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## Counting the Cost of War: the Great War's Economic Impact on Africa

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# By Hunger, if not by Arms: The Strategy of the Italian Control on Libya during the First World War

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## Abstract

The problem of food resources and their use as a tool of war arose with particular importance during the First World War: for many of the belligerent nations the hunger of the enemies became one of the weapons to use, proving itself sometimes as a more deadly and effective destructive element than traditional war instruments. This article examines the indiscriminate hunger war waged by the Italian government against the 'rebel' populations in Libya. From an Italian point of view, the hunger war in Libya was a winning one, allowing to preserve some territorial *enclaves* in the huge spaces that theoretically had become part of the Italian colonial territories after the end of the first Italian-Turkish war and the peace agreements of Ouchy with the use of the least possible military presence, and to maintain its sovereignty.

The hunger war had tragic results for the tribes of Libya that refusing Italian domination had lined up alongside the Ottoman Empire and its allied Austro-German forces. It is challenging to assess their quantitative size, but the losses caused by this war between the civilian population dug even deeper into the "blood furrow" that long separated the colonial conquerors and the local population.

**Keywords:** Libya, First World War, hunger war, war against the civilians, starvation

## Introduction

The problem of food resources and their use as a tool of war arose with particular importance during the First World War. Between 1914 and 1918, and in particular in the last two years, many of the belligerent nations had to face serious difficulties to

feed their populations, while the hunger of the enemies became one of the weapons to use, proving itself sometimes as a more deadly and effective destructive element than traditional war instruments.<sup>1</sup>

In recent decades there has been a deepening of historical research on this issue, as part of a more general theme concerning the 'economic war'.<sup>2</sup> The attention of scholars did not only concern European countries<sup>3</sup> but also turned to the countries of the Ottoman Empire involved in the conflict. In this context, particular attention has been paid to the territories of Ottoman Syria, where one of the most terrible famines occurred during the war.<sup>4</sup> One of the first insights dedicated to this theme has been Linda Schilcher's essay, *The Famine of 1915–1918 in Greater Syria* (Schilcher 1992). This famine had previously been interpreted as the result of the deliberate will of the Ottoman government to starve the Christian populations of the Lebanese mountain: Schilcher has highlighted how a multiplicity of factors contributed to that event, among which the most decisive was the maritime blockade of the Middle East coasts operated by the Royal Navy.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars examined the economic and environmental determinants of the tragedy that hit the Middle East in that period (Farshee 2014; Foster 2015; Tamari 2011; William 2014), and still, others have analyzed the traces left in popular memory, literature, and poetry (al-Qattan 2014a, 2014b). Several other scholars have studied this topic, also making use of the documents of the Ottoman archives and expanding the analysis from the coastal regions of Lebanon to internal Syria (Tarazi Fawaz 2014); some focused in particular on the consequences of the famine on Middle Eastern societies after the end of the war (Thompson 1999; Talha Çiçek 2017), highlighting their importance in the subsequent formation of societies in the territories of Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon.

In the region of the Ottoman Empire involved in the war, it was not only Great Syria that was affected by famine and hunger: this also happened in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. At the beginning of the war, these two territories had recently entered the orbit of Italian colonialism, and therefore strictly speaking they were no longer Ottoman. However, they had been claimed by the Ottoman government, which declared null and void the agreements of Ouchy sanctioning the loss of its last African possessions in October 1912.

I intend to examine in this article a particular aspect of the war that was fought there during the First World War: the indiscriminate hunger war, which (in the impossibility of fighting otherwise with the hope of victory) the Italian government waged against the 'rebel' populations. From a military point of view, the hunger war in the Libyan territories achieved the objectives of the Italian government: to preserve some territorial *enclaves* (an extremely limited part of the huge spaces that theoretically had become part of the Italian colonial territories after the end of the first Italian-Turkish war and the peace agreements of Ouchy) with the use of the least possible military presence, allowing Italy to maintain its sovereignty. This position had been kept even when the military hierarchies during the most difficult phases of the war (and in particular after

the Caporetto rout) had asked for the evacuation of the troops to strengthen the deployment to the northern borders of the peninsula.<sup>6</sup>

Undoubtedly the hunger war had tragic results for the tribes of Libya that refusing Italian domination had lined up alongside the Ottoman Empire and its allied Austro-German forces. It is challenging to assess their quantitative size, but the losses caused by this war between the civilian population dug even deeper into the "blood furrow"<sup>7</sup> that long separated the colonial conquerors and the local population.

### At the beginning of the hunger war: the difficult closure of the frontier in Cyrenaica

At the beginning of 1915, while the First World War yet raged in Europe, the Italian intervention was imminent: in this perspective the armed forces had to be concentrated on the northern borders of the peninsula and in the European theatre, reducing their employment in the territories overseas. After the withdrawal of all the other garrisons in Tripolitania in the summer of 1915, only the strongholds of Tripoli and al-Khums (Homs) remained under Italian control. After the evacuation of the most internal garrisons in Cyrenaica, the ports of Tobruk, Darna and Benghazi were still in Italian hands, and further inland, on the western and northern edges of the Jabal al-akhdar (the Green Mountain, the most populated region of Cyrenaica), al-Marj (Barce) and Shahat (Cyrene): the Sanusiyya brotherhood, under the leadership of the *shaykh al-kabir* Muhammad Ahmad al-Sharif (who headed it since 1902), controlled the rest of Cyrenaica and much of the Saharan territories.

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Even though the Ottoman Empire had entered the field against the Entente powers a few months before the Italian decision to participate in the conflict,<sup>8</sup> the events that took place in Cyrenaica in this interlude did not have a direct connection with the developments of the world conflict. Indeed, the Sanusiyya did not immediately take sides with the Ottoman sultanate but maintained good relations with the British administration of neighboring Egypt until the last months of 1915. These good relations allowed to recruit volunteers among the tribes loyal to the Brotherhood and to obtain supplies in the British-controlled territory of the goods and weapons necessary to continue the fight against the Italians. The trade with Egypt constituted a fundamental resource for the survival of the 'rebel' tribes of Cyrenaica, experiencing from the beginning of the occupation a serious situation of impoverishment and crisis: the trans-Saharan trade had gradually been exhausted and was no more possible to access the main markets and ports of the country under Italian control. Cyrenaica could not do without exchanges with the outside: the territory was not self-sufficient and the balance was possible only with the exchange of the products of the pastoral economy of the Bedouin tribes with the agricultural products (especially cereals and other basic consumer goods) and artifacts that came from outside.

Already from the beginning of the occupation, the Italian government watched impotently the normal commercial traffic of the Sanusis and Bedouin tribes with Egypt,

which met no obstacle on the British side:<sup>9</sup> in the opening of the eastern border and the permissiveness of Great Britain, Italy saw a hostile act, but above all the main reason for the continuation of the resistance of the Brotherhood. Previous diplomatic protests against the London government<sup>10</sup> turned from May 1915 into a request to consider the Sanusiyya and the Cyrenaican tribes as part of the enemy field. In the impossibility of controlling the border with its forces, the Italian government asked Great Britain to prevent any exchange and relationship between the two territories, and above all to close the passage to the men and weapons that were going to strengthen the enemy. The High Commissioner in Cairo, Henry MacMahon, refused the Italian request for a few months: he was, in fact, negotiating with Ahmad al-Sharif to make him an ally,<sup>11</sup> and the closure of the border would have been a reason for him to draw up in the opposite field. Ultimately, the Sanusiyya leader chose to fight on the Ottoman side: it was only after the attack by the Sanusi and Turkish-German forces against al-Sallum in November 1915 that the British command changed its strategy, closing the spaces of exchange and trade with Cyrenaica.<sup>12</sup> In March of the following year, the blockade became much more rigid, with the penalty of death sentences for those who supplied the Sanusi tribes with foodstuff or any other goods.<sup>13</sup> Since then, the living conditions of the populations have rapidly deteriorated: the tribes had no other source of supply from outside than the smuggling and the aid arriving by sea with the German submarines.

### **The only possible war: economic war**

The closure of the border and trade with the Bedouin tribes by Italy and its allies responded to a precise strategy aiming at starving the population to force them to surrender and submission: since the forces in the field prevented a military control of the territory, the only possible war became the economic one, or in more explicit terms, the war of hunger. Already at the end of 1915 General Giovanni Ameglio, Governor of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, recognized in a report to the Ministry of Colonies that it was not possible to control the 'rebels' with armed operations, while the cessation of hostilities and the rapprochement by some tribal groups to Italian positions were due only to the economic weapon,<sup>14</sup> that is, the need to obtain food in a situation of absolute necessity.

The supplies of weapons and foodstuff brought to the coast by German submarines (while the British and Italian naval units crossed along the coastal strip and made landing operations difficult), were generally intended for fighters and could not substitute the items imported from Egypt for the vital needs of the population. If previously the situation was not flourishing,<sup>15</sup> the events of the last months of 1915 and 1916 led to a further overburden, generalizing the famine among the non-submitted tribes.

Some scholars have argued that Ahmad al-Sharif's decision to march against Egypt, and therefore to openly take sides with the Ottoman Empire during the war, was motivated by the need to have access to the Egyptian resources necessary for survival.<sup>16</sup> Some

elements would militate in favor of this hypothesis, for example, the raids carried out by the Sanusis in the oases of the western Egyptian desert, or the fact that many groups of hungry non-combatants followed the troops in the hope of taking advantage of the occupation.<sup>17</sup> I believe, however, that the chronology of the events does not allow to say that this was the decisive reason for the choice of the Sanusi leader, since the closure of the border, as has been said, was after the attack on al-Sallum.

The weapon of hunger proved effective when in March 1916, a few months after the attack by Ahmad al-Sharif against Egypt, a member of the Sanusi family, Muhammad al-Hilal, surrendered to the Italian command in Tobruk, claiming that he decided to do it to remedy the terrible famine that was decimating the tribes loyal to him. The defection of Muhammad al-Hilal led to the submission of the 'Abaidat tribe and allowed the peaceful occupation of Burd Sulayman (later renamed Porto Bardia), roughly halfway between Tobruk and al-Sallum, in May 1916. In exchange, the foodstuff necessary for survival was distributed to the tribe, but in such quantities that it was not possible to improve the situation of the other non-submitted tribes. The instructions in this sense sent by the government were exhaustive, and the results appeared positive to the military command of the colony: "The concessions of foodstuff made by our markets, always contained within the limits set out in Circular 1349 of 4 March [1916], interpreted with strict restriction criteria, allowed us in the month for a further withdrawal of weapons (which overall from March to May yielded around 1,600 rifles and more than 100 pistols) and new submissions of chiefs. The advantages obtained from the application of the provisions on this matter seem to be considered of real and not doubtful importance, especially if commensurate with the quantity of foodstuff that may have been brought internally, in such proportions that they certainly cannot help to end famine and need. We nevertheless insisted on all the zone and garrison commands that the concessions themselves must be increasingly limited and subjected to the most rigorous control, to ensure that this weapon in our hands would be fully effective and derive the maximum possible yield from it".<sup>18</sup> This policy had been rigorously applied, and the results had been terrible. In fact, in the hope of finding help by submitting, part of the tribes moved to the Italian garrisons, which in most cases, however, did not have the material possibility of rescuing them: "Inland people [...] come to us to die of starvation. Several times we were forced in Tobruk to remove them. Yesterday woman dead exhausted within the town-walls".<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the conditions of the non-submitted tribes continued to deteriorate in the second half of 1916, so much so that the expeditionary force led by Ahmad al-Sharif in Egypt, who was withdrawing for fear of a British counter-offensive, had not been able to receive any reinforcement. The not many survivors had returned to Siwa in miserable conditions: many, besides hungry, were half-naked and covered themselves with pieces of tent fabric.<sup>20</sup> In al-Jaghbug, the oasis and holy city of Sanusiyya Brotherhood, the population had asked for help from Egypt, but had to be disappointed when Ahmad

al-Sharif exposed the deplorable state of his army: "If you saw the state of hunger and nakedness in which the fighters [arrived in Siwa from the Egyptian oases] find themselves, you would cry tears of blood"<sup>21</sup>

The livestock, the most important wealth of the Libyan tribes, slaughtered during the food crisis, had gradually decreased, and this also hampered the Sanusi military operations: the lack of camels, for example, had blocked the remaining troops of the expedition in Siwa, who could not move beyond the border without means of transport and who were cut down by malaria.<sup>22</sup> It was ultimately due to a no longer sustainable famine situation, and under the pressure of the chiefs of the tribes who urged him in this sense, that Muhammad Idris, cousin of Ahmad al-Sharif and in charge of the commandment of Cyrenaica in his absence, took the initiative to enter into peace negotiations with the British and Italian governments. So he recounts in his memoirs: "the situation of Cyrenaica was getting desperate [...]. The blockade of the coast had cut off supplies by sea and the shortage of food had been aggravated by a succession of droughts – a situation which caused the tribes to surrender one by one to the Italians in order to avoid starvation. [...] The Cyrenaicans [...] begged me to save them from the hardship"<sup>23</sup>

The seriousness of the food situation linked to climatic factors is confirmed by archival sources. In May 1916 the harvest of barley in the area of Cyrene, one of the most fertile of the Green Mountain, was considered scarce<sup>24</sup> and the following year also was negative for the agriculture, so much that in October 1917 the crop of dates was considered failed.<sup>25</sup> Negotiations with the Italian and English governments did not however come to a rapid conclusion and the tribes of Cyrenaica had to endure the plague of famine for several more months: only in mid-April 1917 an agreement for the cessation of hostilities was found in Bir 'Akrama (Àcroma in Italian toponymy), not far from the border with Egypt.<sup>26</sup> With this agreement Muhammad Idris and a part of the tribes loyal to him lined up in the Italo-British camp establishing a *modus vivendi* pending the end of the war: the agreement allowed the population to access the markets kept under control by the Italians, while Great Britain opened again the border with Egypt. If the conditions of the semi-nomadic tribes of Cyrenaica in the territory near Egypt could be considered gradually improving after the cessation of hostilities, this did not mean that famine and hunger stopped raging.

In the first months of 1918 the police stations of the Benghazi region forwarded the results of some reports of anthropophagy cases to the judicial authorities. The investigations that followed the disappearance of several children in the localities of al-Marj, Gheminès and Tukra revealed that the children had been murdered (in one case the corpse of a dead child had been unearthed) and that a part of their bodies had been cooked and eaten by some families or by "vagabonds" who had found refuge in the caves of the region.<sup>27</sup> Referring to the "murders that occurred in Cyrenaica for the purpose of anthropophagy"<sup>28</sup> the governor Ameglio stated that they were: "To be

considered as sporadic manifestations deriving from the serious economic difficulties – only partially mitigated by the supplies provided by the mother country – crossed by the colony due to consecutive years of famine [... causing] an awakening of bestial instincts, culminating in the wildest form of crime, cannibalism, limited to a few cases, fortunately, [...] in front of which the many cases of indigenous people who died of hunger without going to similar acts are noteworthy".<sup>29</sup> For his part, referring to these events and expressing his 'horror', Minister Colosimo in a few lines note ordered investigations "to ascertain the conditions of inhabited centers of our administration to come as far as possible to help those in urgent need".<sup>30</sup>

### **The war by hunger in Tripolitania: the use of the air weapon**

While in eastern Libya, after the Bir 'Akrama agreement, the food balance necessary for the survival of the populations was recovering, in Tripolitania the war continued and with it the use of the strategy of hunger already adopted in Cyrenaica.

Although almost all of the territory remained in the hands of the 'rebels', even in Tripolitania – as happened in Cyrenaica with the occupation of Porto Bardia – in 1916 a new coastal base was added to those controlled by Italian army: on 18 May 1916 colonial troops had landed in Zuwara. Despite being an interesting strategic point, the capture of Zuwara did not change much the situation: the Italian control included only the inhabited area and a fortified zone around it, while the surrounding territory was controlled by the Tripolitanian tribes who through smuggling had the opportunity to obtain supplies in nearby Tunisia, also receiving aids by the Austro-German navy through the Misrata base. In the first two years of the war, control on the border with Tunisia<sup>31</sup> was non-existent on the Italian side and difficult on the French side. At the end of 1914 and during 1915, the Tripolitanian fighters under the leadership of Khalifa bin Askar entered Tunisia attacking the French garrisons. Between August and October of 1915, French troops had to evacuate the whole territory south of the Dehibat-Remada line. After the occupation of Djeneien, in June 1916 Dehibat and Remada had been attacked and a French column had been destroyed.

A few thousand Tunisians in the southernmost area welcomed the Tripolitanian forces and took side with the anti-colonial *Jihad*. However, starting from Gabès and the advanced position of Tahtaouine, the French troops sent in reinforcement (about 15,000 men) managed to maintain control of the border between the coast and the Gebel thanks also to the Air Force (Martel 1991: 94–96). For the first time in the history of Africa, gas was used in Libya against the civilian population by French planes bombing Nalut (in theoretically Italian territory) in September 1916: since the 'rebels' took refuge inside the troglodytic dwellings sheltered from 'traditional' bombs, the French command decided to use gas (Manchon 2016: 162).<sup>32</sup>

The Air Force, initially used for reconnaissance purposes, became an instrument of terror and reprisal against the civilian population that was used not only by the French



but also by the Italians, with bombings that aimed to destroy food resources during the cereal harvest season. Starting from the analysis of the archival documents, which are not particularly numerous on this topic, it is possible to argue that the use of the Air Force against the civilian population occupied in agricultural work had been in operation since the beginning of the war. A testimony in this sense is a letter sent to the military command of Tripoli by Sulayman al-Baruni<sup>33</sup> a few days after his arrival in Tripolitania in late 1916. Al-Baruni had read to the large crowd who came to welcome him upon his landing in Misrata the decree of the sultan who proclaimed him "Governor of *Vilayet* of Tripoli and Commander of the Muslim troops of the region"<sup>34</sup> and in a letter to General Ameglio had stigmatized an episode that happened just on that occasion, on 9 December 1916, when an Italian plane came to throw propaganda flyers on the crowd. After this operation, the Italian plane had made a more bloody one "The airplane committed an inhuman and uncivilized act, that is, that of throwing the bomb on the poor people plowing".<sup>35</sup>

For al-Baruni this action revealed the barbarity of the Italian armed forces and was considered particularly reprehensible, adding to others already committed by the colonial government. Threatening retaliation, so al-Baruni concluded his missive: "I had decided, after my arrival in Misrata, to be generous with your prisoners as our religion prescribes [...], but I abstained from it when I learned of the mistreatment and killings of our brothers exiled and unjustly detained by you as well as of the offenses to their religious sentiments [...]. There is no forgiveness for those who win through injustice".<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to underline that al-Baruni in this letter links the killing of farmers intent on the plowing works by the Italian aviator to other repressive measures against the civilian population implemented by the colonial authorities since the early days of the conquest: it is evident his horror for the war against civilians, which, however, crosses the limits of the two camps facing each other.

### **The destruction of food reserves: escape attempts and international negotiations**

All the tools available were used to starve the population and break their will to resist, from the raids of detachments that aimed to destroy the foodstuff reserves to the use of the Air Force. One example can be found in one of the periodic reports sent to Rome on military operations during the spring of 1917, just before the harvest season: "During the month [of April 1917] the actions of the [12th] Squadron [Caproni] partly aimed to set fire on the rebel barley fields; in fact, 18 bombings were carried out, of which 9 with 162 m/m incendiary bombs on the fields of Zanzur, Zavia, Sorman. [...] A total of 1,270 kilos of incendiary liquid was thrown".<sup>37</sup> This strategy of destruction would not have the expected effects if the populations were able to receive supplies from Tunisia, or if they had had the opportunity to emigrate: for this reason the Italian government asked the French government to block the frontier, obtaining its agreement at the end of March 1917.<sup>38</sup>

The upheavals of the war and the hunger strategy had terrible effects among the populations: from the Jabal al-gharbi, mostly inhabited by a Berber population, most people had moved to the coast, helping to exacerbate the shortage that the whole region suffered from. In al-'Ujailat, where al-Baruni had established his headquarters, the population cut down the palms to feed on the edible part of their trunk, while the "privates of the mehallas [were] forced to feed on grass".<sup>39</sup> When, after the Italian occupation, Zuwara became a place of refuge for the inhabitants of the Berber mountain, the Tripoli government had found itself in the need to feed about 2,500 refugees (to which were added the Berber volunteers who had joined the colonial forces),<sup>40</sup> while from Rome the Ministry of Colonies ordered to suspend any expenses for the maintenance of the '*inabili*', i.e. all persons unable to work or unfit for military service. General Ameglio responded to this injunction with a refusal: to implement it would mean condemning more than two thousand human beings to starve to death. However, he undertook to cut expenditure by half,<sup>41</sup> that is, to reduce the already scarce food rations by half.

The crisis facing the non-submitted tribes had clear positive implications for the strategy implemented by the military command of Tripoli, which observed how the continuing famine situation, the adverse climatic conditions and the delays in payments of the volunteers enlisted from Sulayman al-Baruni had caused a widespread and intolerable condition of misery for the populations, who in increasing numbers expressed their intention to submit.<sup>42</sup> The governor Ameglio underlined in his dispatches to Rome how in the whole of western Tripolitania the population was decimated due to war, hunger and the spread of epidemics.<sup>43</sup>

However, the Tripoli government believed that the French authorities did not control the border with all the necessary rigor, openly accusing the French *Résident Général* in Tunis of welcoming the Tripolitanian refugees who asked to expatriate, not for humanitarian reasons, but to employ Libyan labor in the mining areas in Southern Tunisia. Indeed, the French and Italian governments had conflicting priorities in the Maghribian territories. On the French side, the war effort always required new quantities of manpower, especially in the mines. The local labor force was insufficient and traditionally the mining basins of the Gafsa region received, already before the Italian occupation of Libya, a considerable contribution of Tripolitanian workers: this contribution had decreased due to the war events and would disappear because of the blockade.<sup>44</sup> On the Italian side, the primary requirement was to close the border, as has been said, to starve the non-submitted tribes.

In the course of the negotiations which took place since the last months of 1916, the Italian government, to consent to the legal emigration of Libyan workers from the areas under its control, asked in exchange for the reinforcement of the French action at the border to prevent the immigration of the 'rebels'.<sup>45</sup> In fact, several episodes in which some hundreds of Tripolitans passing the border were sent to work in Tunisian

yards<sup>46</sup> seemed to demonstrate that the French authorities were inclined to welcome all those who moved from Tripolitania to Tunisia without creating any obstacles.

Finding a balance between the different goals was difficult and complicated the negotiations: for example, the French *Résident Général* in Tunis, Alapetite, rejected in 1916 the Italian request for 10,000 quintals of Tunisian barley,<sup>47</sup> while requesting through the French embassy in Rome an agreement to bring into Tunisia "the valid Tripolitarians who came with their families to ask the Tunisian outposts for work".<sup>48</sup> The governor of Tripolitania affirmed that this proposal would weaken the blockade so that this and other requests of the same tenor were refused.<sup>49</sup>

The French government claimed that the passage to Tunisia had been allowed not to rebels, but to groups of desperate people fleeing a situation of extreme misery and famine that would have simply died of hunger at the border if they had been prevented from passing. It would have been very difficult to enforce the order to reject their co-religionists from Libya (thus condemning them to die of starvation) to the indigenous troops who controlled the border: "You have to take into account [...] the reluctance of the indigenous soldiers, alone capable of performing this service, to pitilessly drive back women and children dying of hunger".<sup>50</sup>

### Humanitarian or utilitarian reasons?

The reference to humanitarian reasons that prevented from barring the border was interpreted by the Italian authorities as a hypocritical pretext used by France to hide a more meanly utilitarian reason: to attract Tripolitanian populations to Tunisia. However, it could not be denied that the flight to Tunisia was the result of a precise war policy against civilians implemented by the governments of Tripoli and Rome, to which France had given his agreement. In fact, at the end of March 1917 the various issues seemed resolved, and the two sides entered into an agreement on the closure of the border which would have prevented any passage of goods, 'rebels' or workers between Tunisia and Tripolitania.

Destruction and hunger raged throughout the territory not only because of the Italian military operations but also for revenge and retaliation by the Turkish troops. In Zawiya the commander of the Ottoman forces, Ishaq Pasha, ordered to cut down all the palms owned by the inhabitants of the region who had chosen the Italian side, in particular the Berber population, so that "Where flourishing palm groves stood, vast, desolate clearings now open. In el-Agelat there are few palm trees left standing, all the others have been razed to the ground".<sup>51</sup> On the Gebel, Yafran was reduced to ruin: as we read in a report dating after the end of the war, all the houses had been looted or demolished, and the city was almost totally depopulated.<sup>52</sup> The situation was the same in Nalut.

In the last two years of the war, and especially between the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918, the famine in Tripolitania had worsened and many sought to cross

the border as the only mean of escaping death. At the frontier the situation showed all its horror. One of the periodic reports sent to the *Résident Général* in Tunis in early 1918 reads: "Our border posts repelled 275 starving, and buried 25 corpses on the spot. Certain groups of natives, unable to drag themselves further, park near the posts awaiting death".<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, in Tunisia and France, the effort for war production required more and more manpower, whatever its origin,<sup>54</sup> and in early February 1918 the French government found a way to get around the Italian refusal through an agreement between the Resident General of Tunis, Alapetite, and the Governor General of Algeria, Jonnart, according to which: "The Tripolitarians who, driven by hunger, implore French assistance to the frontier can be considered as prisoners of war and treated as such, transporting them to Algerian territory to remain gathered, if necessary".<sup>55</sup>

Facing the Italian protests, Alapetite responded by minimizing the number of Tripolitarians crossing the frontier; as for smuggling, he claimed that, following Paris instructions, border authorities strictly enforced the blockade. The quantities of supplies to the 'rebels' crossing the border were very limited. This was demonstrated by the famine that raged in Libya, lightened by smuggling if not in minimal quantities: "It is [...] undeniable that great misery is rife, precisely in West Tripolitania and more than in any other region of insurgent Libya. Tunisia repelled 2,165 people starving from January 1 to March 1 [1918]; 124 died as a result of the hardships they endured".<sup>56</sup>

18 Faced with the *fait accompli*, the Italian government could not modify the French decision to treat the refugees as prisoners of war, if not protesting for the formal incorrectness of its ally. Among other things, there was the risk that in front of an open opposition to a provision with implicit humanitarian motivations, Italy would be accused of conducting a policy of extermination by starvation against the whole population. Minister Colosimo, faced with this prospect that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seemed to fear, defended his position in favor of absolute blockade by stating that "The rigorous blockade is a legitimate weapon of war, especially against rebel subjects, intending to obtain the surrender of the enemy by starvation [...]. The starvation of the rebels is, therefore, a consequence, albeit sad and painful, but natural and essential, of the blockade and the use of feelings of humanity and legal subtleties to justify a real circumvention of it, constitutes for us a weakening of the defense of the colony and a failing in the fundamental duty to protect the safety of our soldiers and our settlers, and for Tunisia, a failing in an equally precise duty such as that of cooperation in the blockade, made compulsory by the declaration of 28 Mar. 1917".<sup>57</sup>

To show the bad faith of the Paris' government on an issue that in his opinion had no real humanitarian motivation, the Minister underlined some news from the mining areas of Tunisia, according to which a part of the Libyan subjects employed there had been transferred to France,<sup>58</sup> contrary to all agreements. In front of these episodes, the

Ministry of Colonies reiterated the need to take an uncompromising position, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed: "The opportunity to agree, albeit partially, to the French government propositions, to have it favorable and well disposed in other complex issues affecting the politics of the two countries".<sup>59</sup>

### Some conclusive considerations

The hunger war waged by the colonial government against the 'rebel' populations of Libya during the First World War had a different duration in the two territories of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. In eastern Libya it lasted from November 1915 to May 1917, although its consequences were felt at least until the middle of 1918. It is extremely difficult to strike the balance of human losses among the civilian population during this period. In the absence of specific statistical data, only conjectures can be made, based on general data, which are also rare and not entirely sure.

Two data in particular, in my opinion, can constitute a reference framework for eastern Libya: the Ottoman census for the Barqa *vilayet* (roughly corresponding to the colonial Cyrenaica) of 1911, made a few months before the Italian expedition, which had counted 198,345 individuals throughout the territory (with the exclusion of the Kufra oasis group in the extreme south) (Corò 1937: 20), and the numerical estimates made by the Cyrenaica government published in the early 1920s, with 185,400 inhabitants (Governo della Cirenaica 1922-1923: 444). The two figures highlight the demographic regression that occurred during the first decade of the Italian occupation: a decrease of about 6.5% over the whole period. This regression must be considered caused by the losses suffered by the population due to the upheaval of socio-economic and political conditions in the period 1911-1917, that is, from the beginning of the Italian military operations to the agreement for the cease fire in 'Akrama. Assuming a constant demographic dimension in normal conditions, the losses due to the war operations, famine and hunger would seem to be between 10,000 and 15,000 units, reaching and exceeding 20,000 if we take into account that the total population in the early 1920s also included the Italians, almost all of whom arrived after the conquest began.<sup>60</sup> If we take into account the emigration to the neighboring territories (in particular to Egypt), which took place especially in the years immediately following 1911, this figure should be reduced by an amount impossible to define.

Accustomed, as we are, to the much more consistent figures in absolute values of the human losses caused by the war, this figure may not seem particularly significant, but on the contrary, it assumes all its importance if we take into account the scarce population of the region.<sup>61</sup> To the contemporary observers, the losses among the Bedouin population seemed much more important: one of them, in an article published in 1921, came to affirm that: "Two years of war and three years of guerrilla warfare [therefore in the five-year period 1912-1917] had [...] completely paralyzed the country reducing

it to the most squalid misery; this was joined by the plague and smallpox and together they were worth – the figure is not exaggerated – to reduce the Cyrenaic population by a good third”.<sup>62</sup>

In western Libya the duration was longer, covering practically the entire period of the World War. However, the size of human losses would appear to be smaller in Tripolitania, where the population figures between 1911 and the early 1920s do not register a great variation.<sup>63</sup> In a previous paper of mine, I hypothesized that: “in Tripolitania the gross consistency of the figures would calculate the losses in a number equal to the failure to grow in a normal situation ([...] a few tens of thousands of units?)” (Cresti, Cricco 2012: 91).

It is extremely problematic to add other hypotheses to those just made, for the rarity of statistical documents; we must surrender in front of the dissatisfaction and doubt that remain after the analyses, all the more considering that the general data to which we referred (which roughly include the first decade of the Italian occupation) do not allow in any way to reach any certainty on the numbers of human losses among the civilian population limited to the period of the First World War, nor to make any distinction between the losses of the civilian population and those of the combatants.

The hunger war waged in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica by the Italian military command in agreement with the central government was an important part of the tragedy that hit the civil populations of Libya during the First World War. As in many other countries involved in the war a precise military strategy considered the civilians as a legitimate target (Bianchi 2006), in a progressive barbarization of the control tactics of the territory that took shape during the First and culminated in the Second World War.

One can undoubtedly speak of barbarization when the war is waged against an entire population: the hunger war affects first of all its weakest portion (women, old people, children), but it is important to underline how in the Libyan case the documents containing humanitarian considerations – as we have seen – are very rare. One of these affirms that the indigenous soldiers (of the French army, perhaps because they are Muslims?) have some difficulty in definitively condemning hungry women and children, who at the Tunisian border implore the passage; another states that humanitarian reasons are a hypocritical pretext that hides much less edifying purposes; in a third, perhaps the most terrible, a Minister of the Colonies assimilates humanitarian reasons to “subtleties”, stating that the weapon of hunger is a “legitimate weapon of war” in defense of national interests.<sup>64</sup> Only a Foreign Minister had the audacity to very timidly advance the distant hypothesis that the death by starvation of a part of the Libyan population could be considered a crime of which in the future someone could have been held responsible.

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## NOTES:

1 - Of the approximately 13 million civilians who died as a result of the First World War, it has been estimated that around 10 million starved to death (Hoover 1951: 289), while about 9 million soldiers had fallen on the battlefield.

2 - On the general theme of the 'economic war', which was an important part in the conduct of the First World War, used to varying degrees by all the fighting powers, see the synthesis of Kramer (2014). For a general overview of the British naval blockade and its consequences on the different countries involved in the war see Bianchi (2010).

3 - See for example Offer (2000), Weinreb (2017 - in particular ch. 1, *The Geopolitics of Total War. Food in the First World War*). I wish to thank Massimo Zaccaria for these and other bibliographical suggestions.

4 - "Starvation deaths in the Levant - in the territories that currently include Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Gaza Strip - have recently been estimated at 500,000, of which 200,000 in Lebanon alone, a huge figure considering that before the conflict, Lebanon had no more than 400,000 inhabitants" (Bianchi 2010: 20).

5 - On the food problems of the Middle East during the First World War, see Schulze Tanielian (2014a). By the same author see also Schulze Tanielian (2014b), and the most recent monograph (Schulze Tanielian 2017).

6 - After Caporetto, General Cadorna asked the government for the concentration of all metropolitan troops and their withdrawal from Albania and Libya (Clodomiro 2012: 319).

7 - The Governor of Tripolitania, General Caneva, used for the first time this expression after the massacres of civilians that followed the battle of Shara al-Shatt on 23 October 1911 (Tuccari 1994: 307).

8 - Great Britain and France delivered the declaration of war in Istanbul on 5 November 1914: three days later the Ottoman Caliph proclaimed the *Jihad*, calling all the Muslims to the insurrection in the territories dominated by enemy nations.

9 - "The Grand Master is now in the city of Sollum [...] to supply the logistical services [...] and to recruit the troops of that region", in Archivio storico del Ministero dell'Africa italiana (ASMAI), Libya 122 / 6-47, *Information note of 22 Feb. 1915*, Roma, 22 February 1915. See Del Boca (1993: 313, n. 166). Al-Sallum (Sollum in Italian documents) and its bay were under the control of an Anglo-Egyptian garrison.

10 - See Ministero degli Affari Esteri (1973), n. 435 and passim. Horatio H. Kitchener, at the time British High Commissioner in Cairo, had expressed his annoyance in the face of Italian protests, replying: "Italy must occupy its border and [...] prevent supplying for the rebels", ASMAI, Libya 134/9-59, *Ciano to Comando Marina*, Roma, 27 June 1915.

11 - The British government feared an armed action against the Suez canal from Libyan territory at a time when war operations engaged a large part of its forces on the Dardanelles and on the Gallipoli peninsula, see McKale (1998: 147-148).

12 - The closure to the transit of foodstuff to Cyrenaica was communicated from Cairo to the British government on 20 November 1915, see Bernini (1999: 307).

13 - ASMAI Libya, 143/3, *Ambasciata Cairo to Ministero delle Colonie* (MC), Roma, 19 March 1916. See also Bernini (1999: 308), Biasutti (2004: 160, n. 412).

14 - ASMAI, Libya 134/11, 71: *Ameoglio to MC*, Roma, 30 December 1915. See Biasutti (2004: 160): "Ameoglio [who previously supported the need for a military offensive to force Senussia to surrender...] was forced to admit that the economic factor was the only means of offense and defense".

15 - The difficult living conditions of the people of Cyrenaica are already highlighted in a newsletter from mid-1915, ASMAI, Libya, 134/9, 59, *Ameoglio to MC*, Roma, 22 July 1915.

16 - According to Evans-Pritchard, the tribal chiefs in favor of an attack on Egypt "were supported by the strongest advocate: hunger" (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 127).

17 - Even in the Egyptian oases, however, the food situation at that time was precarious: the non-combatant groups following the expedition had been reduced to living "on the alms of the mohafzia and stealing from the inhabitants", ASMAI, Libya 143/5-36 from Cairo, *Tosti di Valminuta to Ministero degli Affari Esteri* (MAE), Roma, 7 November 1916. On the raids, see *Lettera del Seied Mohammed Idris al Seied Ahmed Esc Scerif* (20 gennaio 1917), in Serra (1933: 174).

18 - ASMAI, Libya 134/13: Governo della Cirenaica, Ufficio politico militare, *Relazione mensile*, maggio 1916, pp. 5-6. Several circulars by Ameoglio ordering to prevent the supply of food and restrict access to markets in ASMAI, Libya 134/13-87.

19 - ASMAI, Libya 134/13-83: from Tobruk, *Como to Ministero Marina*, Roma, 15 May 1916.

- 20 - ASMAI, Libia 143/5-37, *Estratto dal Bollettino*, n. 43, Roma 24 Decem 1916.
- 21 - Ahmad al-Sharif's letter is published by Serra (1933: 162).
- 22 - ASMAI, Libia 143/5-37, *Estratto dal Bollettino*, without number, Roma, 7 November 1916.
- 23 - De Candole (1990: 31). The author of this volume was a British ambassador to monarchical Libya.
- 24 - ASMAI, Libia, 134/13, Governo della Cirenaica, Ufficio politico militare, *Relazione mensile*, cit., p. 9.
- 25 - ASMAI, Libia 134/16-109, *Ameglio to MC*, 13 Oct. 1917.
- 26 - On the preliminary negotiations with Idris and the Bir 'Akrama agreements, see Del Boca (1993: 335-341).
- 27 - ASMAI, Libia 150/2-14, Roma. Some of the culprits after the capture had been affected by the plague.
- 28 - *Ibid.*, *Ameglio to MC*, Roma, 9 June 1918.
- 29 - *Ibid.*
- 30 - *Ibid.*, *MC to Governo della Tripolitania* (GT), Roma, 21 May 1916.
- 31 - The frontier between the Ottoman *vilayet* of Tripoli and the Tunisian territory under the French protectorate (about four hundred kilometers, from the Mediterranean coast to Ghadamis) was delimited between November 1910 and February 1911.
- 32 - On the bombing of 15 September 1916, after which the plane of Lieutenant Colonel Le Boeuf was missing, see several documents in ASMAI, Libya 125/2, 21: the French government had asked the Tripoli authorities to participate in the search for Le Boeuf, while the Italian government wondered if it was appropriate to protest against the French unauthorized air-raid in Tripolitanian territory.
- 33 - Sulayman al-Baruni, a member of one of the prominent families of the Berber mountain, was elected to the parliament of Istanbul in 1908. He was among the organizers of the resistance against the colonial invasion and in late 1912 proclaimed a national government (*hukuma al-wataniyya*) in Yafran. He was later appointed senator by the Ottoman caliph, who sent him to Libya to organize the popular struggle against the forces of the Entente.
- 34 - ASMAI, Libia 150/14-59, *al-Baruni to Ameglio*, Roma, 19 December 1916, in Pagano (2018: 289).
- 35 - *Ibid.*
- 36 - *Ibid.*
- 37 - ASMAI, Libia 122/15-125, *Comando delle truppe della Tripolitania, Relazione mensile del mese di aprile 1917*, p. 8 (see also Del Boca 1993: 328), Roma. Incendiary bombings on barley fields in the area of al-Maia, west of Janzur, are mentioned in: *ibid.*, *GT to MC*, Roma, 18 April 1917.
- 38 - ASMAI, Libia 122/20-171, *Colosimo to MAE*, 9, Roma, August 1918, p. 5.
- 39 - ASMAI, Libia 122/15-123, *Ameglio to MC*, Roma, 18 February 1917.
- 40 - At the beginning of 1917 there were 2,479 refugees in Zuwara, while the Berber fighters, gathered in the company of Fassato ('banda di Fassato'), were 665: *ibid.*, *Colosimo to GT*, Roma, 1 February 1917. In another document, Ameglio states that within Zuwara "about 30,000 inhabitants and refugees are massed" and that "the failure of the negotiations for the passage of the workforce in Tunisia, which could have constituted a relief valve, has come to aggravate an already disturbing state of affairs". ASMAI, Libia 122/16-134, *Ameglio to MC, Situazione politica della Libia*, 18 May 1917.
- 41 - *Ibid.*, *Ameglio to MC*, Roma, 5 February 1917.
- 42 - ASMAI, Libia 122/16-131, *GT, Ufficio politico militare* (UPM), *Notiziario*, n. 7, Roma, 6-12 February 1917.
- 43 - ASMAI, Libia 122/15-123, *Ameglio to MC*, Roma, 26 February 1917.
- 44 - On the labor crisis in Tunisian mining basins following the outbreak of the war, see Dougui (1995: 222).
- 45 - "The inexorable closure of the Tunisian border to the rebels" was to be the *sine qua non* condition to negotiate with the French government a highly controlled emigration of workers to Tunisia. ASMAI, Libia 122/15-123: *Ameglio to MC*, Roma, 26 February 1917.
- 46 - ASMAI, Libia 122/15-123, *MC to GT*, 2 Feb. 1917.
- 47 - ASMAI, Libia 122/15-123, *L'Ambasciata di Francia al R. Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, Roma, 16 February 1917. "[In Tunisia] a poor harvest in 1916, an average in 1917 and a very good one in 1918 followed one another]", Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, *Papiers d'Agents- Archives Privées, Inventaire*, vol. I, p. IV.
- 48 - ASMAI, Libia 122/15-123: *L'Ambasciata di Francia...*, cit., p. 1.
- 49 - ASMAI, Libia 122/15-124: *Ameglio to MC*, Roma, 4 March 1917. Requests for sending Tripolitanian workers to French mines also continued later: see *ibid.*, *Barrère to MAE*, Roma, 18 May 1917.



- 50 - *Ibid.*, MAE (De Martino) to MC (Colosimo), Roma, 30 March 1917, with enclosed note by the French Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (2 March 1917).
- 51 - ASMAI, Libia 122/20-171, *GT-UPM, La situazione politico-militare nell'interno secondo le informazioni riferite dall'ufficiale turco Teufich Namur*, Roma, 12 June 1918.
- 52 - ASMAI, Libia 122/22-195, *Menzinger to MC*, Roma, 8 October 1919.
- 53 - Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (ANOM), Coll. *Affaires politiques*, 1427, d.4 (*Sud tunisien et Tripolitaine*): *Extrait du rapport hebdomadaire du Service des Affaires indigènes*, 15 January 1918.
- 54 - The French government asked with great urgency to recruit in Libya 2,000 new miners at least, intending to increase by 6,000 tons per month the digging out of lead and zinc for the war production. Cfr. ASMAI, Libia 122/20-171, *Sonnino to Colosimo*, 22 July 1918.
- 55 - ASMAI, Libia 122/15-123, *L'Ambasciata di Francia al R. Ministero degli Affari Esteri...* cit., p. 2.
- 56 - *Ibid.*, MAE Paris to Ambassade d'Italie, Roma, s.d. (post 22 April 1918).
- 57 - ASMAI, Libia 122/20-171, *MC to MAE (Passaggio di indigenti...)*, cit., p. 5. On 28 March 1917 the French government signed the Italian-British agreement of 31 July 1916 against smuggling on the Libyan borders (see Clodomiro 2012: 336).
- 58 - The news came from Consul Bottesini, according to which "most of the Tripolitani, who had been sent to work at the Kalagerda mine, left for France with a team of workers", ASMAI, Libia 122/20-171, *MAE to MC*, Roma, 27 July 1918.
- 59 - *Ibid.*, *Colosimo to Sonnino*, 22 August 1918.
- 60 - "The census of 1 December 1921 in Cyrenaica included 9,402 Italians, of whom 8,100 with habitual residence" (Mondaini 1927: 535).
- 61 - The percentage value increases, and can reach and exceed 10% or more, if it applies only to that part of the population that actually suffered the losses, that is the nomadic population (about 150,000 individuals).
- 62 - The figures proposed by Lo Bello in two different articles have no statistical basis and are inconsistent: in a subsequent paper he states that "by the end of the year 1914, two good thirds of the Cyrenaic population had disappeared. From about three hundred thousand souls at the time of the Italian occupation, four years later Cyrenaica was reduced to just one hundred and twenty thousand souls" (Lo Bello 1925: 25). Both Mondaini (1927: 374) and Evans-Pritchard (1949: 120) consider the figures proposed by Lo Bello improbable. Evans-Pritchard affirms that with such high losses it would not have been possible for the Bedouin tribes of Cyrenaica to resist the colonial conquest until the early 1930s (*ibid.*).
- 63 - As for Tripolitania, a little less than 525,000 inhabitants were calculated in 1911, and 550,000 in 1921 (of which 18,000 Italians, arrived almost totally after 1911, as in Cyrenaica).
- 64 - As Massimo Zaccaria and Karin Pallaver (who read this text and made me aware of their considerations and whom I thank here) have pointed out to me, "during the First World War the food weapon was used almost everywhere, especially in Europe, where Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia were the empires that suffered the most. Britain had a real Ministry of Blockade, so when Colosimo claimed that it was a legitimate weapon in defense of national interests, it conformed to a way of thinking widely shared both within the *Entente* and in the Central Empires". Without forgetting that the international conventions on the conduct of the war that had followed the conferences in The Hague (1899 and 1907) and London (1909) had recognized precise guarantees for the protection of civilians in case of war - and that therefore the civil commands and soldiers who transgressed these guarantees did so choosing to ignore "a principle deeply rooted in the common moral sense" (Bianchi 2010: 4) - it seems to me that transferring the barbarization to an international scale does not change much the terms of the problem. Without forgetting, also, that in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica the Italian government hit with hunger and starvation those who claimed to be its subjects.

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