

From the Desert to the Camp: Colonial Internment, Ethnic Violence, and the Circulation of Imperial Practices from Libya to Fascist Europe

Pierluigi Bolioli

This paper explores the historical continuities between colonial internment and genocidal violence in Fascist Italy's empire, examining how experiences and ideologies forged during Italy's brutal pacification of Libya (1922–1932) shaped subsequent policies of civilian internment, racial persecution, and ethnic cleansing in Europe during the Second World War. By focusing on the Italian case—frequently marginalized in comparative imperial and Holocaust studies—this contribution investigates how practices developed in the context of settler colonialism and counterinsurgency in North Africa were transferred, adapted, and radicalized in the metropole and in occupied Europe. Drawing on archival sources from Italy, Switzerland, and the ICRC, the paper reconstructs the logic and infrastructure of Italy's colonial concentration camp system during the repression of the Senussi resistance in Cyrenaica, when over 100,000 Libyan civilians were forcibly displaced, interned in barbed-wire camps, and exposed to starvation and disease in what scholars have increasingly characterized as a genocidal episode. It then traces how Fascist officials, military officers, and colonial administrators—many of whom had direct experience in Libya—implemented internment and persecution measures against political opponents, Slavic populations, and Jews in the Dodecanese, the Balkans, and mainland Italy during WWII. Rather than drawing a linear causal line, the paper emphasizes the transimperial mobility of personnel, techniques, and imaginaries of violence: how the conceptualization of "unruly populations," "security zones," and "ethnic cleansing" in colonial contexts informed later practices of repression under Fascism. It argues that the Italian example illustrates a broader pattern of ideological and operational transfer, whereby colonial forms of rule did not vanish with the retreat from empire but instead found new expressions within European fascist regimes. By situating Fascist Italy's wartime internment camps—such as those in Gonars, Rab, and Ferramonti—within a longer genealogy of colonial control and racial governance, the paper contributes to the debate on imperial legacies and Nazi rule with a case that bridges Africa and Europe, colony and metropole. In doing so, it highlights the importance of southern European fascist regimes in discussions often dominated by the German experience and offers a comparative framework for understanding how imperial cultures of violence persisted and mutated in the age of total war.