-American schools, while nine-tenths funded the Italian state schools for the children of Mediterranean elites.⁴⁷ Administration of the state schools from Rome was inefficient as well as expensive; the consul in Tunis, for example, sent a telegram in 1889 to the Italian foreign minister requesting urgent authorization for a toilet in the Crispi nursery school.⁴⁸ But the Italians of Tunisia rebuffed Villari's plea for change. They relied on the state schools as proof of Italian support for their colony, and the Dante committee of Tunis opposed reductions in state funding for any of the Mediterranean schools, arguing that Italy should apportion its support "not so much by the number of local Italians who would probably attend the schools, as much as by the stature and importance of Italy's traditional interests in these countries: it seems to us that Italy should teach those populations that sooner or later they will undoubtedly escape the current political regime [the Ottoman empire], spreading the essential ideas of Italy's modern civilization along with her language."⁴⁹ Such a policy would always favor territorial colonialism in the Mediterranean, rather than transnational communities that could be supported worldwide. The Tunis committee succeeded in vetoing Villari's proposal within the Dante Society, and little changed in the Italian government's approach to Mediterranean colonial schools.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *La Patria* 1, no. 6 (1912): 565; Istituto Coloniale Italiano, *Annuario dell'Italia all'estero e delle sue colonie* (Roma: Tipografia dell'Unione editrice, 1911), 395-437.

⁴⁷ Villari, "Discorso, XII Congresso dei rappresentanti dei comitati a Verona (26-29 September 1901)," 9.

⁴⁸ The relevant telegrams were intercepted and are translated into French in MAE, NS Tunisie 385, f. 285-415.

⁴⁹ Comitato di Tunisi, Società Dante Alighieri, to Pres. Prof. Villari in Firenze, 7 February 1902. Archivio Storico della Società Dante Alighieri, Sede Centrale, Rome, Fasc/1902 B12.

⁵⁰ Istituto Coloniale Italiano, *Annuario dell'Italia all'estero e delle sue colonie*, 395-437; Daniel J. Grange, *L'Italie et la Méditerranée (1896-1911). Les fondements d'une politique étrangère*, 2 vols. (Rome: École française de Rome, 1994).

At the heart of the Mediterranean, “Italian Tunisia” became implicated in nationalist calls for Italy to return to the conquest of ancient Roman territories. In 1908 and 1909, the novelist and playwright Enrico Corradini undertook a tour of Tunisia, Dalmatia, Istria, Brazil, and Argentina as a newspaper correspondent and representative of the Dante Alighieri Society.⁵¹ Corradini had long faced frustration as a theorist and advocate of Italian nationalism, but after viewing the conditions of Italian emigrants in the Mediterranean and South America, he launched a new campaign for vindication, imperialism, and “national socialism.” His Nationalist Association attracted a core group of very talented authors and journalists, who argued for the Italian conquest of Tunisia’s neighbor Libya.⁵² Gualtiero Castellini, the Nationalist Association’s secretary, published his book *Tunisi e Tripoli* in early March 1911. Castellini compared fertile Tunisia and Libya with unredeemed Italian Trent and Trieste under Austrian rule and claimed that Italy should expand southward, not eastward: “At Susa, I witnessed devotion to the Italian cause as great as the devotion of Zara and Gorizia.”⁵³ He argued that Italians’ success in Tunisia could be easily replicated in Libya. Despite these promises, the Italo-Turkish War for Libya in 1911-1912 proved immensely costly and was just the beginning of Italian warfare against Senussi tribesmen, which would last until 1931.⁵⁴

Gabriele d’Annunzio also used Tunisia to symbolize immigrant oppression and imperial salvation in his script for the grandiose film *Cabiria* (1914). Set in the Second Punic War and filmed on location in Tunisia, the epic follows little Cabiria as she is kidnaped from Sicily and enslaved in ancient Carthage. Just before she is to be sacrificed by fire to the god Moloch, she is rescued by a Roman nobleman and his faithful slave, the giant Maciste. Maciste is captured and chained to a millstone at the local mill, representing the entire saga of noble Italians oppressed abroad. Cabiria and Maciste are finally liberated by Rome’s imperial victory over Carthage. The character of Maciste became one of the most popular figures in all of cinematic history, starring in more than fifty feature films.⁵⁵

Italy’s “loss” of Tunisia in 1881, followed by Italians’ success in building up Tunisia’s port, roads, railways, industry, and trade, became fodder for the self-justification of Italian imperial

⁵¹ Enrico Corradini, “I nostri connazionali in Tunisia,” *Atti della Società Nazionale “Dante Alighieri” per la lingua e per la cultura italiana fuori del regno*, no. 33, July (1910): 6-7, 35-36.

⁵² Alexander J. De Grand, *The Italian Nationalist Association and the Rise of Fascism in Italy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978); Raffaele Molinelli, “Il nazionalismo italiano e l’impresa di Libia,” *Rassegna storica del Risorgimento* 53, no. 2 (1966): 285-318; Emilio Gentile, *La grande Italia. Ascesa e declino del mito della nazione nel ventesimo secolo* (Milano: Mondadori, 1997).

⁵³ Gorizia is today in Italy, but Susah or Sousse remains in Tunisia, and Zara is now Zadar, Croatia. Gualtiero Castellini, *Tunisi e Tripoli* (Torino: Bocca, 1911), xiii; see also Enrico Corradini, *Sopra le vie del nuovo impero. Dall’emigrazione di Tunisi alla guerra nell’Egeo. Con un epilogo sopra la civiltà commerciale, la civiltà guerresca e i valori morali* (Milano: Treves, 1912).

⁵⁴ Aghil Mohammed Barbar, “The Tarabulus (Libyan) Resistance to the Italian Invasion: 1911-1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1980); Francesco Malgeri, *La guerra libica (1911-1912)* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1970); Sergio Romano, *La quarta sponda. La guerra di Libia, 1911/1912* (Milano: Bompiani, 1977); Salvatore Bono, *Morire per questi deserti. Lettere di soldati italiani dal fronte libico 1911-1912* (Catanzaro: Abramo, 1992); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia*. 2 vols. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1986-1988.

⁵⁵ Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cinema perduto. Appunti di viaggio tra film e storia* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1981), 41-44, and *Cent’anni di cinema italiano* (Bari: Laterza, 2004), 1:50-62; Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 122-46; Giorgio Bertellini, “Italian Imageries, Historical Feature Films, and the Fabrication of Italy’s Spectators in Early 1900s New York,” in *American Movie Audiences*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 29-45; Riccardo Redi, *Cinema muto italiano (1896-1930)* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999).

motives in Africa as more deserving and more sincere. In contrast to the exploitation of French and British colonialists, Italians claimed the moral high ground in demographic colonialism, through the Fascist period and even under the Republic of Italy. Italy's first postwar foreign minister, Alcide De Gasperi, tried to resurrect earlier policies of colonial settlement. In August 1945, as part of the postwar negotiations, he wrote to the U.S. Secretary of State in an attempt to regain possession of Libya:

Before Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, democratic Italy never considered colonies as a tool for imperialism, but rather as a means for absorbing Italy's surplus manpower. Present democratic Italy considers them in this same light. . . . [The proposed] trusteeship . . . hardly corresponds to the peculiar necessities of the Italian colonies, owing to the difference between the Italian colonial conception and praxis founded on emigration and the Anglosaxon [*sic*] system mainly based on raw materials and markets.⁵⁶

But the debacle of Fascism had discredited De Gasperi's arguments. Italy was denied Libya, and the Italians of Tunisia never recovered their prominence. Under the pressure of military collapse, the Fascists had managed to rule Tunisia for only six months, from November 1942 until its liberation by Allied troops in May 1943. Fascist and nationalist propaganda had brought prominence to the Italian Tunisians' cause but had fatally compromised their long campaign for increased civil rights and political representation under French colonial rule.⁵⁷

Historical sources have sometimes been ignored in Italian colonial studies on the grounds that archives are difficult to use and (thereby) invalid and irrelevant.⁵⁸ The problems in Italy's colonial archives are indeed unusual, as many of the relevant materials were dispersed during the Nazi occupation of Rome and partially purged thereafter.⁵⁹ But this does not give academics leave to ignore the many resources available in Italy, France, Britain, and elsewhere. Contemporary history remains crucial to understanding the long-term effects of colonialism reverberating through Mediterranean culture and society. For example, Italy's transnational connections to the Italian expatriate community presage international developments in the twenty-first century. Italians of Tunisia participated in cross-Mediterranean networks that were subsidized by the Italian state, yet built upon populations outside of the state's territorial control. Like Italy, Greece has pursued similar policies in developing an expatriate "Greater Greece."⁶⁰ Emigrant remittances, loyal markets for exports, and accrued human capital through return

⁵⁶ "Exchange of Correspondence Concerning Italian Peace Treaty," *The Department of State Bulletin* (Washington, D.C.) 13/333 (1945): 764; see De Gasperi's 1949 speech on emigration, Zeffiro Ciuffoletti and Maurizio Degl'Innocenti, eds., *L'emigrazione nella storia d'Italia* (Florence, 1978), 2:234-35. Despite De Gasperi's efforts, the new United Nations made Libya immediately independent in 1951.

⁵⁷ Vito Magliocco, *La nostra colonia di Tunisi* (Milano: La Prora, 1933); J. Bessis, *L'Italie mussolinienne et la Tunisie* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1981); Romain Rainero, *La rivendicazione fascista della Tunisia* (Milano: Marzorati, 1978).

⁵⁸ Palumbo, *A Place in the Sun*, 5.

⁵⁹ Nicola Labanca, *In marcia verso Adua* (Torino: Einaudi, 1993).

⁶⁰ Lina Venturas, "'Deterritorialising' the Nation: The Greek State and 'Ecumenical Hellenism,'" in *Greek Diaspora and Migration since 1700*, edited by Dimitris Tziouvas (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009); Venturas, "Divergent Routes to the Study of the Diaspora in Post-War Greece and the USA," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 30:1 (2004): 121-42.

migration provided key advantages in economic development to both Italy and Greece. In coming decades, connections with expatriates will offer development opportunities for Albania, Turkey, Morocco, and other Mediterranean states. Rather than disintegrating nation-states and causing catastrophic instability, expatriate populations can support home countries with remittances and bring back skills with return migration. The history of European colonialism demonstrates that interstate connections across the Mediterranean basin can produce lasting benefits, as well as conflicts.

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