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

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"Not a Hectare of Land Shall Remain Uncultivated this Year!"¹ Food Provisions for Italy and the Role of the Colonies, 1917–1918

Massimo Zaccaria

Abstract

In 1917 Italy launched a plan for the "valorisation" of the colonies in support of the war effort. Under the motto of "Ask the Motherland for as little as possible and give her as much as possible", Italian colonies were asked to quickly achieve self-sufficiency in basic commodities and then come to the aid of the "Motherland". An ambitious plan that soon encountered failure. Nevertheless, to achieve these aims there was no hesitation to impose cultivations, exploiting all the available land and forcing the farmers to work the land normally left fallow, dedicating the labour to the war effort. This essay explores the effects of this policy in each Italian colony, focusing on the reasons behind the poor results and the reactions of the farmers to these requests.

Keywords: First World War, Africa, Italian colonies, colonial economy, food production

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Introduction

In an interview published in *La Tribuna* on 30 January 1918, the Minister of Colonies, Gaspare Colosimo, offered an overview of the contribution of the colonies to the Italian war effort: "What has Eritrea, the faithful and old Eritrea, given? Be it content with the bare and eloquent enumeration: *meat, hides, doum palm, cereals, potassium, soldiers* [*italics in the original*]. What has Somalia given? *Hides, sorghum* (for around 15 million quintals for equine feed), *corn, cotton, beans*. The Colony then provides for its food demands almost exclusively with its own strength, asking nothing of the Motherland.

[...] What has Libya given? It was not allowed, for the difficulties of the moment, to exploit all the resources at its disposal; and yet the Motherland has received sheep from Cyrenaica, in the sense that the sheep have constituted, in part, the supplies for the colonial troops at first exclusively purveyed from the Kingdom; and they were also exported to Sicily. Along with the cow, goat and sheep skins [...]. But the product that our country very much benefits from is given by the *wools*, excellent also for the manufacture of military fabrics. Many thousands of quintals of wool have arrived in Italy, especially from Cyrenaica. Much greater, in terms of significance and as a consequence on the war economy, is the contribution that has been requested of Libya in regard to the manpower to be deployed in the war industries".²

A flattering balance that, a few months later, led the Member of Parliament Carlo Schanzer, President of the seventh section of the Commission for the Post-War Period – the one dedicated to the "Colonial Questions" – to remark: "[...] the colonies have been valorised for the purposes of our war and have made a large contribution in terms of foodstuffs, raw materials and manpower to the Motherland".³ This was the image that everyone agreed on: the colonies had not only been sufficient for themselves, but had even contributed to the needs of the Motherland. In particular, Eritrea and Somalia had distinguished themselves in this mission, repaying Italy that "not in vain has deployed in Africa substantial economic and financial resources of its own".⁴ Reading the publications of those years it is also possible to identify a slogan, all in all effective in summarising the expectations of the Motherland towards her colonies, which was echoed from publication to publication, a true and proper watchword: "Ask the Motherland for as little as possible and give her as much as possible" (Malvezzi de' Medici 1917: 82); and then a sort of mantra: that detailed enumeration of what has been given by the colonies, which was supposed to dispel any doubts concerning the contribution of the Italian colonies. Sheltered from any critical evaluation, over the years this reconstruction ended up being sedimented in the stories of Italian colonialism, at least those willing to dedicating a space to the Great War.⁵ A more detached gaze would have no difficulty in realising how this literature is mostly tied to the Ministry of Colonies and to the "colonial party" (Monzali 2008), environments that strove to give the colonial question centrality with the Paris Peace Conference impending. Declaiming the "contribution of the Colonies for the Motherland" was therefore the most effective way to legitimise Italy's expansionist aspirations.

If the debate on the impact of the First World War on Africa was dominated by the human factor in its military and civilian component, the analysis of the economic impact allows us to offer a war geography that is more accurate and less bound to military and political history (Compagnon, Purseigle 2016: 52). Africa was not only a reserve of soldiers and workers, but also provided resources and, in many territories, the war needs oriented the decisions on what and how to cultivate, a dimension that nevertheless is still little investigated (Laṭīfa Muḥammad Sālim 2009; Dīnā 'Abd al-

Hamīd Muhammad, Laṭīfa Muḥammad Sālim 2016). This article focuses on the food contribution that it was hoped the colonies could supply to Italy. The available literature provides few indications on this matter, with attention being addressed especially to some products such as canned meat, leather, wool etc. (Ministero delle Colonie 1917). The fact that foodstuffs appear only marginally among the goods exported from the colonies to Italy could make us conclude that they were an insignificant contribution: if the yardstick for Africa's contribution to the war effort remains that of evaluating how much arrived in Europe, then we can only agree with that assessment, seeing that in food terms little reached Italy from the colonies. To evaluate the impact of the war on Africa more accurately, this article aims to consider not only the results achieved, but what was attempted unsuccessfully: what is proposed, therefore, is an analysis that focuses on the measures promoted, irrespective of the results achieved. The fact that numerous attempts were translated into failures must not make us forget that to satisfy these demands the productive systems were submitted to considerable pressure, often reaching the limits of their productive capacities. Between 1917 and 1918, on the subject of food, Italy pursued in its colonies a policy that aimed to achieve in a short time food self-sufficiency and then move on to supply Italy with grain and other cereals. Borrowing the terminology that Italy used during the Paris talks, there was a minimum target, food self-sufficiency in the colonies, and a maximum one, supplying Italy. A decidedly ambitious plan that, however, soon encountered failure.

The first part of the article will discuss the importance of food provisions in the Great War and how the Entente powers turned to the imperial territories to satisfy their domestic needs. Then the situation in each Italian colony will be analysed, highlighting the policies adopted and the results achieved. It must be said that the documentation on this particular aspect is rather limited, although in the case of Eritrea it was possible to use the papers held at the regional archive of the Akkälä Guzay preserved at Mendefera, whose existence and importance had been reported by Irma Taddia (Taddia 1998). These documents allow us to grasp the impact of the measures adopted in some zones of the Akkälä Guzay region, making possible an interesting micro-historic approach. Documents that for their characteristics also allow us to grasp the reaction of the farmers to the policies set by the central administration; a perspective that is often precluded to us in classical colonial archives.

L'Appel à l'Empire

At the end of 1915 the effect of the crossed vetoes and then the demands of a conflict that was turning out to be longer than expected were starting to have serious repercussions on the productive systems of the countries at war (Neiberg 2014: 113; Purseigle 2012). With the beginning of the new year, many European countries started to experience growing difficulties tied to the war needs. Particularly in the countryside, the requisitioning of working animals reduced output so it was natural to supplement

this deficit by means of the importation of foodstuffs (Balderston 2010: 219).

Germany, which at the time of joining the war was only capable of satisfying between 10% and 25% of its own food demands (Kramer 2014: 471; Balderston 2010: 227), had not had the time to build up stocks and raw materials and from the outset rationing was introduced, also in response to the *Hunger blockade* launched by the allies (Bianchi 2010; Cox 2015). The situation worsened when, in February 1917, Great Britain succeeded in assuring for itself half of the production of neutral Holland, and when Denmark and Switzerland, concerned for their domestic needs, significantly reduced their exports to Germany. There were a series of poor harvests that complicated the situation even more, so much so that in Germany the winter of 1916-1917 went down in history as the *turnip winter*, due to the shortage of food.

In the Austro-Hungarian empire, Hungary, which was self-sufficient from the nutritional standpoint, showed a growing reluctance to share its own resources with the rest of the empire: Vienna was thus one of the first cities that had to deal with hunger. Even the Ottoman empire experienced growing difficulties and, throughout the war, both the civilian population and the army suffered from hunger (Schulze-Tanielian 2014, 2017). As regards the Entente, the German decision in January 1917 to retake *unrestricted submarine warfare* complicated the supplies. France and Great Britain, two countries that could count on a good domestic organisation as regards supplies, albeit not avoiding problems altogether, still did not suffer from hunger. In Great Britain, where problems were already recorded in 1916, it was only in January 1918 that the first rationing was imposed (Balderston 2010: 227). In Russia, one of the most important producers of cereals at the world level, the war instead determined a true and proper collapse of the productive system and that of transport, triggering constant food emergencies in the main cities of the Empire.

In Italy most of the population still based their own diet on carbohydrates and grain stocks soon represented a problem (Galassi, Harrison 2005). In this field, Italy had never been self-sufficient and the war interrupted the supplies coming from Russia and Romania, so much so that in December 1914 the first grain shortages and the consequent rise in bread prices were recorded. In March 1915, in Italy curbs on bread making had been enforced that, in a short time, led to the appearance of the so-called 'war bread' which, Maria Concetta Dentoni recalls, "of bread by then it had only kept the name" (Dentoni 2014: 232). The increase in prices and the scarce availability of products triggered protests against the cost of living, culminating in the bread strike in the summer of 1917, which left more than 50 dead on the ground (Faustinella 2017). To contain the social tensions caused by the food shortages, the European powers found it natural to turn to the colonies in what had been called *L'Appel à l'Empire*. To rationalise the drafting of men and the use of resources some fully-fledged bodies were created like, in 1916, the British Empire Producers Organisation and the Committee on Empire Resources Development (Mackenzie 1999: 121; Killingray 1982). In France in

June 1917, the Minister of colonies – André Maginot – called a *Conference Coloniale* in which the contribution of the Overseas to the needs of France was discussed (Janes 2016). In August of the same year, the government entrusted to Edmund Du Vivier de Streel with an explorative mission aimed at identifying the most effective means to increase the contribution of the colonies to the French economy (Du Vivier de Streel 1917; Michel 2003, 2013). These initiatives did not escape the attention of the Italian Minister of colonies who, in 1917, published *Approvvigionamenti, consumi e contributi delle Colonie Italiane*,⁶ a sort of extraordinary plan for the 'valorisation' of the colonies in support of the war effort. It was then in 1917 – the crucial year of the conflict – that Italy also decided to launch its *Appel à l'Empire*. This was not a decision taken superficially, in Rome the key figures of the ministry for the colonies were thoroughly committed to honing a strategy capable of drawing in a short time as much as possible from the Overseas. Of course, the ministry for the colonies did not miss the fact that, from the food point of view, the situation in the various Italian colonies was very different. In this regard, Somalia alone could consider itself to be self-sufficient, while, already before joining the war, Eritrea, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica had to import foodstuffs to satisfy the domestic needs. Except for Somalia, then, the immediate aim could be no other than to reduce the food deficit as much as possible.

Eritrea

Among the Italian colonies, Eritrea was the territory where the impact of the war had the most significant consequences. Ever since in 1912 the country had started to send its own *ascari* to Libya, Eritrea had been transformed into a military colony: out of a population of around 300–350,000 inhabitants, the army absorbed 10,000 men, a unique situation across the whole of the continent. Apart from the soldiers, Italy obtained 12 million cans of meat (Zaccaria 2019), hides, doum palm nuts and potassium.⁷

The first measures supporting the agricultural production were enforced in 1916, but it was a case of measures addressed to the Italian concessionaires alone (anticipation of seeds, supply of farm machinery, granting of small farm credit).⁸ From the food point of view, Eritrea – partly owing to its scarce productive capacity, partly owing to the frequent droughts and famines – to some extent had always relied on imports. From Sudan came the sorghum (*Sorghum vulgare*) which, in many areas of the country, was at the basis of the local diet, but supplies from the Indian market were not rare, from where, still in 1914, 24,000 tonnes arrived. The outbreak of the hostilities complicated this system of supplies; at the same time, the local production suffered from the drought, to the point that in 1914 the production in the eastern plateau had been 'nil' while in the Akkälä Guzay, the harvest had been seriously damaged by the appearance of locust.⁹ For these reasons, since 1916 a rigorous system of rationing had been introduced along with price regulation.¹⁰ In January 1917, the government decided to

include in the price capping grain and barley, while a permanent watchdog commission had the mandate to monitor the price trends on the market¹¹ and publish weekly a price list.¹² In the subsequent months, other products were added to the price capping: soap, petrol, wine, poultry, butter, sugar and meat.¹³ In general, these measures did not have much effect on the price trends which rose constantly.

The Minister of colonies launched his *Appel à l'Empire* in the period when Giacomo De Martino, after six years leading Somalia, was appointed Governor of Eritrea (16 September 1916). His passion for farming matters was well-known, as was his difficult relationship with his agriculture technicians, who would reprimand him for his often unfounded enthusiasm and continuous interference in their work.¹⁴

After arriving in Eritrea, De Martino immediately declared he was ready to "come to the aid of the Motherland in the serious moment she was going through".¹⁵ This was not just patriotic rhetoric: on 8 February 1917, all the regional commissioners were summoned to Asmara "for an exchange of ideas concerning the means to make possible the contribution of the Colony to the provision of foodstuffs in the Kingdom". The tenor of the meeting, which can be reconstructed from its agenda, was clear: to increase the cultivated surface orienting it towards cereals, potatoes and other staples, also to the detriment of barley and the other cereals of "indigenous consumption" (Istituto Coloniale Italiano 1920: 291), after which quotas were imposed obliging the cultivation on state-owned lands.¹⁶ On 3 May 1917, De Martino reminded the regional commissioners that for those who had achieved significant results, there was the concrete possibility of being awarded the honour of the colonial order of the Stella d'Italia.¹⁷ The encouragement to take part in a new anniversary, specially devised to reward the best producers, was extended to everyone, then: the grain feast, which was to fall on 11 November, Saint Martin's day and that in Italy marked the end of the farming season. The aim was to manage to ship to Italy 20,000-30,000 quintals of grain.¹⁸ In the same period, the Governor wanted that in the judgement on the work of the local chiefs, the fact of having "toiled [...] for the cultivations" should become the second criterion of evaluation in order of importance, immediately after loyalty and devotion to the flag.¹⁹ By late August the first reports started to arrive concerning the best producers, such as "Asmac Chidane" who distinguished himself by " [...] relentlessly travelling in the villages of the province – inciting and overseeing the Ciccà and the villagers – until the sowing had been completed".²⁰ Or the Ciccà and the assistant Ciccà indicated by "Fitaurari Sengal Tuccu" "who have helped the most in the cultivations and have cultivated a lot more and it also turned out well".²¹ The Eritrean farmers thus had to give priority to the cultivation of wheat, corn and potatoes, all to the detriment of traditional consumables. Incentives were assigned to the Italian farmers while the Eritrean chiefs and notables who distinguished themselves the most in the production were rewarded on the occasion of the *fešta delle granaglie* (grain festival).²²

The difficulties tied to the contribution demanded to Eritrea were generally borne stoically by the population, who on several occasions were publicly praised by the administration. But the weight of the demands was such that discontent was reported a bit everywhere until, in late October, a full-fledged "collective protest" occurred²³ that started from Kwä'atit and affected some areas of the Akkälä Guzay where some 400 people were involved in the episodes. Moving from village to village, the protesters urged the inhabitants to support them. Some crossed the border, and took their cattle with them, to the extent that two companies of Ascaris had to be deployed on the Ethiopian

border. The causes of the discontent were largely related to the government's demands, beginning with the supply of cattle to the Ditta Torrigiani, which had to be transformed into canned meat for the Italian troops. Among the other causes at the origin of the discontent were the complaints relating to the cultivations on behalf of the government and the demand for labour for the hay harvest of the military garrisons, the lack of Maria Teresa thalers and the introduction of paper money, the rigid enforcement of the price ceiling, the requisitioning of the grain and the free cultivations; other complaints followed concerning the choice of the local chiefs, considered far from the populations and imposed by the central government and, to finish, the discontent triggered by the slowness of justice. Trying to sum up the Eritreans' demands, the new Commissioner of the Akkälä Guzay, Dante Odorizzi, wrote: "They say [the local population]: leave us our

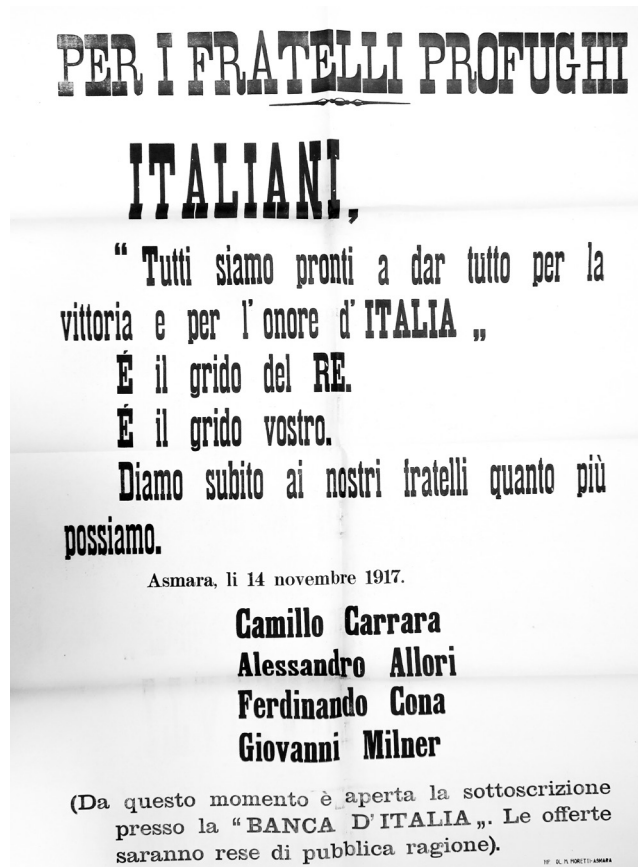


Image 1: Appeal to the Italian population of Asmara to contribute to the rescue of the «fellow Italian refugees». Worth noting is the absence of any reference to the overwhelming defeat at Caporetto. Asmara, 14 November 1917 (ASDMAE, AE 824).

oxen, our lands, do not force us to give lands to the Muslims and to plough lands that we want to leave fallow, in a word let us work how and for as long as we wish and do not worry about us".²⁴ The Director of Civil Affairs, Alessandro Allori, went to the region and, following an act of submission, promised a pardon for everyone. Public assemblies were organised where Allori laid out the government's reasons, "both in regard to the supply of the oxen and in regard to the cultivations, to the circulation of the thaler, the price ceiling etc. etc".²⁵

The circumstances laid out show, however, the scarce realism of De Martino's plan who, with his request, had brought relations with the Eritrean population to the breaking point. For the Governor, the bad news was not finished: again in late October, the agriculture technician A. Melis visited the Akkälä Guzay and found himself faced with harvests mostly hit by drought and locust, but also by what he described as the diffuse "neglect" of the farmers. It is likely that in this way the farmers were expressing their dissent vis-à-vis the government that, as we have seen, forced them "to plough lands we want to keep fallow". Melis seemed to skirt the issue, but the Eritrean farmers were sceptical about the techniques the Italians were insisting on and they often withstood their adoption. One year after these facts, a disconsolate De Martino wrote that: "We are all certain of the fact that it will be almost impossible to make the natives change their system of cultivation. From them we will only be able to achieve that they will slowly substitute low yield production of almost completely immediate and local consumption with more productive cultivations, persuaded to do so not by paternal advice but by greater earnings" (Ministero delle Colonie 1918: 6).

This represented a passive resistance that contributed to undermining De Martino's plans once and for all: considering these developments, in the end far more sober celebrations were chosen, with the distribution of some praises and gifts, while the pompous name of "Festa delle granaglie" (Feast of the Grains) made way for the less demanding "11 November".²⁶ Five years later, going back to those days, the Count Gentile Farinola wrote that De Martino had transformed Eritrea into his own personal fief where he "unleashed his mad fantasies",²⁷ notation that, in the light of what has been illustrated, was not wholly misplaced.

Notwithstanding his efforts, Eritrea, instead of offering its food contribution to the Motherland, had to come to terms with a far more prosaic reality: that of not even managing to feed its own population. This was admitted by De Martino himself who, in February 1918, for the umpteenth time grappled with the problem of the food stocks that were running out. Seeing the impossibility to get supplies from Sudan²⁸ and from India, De Martino informed the ministry for the colonies that he was seriously considering the hypothesis of getting rice and grain from Japan.²⁹ In the end, Mombasa was asked for corn,³⁰ while *Phyllis*, a sailing ship with 3,500 tonnage, ensured contacts with New York from where motor cars, spare parts, timber, pasta, canned fruit and petrol arrived (Cufino 1919: 195).

Hôtel Continental

AVVISO

Sono oltremodo spiacente di avvertire la mia Spett. Clientela che col 15 corr. mese, per opportunità e precisamente per mancanza di alimenti principali data la gran difficoltà di trovarne, sono obbligato a chiudere il Reparto Ristorante sino a miglior epoca.

Mi si voglia compatire per tale provvedimento al quale ho solo ricorso all'ultimo momento; sono speranzoso che mi si farà buon viso in altra migliore futura occasione e passo ad ossequiare sentitamente.

Asmara, 10 luglio 1918.

Il Proprietario
Giovanni Nicosia.

Image 2: Giovanni Nicosia, owner of the Hotel Continental, informs the Customers that, due to the scarcity of food, the Hotel restaurant will remain closed, Asmara, 10 July 1918 (ASDMAE, AE 866).

Tripolitania

The most complicated situation was the Libyan one: already before the outbreak of the Great War, Italy had abandoned the Fezzan; in Tripolitania, in May 1916, the Italian control was by then limited to the districts of Homs, Tripoli and Zwara, isolated locations, which were to be supplied by sea and where around 30,000 troops, 96,000 Libyans civilians and 12,000 Europeans were concentrated (Biasutti 2004: 111). In April 1916, the Tunisian newspaper *Al-Zohra* discussing the local rise in prices caused by the war reported how things were going even worse in Tripoli. From the Libyan capital a request had arrived to "benevolently allow" the

shipment of several thousand quintals of grain and barley, and then that of rams and oxen. The French made it known that the request would be taken into consideration but that, in any case, the priority would go to the provisions for the troops in Europe and then to the local needs.³¹

In Tripoli, according to the Italian calculations, there were just 6,200 hectares of arable land, clearly not enough to satisfy the needs of the city itself. The agriculture Office, set up in March 1914 and that until then had mainly conducted research activities, was charged with providing an eminently practical orientation to agriculture in the few territories controlled by the Italians (Bassi 2010). The agriculture Office distributed, free of charge, seeds, plants, and then offered subsidies and prizes, so as to encourage the rapid use of the available agricultural lands. Always with the aim of increasing the agricultural output, the official sources recall how in Tripolitania 255 wells were reactivated, 438 gardens were put back into production and 3,350 quintals of barley

seed, imported from Tunisia, 3,365 quintal of seed potatoes and 2,950 quintals of vegetables were then distributed (Malvezzi de' Medici 1917: 84).

These efforts certainly led to an increase in the cultivations to the point that in 1918 Colosimo could declare that the oasis of Tripoli "had been cultivated as it never had been in the past" (Colosimo 1918: 43). But this positive evaluation did not mean that food self-sufficiency could in some way be closer. Paradoxically, if Tripolitania exported something, then, in all likelihood, that small amount went the way of the central Empires since at Misurata, on a fortnightly basis, German submarines were moored, unloading weapons, munitions and money to set sail once again laden with grain, barley, preserved meats, hides, etc (Mondaini 1927: 370; Ciasca 1938: 367-368). Moreover, the Italian request for agricultural products came about in 1917 which, from the agricultural point of view, was a critical year at the global level, with scarce harvests more or less everywhere. Tripolitania's most significant contribution to the war effort then were the 6,000 or so workers dispatched, starting from June 1917, to the Italian factories of the north-east, and used mainly in the metal-making factories and the constructions industries (Di Pasquale 2009, 2018; Di Girolamo 1995).

Cyrenaica

The situation in Cyrenaica was different: here the arable land was larger, even if much less studied and known than those of Tripolitania. The colony was presented as "a blessed country, especially from the point of view of the physical environment (climate and soil) and highly suited to developing agriculture and sheep rearing" (Manetti 1920).³² In Cyrenaica, as a first measure, an expert was sent to lead the local farming service with the mission to quickly achieve self-sufficiency and "if it were possible, for the needs also of the other Mediterranean colony [Tripolitania]" (Colosimo 1918: 44). The situation on the ground was more critical, however, as confirmed in May 1916 by the restrictions on the consumption of sugar and the ban on exporting goods and foodstuffs,³³ while the ration book was introduced in December 1916 (Colosimo 1918: 51).

After Ahmad al-Sharīf al-Sanūsī left the scene, the situation in Cyrenaica had improved and in April 1917 the *modus vivendi* of Akroma was underwritten that led to what Mondaini termed a "perfect tranquillity" (Mondaini 1927: 388). In these conditions it was possible to plan a more incisive action with the aim of reaching food self-sufficiency and, perhaps, providing a contribution to Italy. The activities were mainly concentrated in the areas of Derna and Bengasi, where farm machines were sent – "which were subtracted from the availability of the Motherland in really critical moments" (Istituto Coloniale Italiano 1920: 291) – for a value of around one and a half million lire, a substantial figure: Mogul tractors, double furrow plough, American sowers, mowers, steam presses for straw, threshers, etc. that should avert the chronic lack of manpower and the reduced time available for the harvest (Colosimo 1918: 46). In Cyrenaica 8,000

quintals of durum wheat from Puglia and around 12,000 quintals of seed barley arrived (The contribution of our Colonies 1917: 511). Certainly an ambitious plan, but with a good many obstacles to its realization, starting from the scarcity of Italian technical and administrative staff that had been reduced in all the colonies following the war. Official sources, so accurate in quantifying the extent of the effort, are much more evasive when establishing the results: in regard to Cyrenaica, the sources refer to "significant quantities" of ovine meat, but also hides (bovine, caprine and ovine), "many thousands of quintals of wool" and "considerable quantities of vegetal coal" (Malvezzi de' Medici 1917: 84), but nothing is reported about the agricultural contribution. Generally neglected at the official level is the information that in Cyrenaica, from 1916 onwards, the harvests were affected by drought and diseases, to the extent that it would be necessary to wait until 1920 to record a harvest defined as being abundant, at least for barley (Notiziario commerciale 1920: 145). To retrieve a semi-official indication on the results obtained, it is necessary to refer to the proceedings of the Convegno Nazionale Coloniale in 1919; in the reports of the sessions mention is made to the possibility to obtain 1,800,000 hectolitres of grain and barley, but in actual fact only 80,000 were harvested: "having as a consequence of that fact a worsening in the food crisis in Cyrenaica, crisis that in some centres had the appearance of a true and proper famine with thousands of natives dying from starvation" (Istituto Coloniale Italiano 1920: 291). In other words, in Cyrenaica the attempt to achieve food self-sufficiency and then to export part of the harvest had completely failed and in 1919 people continued to suffer and die of hunger. The government harvests had been so small that it was soon necessary to proceed with hoarding and requisitioning, as the internal reports that sought to assess the cereal growing campaigns promoted from 1917 to 1920 admitted.

Somalia

If the aim for Tripolitania and Cyrenaica had been to weigh as little as possible on Italy, for Somalia the expectations were greater. According to the official data, in 1917 Somalia was capable of exporting 15,000 quintals of sorghum to Italy (Ciasca 1938: 355), utilised, experimentally, as seed for forage and as horse food. Around 16,000 quintals of hides, partly used in the making of military footwear (Caroselli 1922: 370), were shipped to Aden, Italy, Zanzibar and the United States. In 1918, 10,000 quintals of sorghum were exported to Eritrea (Colosimo 1918: 137-138). Somalia could certainly have given more: but its rich zootechnical assets – estimated at around 800-900,000 head of cattle – could not be exploited given the ban on meat imports enforced in many regions of Africa for health reasons and also given the lack of plant for the preparation and processing of the meat. With a certain disappointment it was then pointed out that safer and more regular connections would have allowed for the shipment to Italy of around 40,000 quintals of sorghum and 10,000 quintals of corn and beans that were

said to be ready (Malvezzi de' Medici 1917: 83). The official sources – it is not clear whether for neglect or calculation – reported the problem of transport, but without its bearing being fully expressed. In actual fact, the question of transport, already critical before the war (Cufino 1914), got worse and represented one of the many obstacles to the accomplishment of the Italian food plan. The penury of transport was apparent first of all among the places of production and the embarkation ports, as proof of the high price of camel hire, to the point of imposing the creation of an "Agency for Camel Hire".³⁴

During the war, the few vessels that docked at Mogadishu and Massawa already arrived with a full load, coming mostly from other ports in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, seeing the lack of space on board, the goods often stayed on the quays and in the depots. Also owing to the speed limits to save coal, the trip to Somalia became particularly slow: in October 1918, Luigi di Savoia took 35 days to reach Mogadishu whereas, in 1906, he had taken just 16 (Milanese 1995: 73). In Massawa the situation was no different: an Italian entrepreneur, Ambrogio Cesare Garavaglia, sent monthly reports of an economic nature to the journal *L'Agricoltura coloniale*, in which is described a port of Massawa filled with goods owing to the "uncertainty of the embarkations" (Garavaglia 1917). This problem was denounced in 1917, and two years later it was still unsolved, to the extent that Garavaglia had to once again report that "the lack of maritime transport paralyzes every activity" (Garavaglia 1919: 374–375).

Conclusions

On the grounds of all the government reports, the colonies had asked the Motherland for as little as possible, managing to give as much as possible. If on the one hand the political and military conditions of the Mediterranean possessions precluded the complete achievement of the objective, in eastern Africa things went better, and Eritrea and Somalia contributed significantly to Italy's needs (Mori 1918: 281). A less amenable look at the rhetoric of the Ministry of Colonies reveals, however, a more complex picture: the colonies, in spite of the efforts, did not even reach the minimum target, that of food self-sufficiency. Except for Somalia, all the other colonies literally suffered from hunger and the government, to avoid the worst, had to purchase on the international market substantial quantities of grains: a truth kept quiet at length, which every now and then someone mustered up the courage to denounce, like Vincenzo Giovanni De Meo – resident in Tripoli since the start of the Italian domination – who revealed how in Libya "during the war everything had to be imported from the Motherland, from Egypt and from Tunisia, and those who say, as was said, that they were enough for themselves, lies" (Istituto Coloniale Italiano 1920: 292). The Italian policy was unfortunate also because, launched in 1917, it coincided with a worsening of the problem of drought and the locusts all over eastern Africa and in Libya. In a similar context the Italian food plans failed, and if these had come to fruition, there would still have been the problem of transport, particularly serious in the Horn of Africa, where the Eritrean and Somalian

products were piling up in the harbour warehouses, often left to perish, without finding their way to Italy, except in a few cases.

Describing an attempt that did not give results, telling of a failure, adds an important variable in the effort addressed to a better understanding of the impact of the Great War in Africa. Accustomed to using quantitative parameters based on what is offered – in terms of men or resources – also considering what was attempted but did not succeed, allows us to add a new dimension to our analyses. To achieve those aims that later turned out to be ephemeral, there was no hesitation to impose cultivations, exploiting all the available land and forcing the farmers to work the land normally left fallow, dedicating the labour to the war effort.

The Eritrean case, which we have dwelled on most of all, lends itself to a further consideration. In the first place, the country supplied soldiers to Libya; with about 10,000 enlisted men out of a population of 300–350,000 people, this was undoubtedly a considerable effort, which significantly complicated the recruitment of manpower for all the country's other economic activities. Many scholars are by now convinced that Libya must to all effects be considered a front of the First World War (Istituto Coloniale Italiano 1920: 290; Berhe 2016, 2017). The Eritrean troops were thus deployed not so much in a forgotten colonial conflict, but in a theatre of operations of the Great War. But the first-born colony was also asked to put its resources at Italy's disposal: Eritrea produced 12 million cans of meat for the army to which we must add the substantial amounts of hides, doum palm nuts and potassium shipped to Europe and the United States. Making available men and products, the Eritrean society experienced the concept of *total war*, because no sector seemed to evade the needs of war. Albeit it was fought thousands of kilometres away, for Eritrea as for the other Italian colonies in Africa, the Great War was never a distant conflict.

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NOTES:

1 - From a notice of the Consorzio Agrario Eritreo (Eritrean Agricultural Consortium) addressed to the Italian farmers: Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (ASDMAE), Archivio Eritrea (AE), 801, *Convenzioni e statistiche commerciali*, 1917.

2 - A summary of the article that appeared in «La Tribuna» on 30 January 1918 was published in *Le nostre Colonie, la Guerra e il dopo Guerra*, in «Rivista Coloniale. Organo dell'Istituto Coloniale Italiano», a. XIII, n. 1-2, Jan-Feb 1918, pp. 38-40.

3 - *Discorso dell'On. Carlo Schanzer, Deputato al Parlamento (Presidente della Sezione VII)*, Commissione per il Dopoguerra, Inaugurazione dei lavori della sezione VII. Quistioni coloniali, 25 agosto 1918, Rome, Tip. Editrice delle Matellate, p. 12.

4 - *Il contributo delle Colonie alla madre Patria in guerra*, «L'Agricoltura coloniale», a. XIII, n. 2, 31 May 1918, pp. 135-140.

5 - The situation in the Italian colonies during the Great War found space above all in the works in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, see for example the chapter "*L'Italia coloniale e la guerra mondiale (1914-1918)*" in Mondaini (1927: 644-420) and then Ciasca (1938) who dedicates the fifth chapter to the topic: "*La nostra politica coloniale durante la guerra mondiale*", pp. 349-374. See also Podestà (2004).

6 - The relationship between this publication and the debate ongoing in France is described in Malvezzi de' Medici (1917: 81).

7 - "The preserved canned meat – local industry – in about 12 million for the needs of the army; hides for about 18 million; doum palm nuts for military attire – for the buttons, so called of 'vegetal ivory' this too local industry – in 50,000 quintals; potassium for the munitions and indirectly for the saccharine, in the quantity hitherto of 50,000 quintals. For the circumstance the exploitation of the potassium mine of Dallol, in northern Danakil has been intensified, and large amounts of this mineral have been exported not only to Italy, but also to France, England and even to Japan", in *Le nostre Colonie, la Guerra e il dopo Guerra*, «Rivista Coloniale. Organo dell'Istituto Coloniale Italiano», a. XIII, n. 1-2, January-February 1918, pp. 38-40.

8 - The notice, published by the Eritrean Agricultural Consortium, ended with these words: "Not a hectare of land shall remain uncultivated this year! Let us put all our energy to the work in the fields and we shall thus contribute usefully to the achievement of the highly patriotic goal", ASDMAE, AE 801, *Convenzioni e statistiche commerciali*, 1917.

9 - See the circumstantial reports on the damage wreaked by the locust in Akkälä Guzay preserved in 'Addi Qäyyäh Regional Archive (AQRA), Mendefera, Eritrea, Agriculture I, *14 coltivazioni del grano*.

10 - «Bulettoino Ufficiale delle Colonia Eritrea», (BUCE), 25, supplement to no. 51, December 1916, p. 379.

11 - Decreto Governatoriale 2745 which set up a commission for the supervision of the flours and bread in Asmara, «BUCE», 26/5, 1 feb. 1917.

12 - *Commission for the setting of the price ceiling for grain and barley*, in «BUCE», 26 suppl. 2, 14 January 1917.

13 - The limitations to the consumption of sugar were abolished in August 1918: D.G. 22 ago. 1918, n. 3153, «BUCE», 27 suppl. al n. 33, 23 August 1918.

14 - Famous, for instance, are the clashes with Romolo Onor (Milanese 2018).

15 - Giacomo De Martino to Sidney Sonnino, Asmara 26 March 1917, n. 1329, in Ministero delle Colonie. Direzione Generale degli Affari Politici, *Arabia*, vol. II: 1916 and January-April 1917, Rome, Tipografia del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1919, pp. 411-413.

16 - ASDMAE, AE 801, *Segreteria del Governo ad Alessandro Allori*, Asmara, 8 February 1917.

17 - AQRA, Agriculture II, *1917 Festa delle granaglie*, Giacomo De Martino a Commissari regionali, 3 May 1917.

18 - The target was not reached, and only a few thousand quintals of grain arrived in Italy, cfr. Istituto Coloniale Italiano (1920: 291).

19 - See in particular the file AQRA, Agriculture I e II.

20 - AQRA, Agriculture II, *1917 Festa delle granaglie*, chiefs who distinguished themselves for overproduction, 8 August 1917.

21 - AQRA, Agriculture II, *1917 Festa delle granaglie*. Fiteurari Sengal Tuccà a [De Rossi], 31 August 1917.

22 - AQRA, Agriculture II, *Rendiconto per Festa delle granaglie, 1917*, Giacomo De Martino to the regional commissioners, Asmara, 5 May 1915.

23 - This is the definition used in the Italian documents; see for instance: ASDMAE, AE 828, Acchele

- Guzai, Dante Odorizzi, *Relazione circa le condizioni della Regione ed il funzionamento dell'Ufficio per i mesi di ottobre e novembre 1917*.
- 24 - ASDMAE, AE 828, Acchele Guzai, Dante Odorizzi, *Relazione circa le condizioni della Regione ed il funzionamento dell'Ufficio per i mesi di ottobre e novembre 1917*.
- 25 - ASDMAE, AE 828, Acchele Guzai, Dante Odorizzi, *Relazione circa le condizioni della Regione ed il funzionamento dell'Ufficio per i mesi di ottobre e novembre 1917*.
- 26 - AQRA, Agricoltura II, *Rendiconto per Festa delle Granaglie, 1917*, il reggente del Governo a Commissari regionali, Asmara, 10 novembre 1917.
- 27 - ASDMAE, Affari Politici 1919-1930, 1023, *Gentile Farinola to Ministero Affari Esteri*, 10 December 1922.
- 28 - From 1917 the Sudanese government reserved all its food surpluses to Egypt, forbidding exports to Eritrea (Daly 1986: 228).
- 29 - De Martino to the Ministry of the Colonies, Asmara, 18 February 1919, in *Ministero delle Colonie* (1919b: 128).
- 30 - Archivio della Camera, Sottocommissione Parlamentare di Inchiesta sulle spese di Guerra, Sottocommissione A. Inchiesta sull'Eritrea, 18.
- 31 - ASDMAE, AE 767, Weekly Bulletin of the Arabic Press, no. 16, April 1916, p. 17, *La vita di Tripoli*, «al-Zohra», Tunis 22 April 1916, translated and published in Ministry for the Colonies, Translations Office.
- 32 - Letter sent by Dr. Oberto Olietti, head of the agriculture services of Cyrenaica, to the counsellor of the Società Africana d'Italia, Beniamino Laccetti, May 1918.
- 33 - Decreto Governatoriale no. 1380 dated 16 February 1916, in *Cirenaica. Provvedimenti legislativi in dipendenza dello stato di guerra*, «Rivista Coloniale. Organo dell'Istituto Coloniale Italiano», a. XI, n. 10, 1916, pp. 619-621.
- 34 - ASDMAE, AE 801, *Dotti to Direzione Affari Civili*, Massaua, 12 June 1917.

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