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Italy's Imperial Hangover

In the international system before 1940, Italy ranked as both the last and the least of the Great Powers. Inasmuch as possession of an empire was regarded as a condition of Great Power status, Italy's empire was one of the smallest and shortest-lived. Her imperial hangover was therefore less severe than those of other ex-imperial powers.

Italy's imperial ambitions had been pursued in two directions, sometimes concurrently, more often in alternation: southwards into Africa, and northwards and eastwards into Central Europe and the Balkans. African footholds were established on the Red Sea in 1882, on the Indian Ocean in 1889, and on Italy's 'fourth shore' at Tripoli in 1911.¹ By 1914 these had expanded into three colonies, Eritrea, Somalia and Libya (though the conquest of the last was not completed until 1931). In 1915, as part of her price for entering the war, Italy secured the promise of African 'compensations' from Britain and France in the event of their acquisition of Germany's colonies. But after 1919 Britain ceded to Italy only an oasis on the Egyptian-Libyan frontier (Jarabub) and a Kenyan province (Jubaland), and France made only trifling adjustments of the Tunisian-Libyan frontier. The inadequacy of these compensations created lasting bad feeling in Italy. In 1936, after a victorious seven-month invasion of Ethiopia, Mussolini proclaimed King Victor Emanuel III Emperor, and combined Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia in a single united Italian East Africa.

Italy's imperial ambitions in Europe were in part irredentist, in part strategic. Her irredentist claims to Trentino, Trieste, the Istrian peninsula and Fiume were satisfied after victory in 1919-24, but her ambition to annex part of Dalmatia was frustrated. On

strategic grounds she acquired the Brenner frontier, together with 250,000 Germans, and the frontier of the Julian Alps, together with 750,000 Yugoslavs. Between the wars she aspired, in rivalry with France, to fill the vacuum created in Central and Eastern Europe by the disappearance of Austria-Hungary and the temporary retreat of German and Russian power. Albania, in which Italy's special interest had gained international recognition in 1897, became an Italian protectorate in 1926 and after invasion in 1939, virtually a colony. When Yugoslavia was crushed and partitioned by Germany in 1941, Italy annexed Dalmatia, occupied Slovenia and set up a puppet Croat kingdom under an Italian prince. The dream of making the Adriatic an Italian lake had come true.

Italy's imperialism, just because she was last to enter the race, was largely imitative. The 'industrial imperialism' of northern traders, bankers and manufacturers took the form of a search for markets, natural resources and investment opportunities, mainly in the Balkans and Asia Minor.² The 'demographic imperialism' of southern politicians, publicists and peasants took the form of a search for land where Italy's surplus population could be settled in prosperity under the Italian flag. But the largest element in Italian imperialism was the pursuit of prestige and glory. Francesco Crispi, Italy's first imperialist statesman, believed that colonies were 'a necessity of modern life'. His attempt to conquer Ethiopia ended in 1896 in military disaster at Adowa and his own political ruin. But within fifteen years a vigorous nationalist movement was proclaiming the need to create a virile, bellicose nation which would wipe out the shame of Adowa and force the plutocratic imperialist powers to give justice to Italy, 'the proletarian nation'. The nationalists also preached the revival of the martial traditions of ancient Rome and the maritime traditions of Venice, queen of the seas. After 1922 Mussolini adopted and exaggerated this nationalist rhetoric. In 1936, in defiance of the League of Nations and its 52 'sanctionist' members led by Britain, he avenged Adowa and created a new Roman Empire.³

Mussolini's triumph was short-lived. Between June 1940, when he took Italy into war, and July 1943, when he was dismissed from power, the whole of Italy's African empire fell under enemy, mainly British military occupation. When Mussolini's successor, General Badoglio, surrendered in September 1943, Italian power in the Adriatic and the Balkans disintegrated. By the end of the war not only had Albania and Dalmatia been lost, but Tito's partisan

army had occupied Fiume and the Istrian peninsula, and only Allied troops were keeping it out of Trieste.

The task which Italy's democratic statesmen set themselves in 1945 was to save as much as possible of Italy's pre-fascist territories. They started with high hopes that Italy's post-1943 co-belligerency on the Allied side, and the contribution to victory of her Resistance and her reconstituted armed forces, would induce generosity in her former enemies. In this they were to be disappointed. By the terms of the Paris Peace Treaty of 10 February 1947, Italy was obliged to renounce all right to her former colonies. Istria⁴ and Fiume were ceded to Yugoslavia, and it was decided to set up a Free Territory of Trieste under the United Nations. The only Italian claim to be satisfied was the retention of the Brenner frontier and the German population of South Tirol. As later events were to prove, it was a claim of dubious advantage, but one which in 1946 would have been psychologically impossible for any Italian Government, and for all but a tiny handful of Italians, to renounce.⁵ In September 1946 Italy's Christian Democratic Prime Minister, Alcide De Gasperi, signed an agreement with the Austrian Foreign Minister, Karl Gruber, which promised the German minority 'complete equality of rights' with the Italian population, and the 'exercise of autonomous legislative and executive regional power'. This agreement made Italy's claim internationally acceptable, and its text was attached to the Peace Treaty in the form of an annex.

Great bitterness was expressed in the Italian Constituent Assembly during the debates on the ratification of the Treaty, which continued until 31 July 1947. Benedetto Croce, Italy's most distinguished intellectual, spoke for many of the pre-fascist liberal ruling class when he condemned the treaty on moral grounds; it deprived Italy of her 'dignity and legitimate pride'. In particular he deplored the unconditional renunciation of those colonies which Italy 'had acquired by her blood, and administered and elevated to civilised European standards by her genius and by expenditure of her all too scarce financial resources'.⁶ But De Gasperi and Carlo Sforza, the veteran anti-fascist diplomatist who took over the foreign ministry in January 1947, insisted that only ratification could eliminate the stigma of fascist crimes and open the door to Italy's return to the community of nations. Their view prevailed.

The treaty once ratified, De Gasperi and Sforza embarked on a long struggle for its revision. The fate of the former colonies now lay with the United Nations. Sforza set his target high and demanded that Italy be entrusted with the trusteeship of the Tripolitanian half of Libya⁷, of Somalia and of Eritrea (with special status for Asmara and Massawa, 'Italian towns which we cannot be asked to abandon'). The length of Italy's trusteeship would depend on the rapidity with which the peoples of the territories could be prepared for independence. De Gasperi and Sforza argued that Italy's pre-fascist record was not significantly different from that of other imperial powers, and moreover it had been with their assent (and in the case of Britain, encouragement) that she had acquired her original colonies. The demographic argument was also deployed: the colonies were the creation of Italian labour, and only Italian emigrants were suited for the task of further developing them. There was also the argument of national dignity: even if the responsibilities of trusteeship proved costly, 'the Italian people does not live on bread alone'.⁸ In August 1950, disturbed by the possibility of Eritrea being absorbed in Ethiopia, De Gasperi appealed personally to the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, not to reject the 'intermediate solution' of trusteeship, which would preserve to the Italians the opportunity to continue their 'civilising task' and to the Eritreans the opportunity of autonomous development.⁹

The sincerity of De Gasperi, Sforza and other democratic politicians in making these pleas has sometimes been questioned.¹⁰ They were in fact motivated less by imperialist nostalgia than by fear of a nationalist outburst which might endanger Italian democracy.¹¹ There had been a revival of the extreme right in the local elections of autumn 1946 and its representatives in the Constituent Assembly repeatedly attacked De Gasperi for treason. In January 1948 strong emotions were aroused against the British military administration when 42 Italians were killed in Mogadishu during demonstrations organized by the nationalist Somali Youth League. On 23 February Sforza wrote privately to Bevin: 'Do not give me away: personally I would sooner prefer a gigantic reconstruction in our South and in Sicily than to spend a penny in Africa. But you know too well that certain traditions are a force one cannot ignore; we cannot go "against the current"'.¹²

It soon became apparent that Italy's proposals had not the faintest chance of being adopted by the United Nations. Only the Latin Americans showed sympathy with the Italian case. On 1

October 1949 Sforza accepted the inevitable and announced to the Political Committee that Italy now advocated independence for all her former colonies at the earliest possible moment, except for Somalia where 'the task assumed by us in the past is not yet completed'. The Italian people, he declared, had resolved to follow Britain's 'farsighted and generous example' of cultivating the friendship of the new states.¹³ At the end of 1950 the United Nations decided that Libya should achieve independence on 1 January 1952. Sforza lost the battle for Eritrean independence, though it was given autonomy within an Ethiopian federation. Italy did, however, secure a ten-year trusteeship of Somalia. In the words of Alberto Tarchiani, Italian ambassador in Washington, who played a leading part in the negotiations, this act constituted the effective refutation of the charges of barbarity and exploitation which had been levelled at Italian colonial rule.¹⁴

After 1951 some Italians continued to think in terms of a Mediterranean mission and a special relationship, implicitly anti-British, with the Arab world. The politician most sympathetic to such ideas was Amintore Fanfani, the biggest man in the Christian Democratic party after De Gasperi's death. In his youth, while a lecturer at the Catholic University of Milan, he had praised Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia as 'the reappearance on earth of Roman virtue, fortified by the consecration of Christianity'. As prime minister and foreign minister in 1958-9 he paid a much publicized visit to Nasser, and in general pursued a dynamic foreign policy designed to make the Italian *presenza* felt throughout the world.¹⁵ He found a kindred spirit in Enrico Mattei, Italy's most colourful industrial tycoon, who had built up ENI, the national energy corporation, as his private empire. After being refused entry into the international oil consortium in 1954, he negotiated a separate agreement with the Iranian Government, undercutting his foreign rivals, and subsequently did a private deal with the Soviet Union. His denunciations of the unscrupulous foreign monopolists, and his depiction of an impoverished Italy struggling under his leadership for a rightful place in the world, recalled the nationalistic rhetoric of the 'proletarian nation' before 1914.¹⁶

Many besides Sforza hoped that Italy would be able to follow the British example and maintain links with the former colonies on a new basis of parity of status and esteem. At the end of the war there were just under 50,000 Italian residents in Tripolitania. Many of

them decided to stay on after Libyan independence; but the experience was unhappy and their numbers dwindled. In 1970 Colonel Gadafy, who had seized power in the previous year, expelled the remaining 20,000. Most of them settled in Sicily, where they seem to have been assimilated less successfully than the much greater number of Algerian *pieds noirs* in Southern France. The Eritrean experience was equally unhappy. Its Italian population dropped steadily after 1950, and left en masse after the Ethiopian Government abolished Eritrea's autonomous status in 1962.

Italy's relationship with Somalia by contrast was fruitful. Whatever the shortcomings of Italian rule before 1940, the trusteeship administration worked hard to remedy them. Education was greatly extended, administrators were trained, and numerous Somali students went to Italian universities where they happily absorbed Italian culture. Commercial relations also survived, and the Italian State Banana Monopoly still ensures the sale in Italy, somewhat to the detriment of the consumer, of the products of the plantations established before 1915.¹⁷ Most important of all, whereas political life was non-existent before 1940, after 1950 every effort was made to stimulate it. In this task the Italian Communist Party (PCI) played its part by establishing close relations with the Somali League, which became the ruling party after independence in July 1960.¹⁸

The fate of Trieste took even longer to settle than that of the colonies. In his address to the plenary session of the Paris Peace Conference on 3 August 1946, De Gasperi had protested vehemently against the proposal to create a Free Territory; but his speech was coldly received. For the next seven years until his retirement in August 1953, Trieste remained 'the polar star of my democratic policy'.¹⁹ Trieste was certainly the most emotional and widely felt issue in foreign policy during the years of imperial hangover. De Gasperi was justified in asserting that resentment over its denial to Italy was spontaneous, not contrived, and the monopoly of no party either in parliament or in the country.²⁰ Even the PCI resisted Yugoslav pretensions and insisted on Trieste's right to self-determination.²¹

The tensions of the Cold War prevented agreement on the appointment of a UN governor for the Free Territory, which therefore remained divided into two zones: A, administered by an

Allied force under the British General Winterton, and B, administered by the Yugoslav army. In fact the Yugoslavs progressively communized their zone and treated it as if it were part of their own country. On 20 March 1948 the US, British and French governments publicly called for a revision of the peace treaty which would give the whole Territory to Italy. Tito protested, but the declaration served its purpose of contributing to the massive victory of the anti-communist parties in the Italian general election of 18 April. In September Tito broke with the Soviet Union, and the three Western Powers quickly forgot their zeal for treaty revision. The British bore the brunt of the consequent resentment.

In September 1953 Giuseppe Pella, De Gasperi's successor as prime minister, made a bellicose speech, mainly for domestic consumption, in which he demanded a plebiscite in the whole Territory. The US and British governments responded by offering to hand over the administration of Zone A to Italy. Tito reacted with a warning that Italian entry into Zone A would be regarded as an act of aggression. Feelings ran high in both countries, and on 6 November a demonstration in Trieste was quelled by the British-controlled local police with the loss of six lives. The intensity of anti-British feeling recalled that of the years 1935-36.

But this incident proved the catalyst for a satisfactory solution. Secret negotiations between Italy and Yugoslavia started under Anglo-American sponsorship in London in February 1954. On 5 October the four governments signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding' whereby Yugoslavia was granted the administration of Zone B and Italy that of Zone A, with a trifling boundary rectification in Italy's favour to assuage sore feelings. The agreement was calmly received.²²

Once Trieste was removed as a source of conflict, Italians were able to appreciate the value to them of a non-aligned Yugoslavia interposed between themselves and Soviet power, and Yugoslavs were able to appreciate the value of a convenient and welcoming opening to the west. Traffic across the Italo-Yugoslav frontier is now heavy, and Yugoslavs shop in Trieste while Italians swim on the sandy beaches of Istria. Trieste's standard of living is now among the highest of Italian cities. In the First World War a few far-sighted Italian democrats had argued that the creation of a Yugoslav state would contribute to Italy's security and prosperity; but their voices were swamped in nationalist, and later fascist hysteria. In 1975 the Memorandum of Understanding of 1954 was

superseded by the Treaty of Osimo, directly negotiated between Italy and Yugoslavia. In welcoming its conclusion, the Italian Government declared that a strong and united Yugoslavia was an essential Italian interest. Few Italians during the period of imperial hangover from 1945 to 1953 would have dared to predict so rapid and happy an outcome.

The area in which Italy's imperial hangover could be said to have lasted longest was the South Tirol. The Italian Government's solution to the problem was the creation in 1948 of a region of Trentino-Alto Adige, composed of the German-speaking province of Bolzano (South Tirol) and the Italian-speaking province of Trento. It was one of Italy's five 'special' regions to which a considerable measure of autonomy was granted. While the Italians claimed, with remarkable insensitivity, that this arrangement met the promise of the De Gasperi-Gruber agreement of 1946, the German minority rejected it with contempt and demanded further substantial devolution of power from the region to their province. Their demand secured the sympathy of the Austrian Government and the active support of the North Tirolese. It took more than twenty years of political conflict, including six marked by terrorism and repression, for an Italian government to make the necessary concessions. Since 1972 calm has descended. But the German minority has fiercely preserved its separate identity and its own political party, the *Südtiroler Volkspartei*. Innsbruck and Munich are much nearer than Rome, and the economic and cultural links with the north are strong. It would be unwise to assume that a final solution has yet been reached.

The nationalist outburst of 1953 over Trieste may nevertheless be regarded as the last spasm of Italy's imperial hangover. There are three reasons for this: Italy's integration in Western Europe and the Atlantic alliance, her 'economic miracle', and the increasing pace of decolonization in Africa.

By 1953 Italy's international status had been transformed. In January 1947 De Gasperi visited Washington, the first transatlantic visit by any Italian prime minister, and was welcomed by President Truman not as an ex-enemy but as a potential ally. The US had been little involved in fighting Italy between 1941 and 1943, and did not therefore share Britain's persistent feelings of hostility and suspicion. Thanks largely to Sforza's diplomatic skill, Italy

participated as an equal in the work of the European Recovery Programme, through which Marshall aid was disbursed. In August 1947 Marshall told De Gasperi that Italy's ratification of his Plan 'has removed the last barrier created by fascism between Italy and the other peace-loving sovereign nations'.²³ The result of the 1948 Italian election strengthened the US commitment and did much to diminish British (notably Bevin's) doubts about Italy's democratic credentials. On 4 April 1949 Sforza signed the North Atlantic Treaty on behalf of Italy as an equal and founding member.

Integration in Western Europe had been perceived by De Gasperi and Sforza as early as 1945 as the solution to the dilemma of Italy's post-imperial role. It provided the psychological boost to Italian morale after the humiliations of military defeat and the peace treaty. Italy was a founding member of the Council of Europe in 1949, of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950, and of the European Economic Community in 1957. The process of integration coincided with Italy's 'economic miracle'. Insofar as demographic needs had inspired Italian imperialism, the massive internal migration from south to north, which accompanied the 'miracle', relieved the pressure of rural overpopulation. Mobility of labour within the EEC, on which Italy had insisted during the negotiation of the Treaty of Rome, also made a contribution. The illusions of massive overseas settlement had already vanished before the process of decolonization got fully under way. In 1956 there were some Italians who expressed pleasure at the discomfiture of Britain and France over Suez.²⁴ But by the 1960s most felt thankful that the forcible loss of their colonies had spared them the agonies of decolonization experienced by the French in Algeria and the Belgians in the Congo.

Notes

1. See Claudio G. Segrè, *Fourth Shore: The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago 1974).

2. See R. A. Webster, *Industrial Imperialism in Italy 1908-1915* (Berkeley 1975).

3. At different times Italian imperialists claimed Nice, Corsica and Savoy (in November 1938); Tunisia (which the French had seized in 1881 and where there were large numbers of Italian settlers); the Balearic Islands (as a reward for supporting Franco in the Spanish Civil War); and large chunks of Sudan, to link Libya territorially with Eritrea. In 1912 the Italians seized the Aegean Dodecanese from the Turks, and succeeded in retaining the islands until 1943; but their plans to use them

as a base for the development of Southern Anatolia were frustrated by the triumph of Turkish nationalism under Kemal in 1920-1. A complete list of Italian imperialist fantasies would be very much longer than this.

4. The Italian Government had proposed to the Peace Conference in 1946 that Istria should be partitioned along ethnic lines, basing its claim on the Wilson Line which President Wilson had proposed in 1919, but which the Italians had then rejected. Had they accepted it, instead of insisting on the whole peninsula (and thereafter persecuting its predominantly Yugoslav population), the Wilson Line might well have survived in 1947.

5. Togliatti wrote in *l'Unità* in September 1945, that 'it is almost a matter of principle that our frontier should remain on the Brenner'. P. Togliatti, *Linea d'una politica* (Milan 1948) 62.

6. B. Croce, *Contro l'approvazione del trattato della pace* (Bari 1947).

7. Italy made no attempt to return to Cyrenaica in view of Anthony Eden's public pledge of 8 January 1942 that the Senussi, who had resisted Italian rule until their final subjugation in 1931, would never again come under Italian domination.

8. C. Sforza, *Cinque anni a Palazzo Chigi* (Rome 1952) 97-99.

9. G. Andreotti, *De Gasperi e il suo tempo* (Milan 1956) 364.

10. See N. Kogan, *The Politics of Italian Foreign Policy* (London 1963), 20. Sergè states (p. 173) that post-war Italian public opinion showed a revival of interest in the colonies, and that colonial congresses were held in 1946 and 1947.

11. Andreotti, op. cit., 318-19. See also Pietro Scoppola, *La proposta politica di De Gasperi* (Bologna 1977), chs. 3 and 4. Scoppola argues that neither the Vatican nor the US Government would have been sorry at that time to see Italy ruled by a right-wing rather than a Christian Democratic government.

12. Sforza, op. cit., 139-44.

13. Sforza, *ibid.*, 173-83.

14. A. Tarchiani, *Dieci anni tra Roma e Washington* (Milan 1956), 190.

15. G. Galli, *Fanfani* (Milan 1975), 17, 73-75, 84-85.

16. D. Votaw, *The Six-Legged Dog: Mattei and ENI — A Study of Power* (Berkeley 1964), 90-107.

17. R. L. Hess, *Italian Colonialism in Somalia* (Chicago 1966), 190 ff.

18. In very recent times the war between two 'socialist states', Ethiopia and Somalia, and the insistence of the former on the military subjugation of Eritrea, has caused a 'crisis of conscience' on the Italian Left. Early in 1978, after a visit to the Horn of Africa, Gian Carlo Pajetta, the PCI's roving ambassador, expounded the party's official pro-Soviet line of support for Ethiopia in *Rinascita*. This provoked passionate protests from pro-Somalis, and the publication some weeks later in *l'Unità* of a reasoned statement of the Eritrean case.

19. Speech in Trieste, June 1949, Andreotti, op. cit., 339.

20. Adstans, *Alcide De Gasperi nella politica estera italiana 1944-1953* (Milan 1953), 205.

21. P. Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, V (Turin 1976), 433-39. In September 1945 Togliatti declared that 'the Italian character (*italianità*) of Trieste must be defended'. Togliatti, op. cit., 63-64.

22. For a detailed account see John C. Campbell (ed.), *Successful Negotiation: Trieste 1954* (Princeton 1976).

23. Tarchiani, op. cit., 133-34.

24. In this connection I permit myself a personal anecdote. In the summer of 1951 I travelled from Rome to Milan in the chance company of a formidable and voluble lady of the rich Milanese bourgeoisie. She kept me awake all night with her exposition of British wickedness and Italy's sufferings. Next morning on Milan platform she told me that she had found me *molto simpatico* and expressed the hope that 'when Britain has lost *all* her colonies, our two nations may be friends again'.

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