

Colonies (Italy)

By [Simona Berhe](#)

Summary

The Italian colonies, with the partial exception of Libya, played only a secondary role in the Great War. By virtue of not sharing borders with any German colonial territories, Italian overseas possessions were spared the conflict between the European powers in which other African countries became involved. Nonetheless, the First World War did have an impact upon the internal situation in the Italian colonial territories: while in Libya there erupted an anti-colonial revolt backed by the Central Powers, Eritrea and Somalia were affected by operations planned by the pan-Islamic network, which in the Horn of Africa was mainly sustained by Ethiopia. Finally, in the Dodecanese the war exacerbated the inter-ethnic divisions pitting the local Greek population against the Italian occupiers.

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Introduction

Although for the majority of the European [imperialist](#) powers the First World War led to greater integration between metropolis and colonies, in the case of [Italy](#) it caused the kingdom and its overseas territories to draw apart. The reasons for this were various: the fact of native troops not actually being involved in military operations on the European front; the impoverished state of the economies of Libya, [Eritrea](#), [Somalia](#) and the Dodecanese, none of which made significant contributions to the industrial war effort of the metropolis; the inability of the Italian ruling class to grasp the global scope of the conflict.

Finally, what really accounts for the marginal role of the Italian colonies (with the exception of Libya) in the Great War was the fact of their not possessing any particular strategic value, since none of them bordered on territories ruled by countries belonging to the Entente. The decision to align with [France](#) and [England](#) (April 1915) eliminated any risk of Italian overseas territories being militarily contested in a conflict between Italy and the powers of the Entente. The Italian colonies would have played a wholly different role if Rome had sided with the Central Powers. In that circumstance Libya, Eritrea and Somalia would have served a crucial function as bases for attacking Anglo-French possessions in the [North](#) and in the [Horn of Africa](#).¹

The International Context

At the outbreak of the Great War in Europe, in 1914, Italy was tied diplomatically to the Central Powers by virtue of the Triple Alliance, which from 1882 had served to safeguard the interests of the young kingdom in the continent.² While the outcomes of its expansion into Africa were guaranteed by the subaltern character that Rome's colonial (and Mediterranean) policy maintained with respect to British orientations.³

The competition ignited at the beginning of the 20th century between Berlin and London rendered the Italian position more awkward, caught as the kingdom was between the two rival [Empires](#). It became apparent that this was indeed the crux of Italian foreign policy at the Conference of Algeciras (1905), where the safeguarding of Rome's Mediterranean interests came into conflict with loyalty to the Triple Alliance. The outbreak of the Great War brought up the same dilemmas, but this time obviously in more dramatic terms. The decision to opt for [neutrality](#) reflected the state of indecision in the country at large, but also the objective difficulty of harmonising the various diplomatic requirements of the young Italian Kingdom.

Looking at things from the perspective of the overseas territories, however, the international situation as regards the conflict did in fact seem clearer: the Italian colonies were surrounded by Anglo-French possessions; furthermore, hegemony over the Mediterranean, exercised through control over the straits of Suez, was in London's hands. Then again, the fact of overseas Italy and [Germany](#) being placed in two opposed camps was confirmed by the militant fashion in which Berlin, from 1914 onwards, had fomented pan-Islamic [propaganda](#) in Libya, Somalia and Eritrea. The renewal of the Triple Alliance in 1912 was not sufficient reason to hope that Libya would escape the German vice.

The Mediterranean Colonies

Libya

Together with the [Italo-Austrian front](#), the Mediterranean area represented the main field of action for the Italian armed forces during the Great War. In particular, Libya, from November 1914 onwards, became the southern front in the Great War fought by Italy.

The outbreak of the rebellion in Fezzan (in the south) – which was due to the Sanussi faction – inaugurated a four year period of conflict that devastated Libya.⁴ From Fezzan the revolt spread rapidly to the rest of the country until it involved the whole of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Sweeping all before it, the rebellion convinced the [government in Rome](#) to opt for the most drastic solution, namely, to withdraw all garrisons from the interior.⁵ In the space of a few months Italian possessions in Libya had been reduced to a handful of coastal cities, the rest of the territory having fallen into the hands of the rebels.

The Italian withdrawal to the coast and the abandonment of a large part of the colonial territory did not signify a cessation of hostilities. On the contrary, the conflict against the *mujahidin* dragged on until 1919, Italy having to withstand pressure from the rebels attacking the few cities still in Italian hands, in the hope of winning them back again. Lacking a sufficient number of battalions and aware that the military chiefs in Rome had decided to concentrate their efforts on the European front, the governments in Tripoli and Benghazi simply sought to repel the rebel onslaught. In short, the Libyan war of 1914-1919 was one long siege.

The conflict unleashed through the resistance in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania should not be seen solely in the context of the colonial war but ought to be inserted into a wider frame, namely, the Ottoman [Pan-Islamic](#) project and the German attempt to rid the Mediterranean of the English, French and Italian presence. The convergence of German, Turkish and Libyan objectives became apparent in the Autumn of 1915 in Cyrenaica. After having driven the Italian troops towards the coast, the leader of the Sanussi, [Ahmad al-Sharif \(1873-1933\)](#), organised his forces in an attack on [Egypt](#), then an English protectorate. The invasion plan was not an isolated project but was a strategy coordinated with the [government in Berlin](#), its intention being to draw away a quota of English troops from the European theatre of war.⁶ But the presiding genius behind the operation was the Ottoman minister of war, [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#), who sought to regain a foothold in Africa and to reclaim two territories that had once belonged to the Sublime Porte, namely, Egypt and Libya. In February 1915, the Turkish minister sent his brother [Nuri Killigil Bey \(1890-1949\)](#) to Cyrenaica, his allotted task being to organise a pincer movement whereby Egypt would be invaded from the east (Sinai), from the south (Sudan)⁷ and from the west (Cyrenaica).⁸

The Grand Sanussi, who throughout 1915 had been involved in the conflict against the French in Wadai and Tibesti and against the Italians in Cyrenaica, on 12 November launched an attack upon the Anglo-Egyptian troops. The Sanussi forces, led by Nuri Bey and resupplied by German [submarines](#), succeeded in occupying Sollum, and then advancing towards Sidi al-Barrani. Nonetheless, the triumphant march of Nuri and of the Grand Sanussi was halted on 25 December that same year by the South African troops commanded by General [John Maxwell \(1859-1929\)](#), come to relieve the Anglo-Egyptian forces.⁹

The crushing defeat that followed would cost Ahmad al-Sharif his role as leader of the Sanussi brotherhood. The consequence of this new orientation was the Acroma Pact (April 1917). The accords recognised the authority of the Sanussi faction in Cyrenaica and thus enabled Italy to scale down its war effort in eastern Libya, in order to concentrate upon the western region, which had become the centre of the anti-colonial revolt.

The attempt to attack Egypt from the west having failed, the Turko-German officers chose to concentrate their forces in Tripolitania, in an attempt to strike Italy, that is to say, the weakest of the three allies then in control of the North African coast. From 1914 onwards the Ottomans had worked to promote the return of the rebels, who after 1912 (the peace of Lausanne) had left Libya, having found a welcome within the [Ottoman Empire](#). Those involved were exponents of the Libyan [jihad](#) who represented the most intransigent fringes of the resistance movement, preferring as they did exile to submission. Amongst their number were the Berber [Suleiman al-Baruni \(1872-1940\)](#) and the Arab leader [Mohammed Sof \(1857-1930\)](#).¹⁰ The power vacuum brought about by the withdrawal of the Italian garrisons resulted in the installation of governments led by the leaders of the resistance: in the Jebel (the plateau) the government of the Arab leader Sof alternated with that of the Berber al-Baruni, which mounted various expeditions against the few enclaves still controlled by the Italians. Nonetheless, their inability to capture Tripoli (and thereby to deal a mortal blow to the Italian colonial regime) and the domestic strife between Arabs and Berbers rendered the establishment of a stable government impossible. Within a short space of time the Jebel sank into a condition of misery and political anarchy.¹¹

While the zone of the plateau was grievously stricken by competition between the different political tendencies, in east Tripolitania the leader of Misurata, [Ramadan Shitewy \(1881-1920\)](#)¹² managed to ensure stability and unity of action among the *mujahidin*. From 1916 Misurata became the most important centre of Libyan resistance, extending its hegemony over Fezzan and the central-eastern region of Warfalla. Shitewy reached the apogee of his power in November 1918 when under his aegis the Tripolitanian republic was constituted, with the support of the majority of the country's notables.

For Italy the year 1918 ended in a victory in Europe and crushing defeat in Libya. Once hostilities on the European front had ended, Rome could again concentrate on the colonial question, which had been removed from the country's political agenda in 1914. Hastily abandoned between 1914 and 1915, the appearance of Libya had completely altered at the end of 1918. Having escaped from Italian control, its territories were ruled by local leaders, Shitewy in the west and [Idris Sanussi \(1889-1983\)](#) in the east.

The Dodecanese

At the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 the Dodecanese was not strictly speaking an Italian colony, but rather a colonial possession. In fact, in the course of the [Italo-Turkish War](#), the archipelago was occupied by Italian troops with a view to inducing Constantinople to surrender. According to the treaty signed at Lausanne by the Ottoman Empire and Italy, the Aegean islands would only temporarily remain in Italian hands.¹³

Italy's declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire on 20 August 1915 ratified the expiration of the peace of Lausanne and transformed the archipelago facing the Anatolian coast into a bridgehead for potential attacks on the Ottoman enemy. As things turned out, in the course of the war the islands were not involved in any hostilities. Nonetheless, notwithstanding their not being involved in the conflict, the Dodecanese were not wholly unaffected by the events of the war: the Italian [occupiers](#) had to confront the local Greek population, given the open support that this community, with the backing of the Orthodox Church, gave to [Greece](#), which positioned itself as a rival to Italy in the eastern Mediterranean. The Greek community's orientation was counterbalanced by the favourable disposition of the Muslims and the Jews, who, fearing pan-Hellenic impulses, already in evidence in other regions, maintained a benevolent stance towards the Italian presence.¹⁴ If in the course of the world war the role of the Dodecanese was, all in all, marginal, it nonetheless acquired a strategic importance in the following months, serving as a logistics base for the Italian expedition to Anatolia.

The Context of the Horn of Africa

The conflict that erupted in 1914 did not directly involve the Italian colonies of east Africa (Eritrea and Somalia); nonetheless, the domestic politics of Eritrea and Somalia were affected by international tensions. The fact that in summer 1914, at the outbreak of hostilities, Italy was in the opposite camp to England and France aroused deep apprehension in Asmara and Mogadishu (the capitals of Eritrea and Somalia respectively). Once it had become clear that Italy would align itself with the Entente, the fear of a possible Anglo-French attack dissipated, but the risk of an Abyssinian offensive appeared ever more concrete. In December 1913,

upon the death of the [Menelik II, Negusa Nagast of Ethiopia \(1844-1913\)](#), the young [Lij Iyasu \(1895-1935\)](#) was appointed as regent. The latter then decided to detach Ethiopia from the sphere of influence of France and of England, whose hegemony extended to a large part of the Horn of Africa.¹⁵ Addis Ababa drew closer to Germany and to the Ottoman Empire, which were intent upon undermining British power, their aim being to subsume Eritrea, Somalia and Kenya within the Abyssinian Empire.

Somalia

A powerful pole of anti-colonial opposition had been constituted in the Horn of Africa, to which the leader of the Somalian resistance [Mohammed Abdullah Hassan \(1856-1920\)](#) also rallied.¹⁶ The struggle spearheaded by Hassan, leader of the religious brotherhood of the Salihiya, against the English and Italian occupation of Somalia dated back to the beginning of the 20th century. Once Hassan had succeeded in stemming English advances into the country, he forced the Italians to sign a treaty recognising his authority over a part of the northern territories (1905).¹⁷ The fragile peace was breached in 1911 by Hassan's dervishes, who attacked the zone of Migiurtina, but were then driven northwards, into the territories of British Somalia. The world war coincided with a recommencement of the conflict between the Somalian resistance and the colonial troops, English and Italian.

Hassan tried to involve the Sultan in his struggle, requesting that the Ottoman troops stationed in the Arabian peninsula come to his aid in Somalia.¹⁸ He also endeavoured to draw up a matrimonial alliance with Lij Yiasu. However, the deposing of this latter in September 1916 altered the balance of power yet again, with every agreement thereby being annulled.

Yiasu's fall put an end to any hopes of forming a common anti-colonial front cemented by a shared Islamic faith. Besides, the [revolt](#) that broke out in 1915 in the Hejaz (Saudi Arabia) against Ottoman rule and the failed attempt by Enver Pasha to occupy the Suez canal had dealt a fatal blow to the pan-Islamic movement directed by the Sublime Porte.¹⁹

The scant support that Hassan received from the Turco-Germans and the deposing of Lij Yiasu meant that the former was unable to exploit to his own advantage the contemporary engagement of Anglo-Italian troops on the European front and in north Africa. At the end of the global conflict, the situation in Somalia seemed not to favour the Somali resistance, who had not been able to exploit the pan-Islamic wave (which in Libya had caused the Italian colonial regime to founder). The social and economic context had been fatally affected by the limited circulation of currency and by the anarchy that was unleashed in the central zones, causing the deaths of one third of the population of British Somalia.

The end of the campaign on the European front inaugurated a period of intense military engagement for the Mullah's troops, who were intent upon repelling the British attack mounted from October 1919 onwards: the colonial government had decided to deal once and for all with the rebellion of the dervishes. The brief campaign led in 1920 to the defeat of Mohammed Abdalla Hassan and to his death that same year.

As events in Somalia had made plain, the real danger for the colonial governments in the Horn of Africa arose from the pan-Islamic network, backed as it was by Berlin and Constantinople, and involving Ethiopia also. The chances of the revolt unleashed by Hassan proving successful depended upon his finding a point of insertion within this transnational movement.

Eritrea

The spectre of pan-Islamic contagion loomed in Eritrea in February 1915, when the German explorer [Leo Frobenius \(1873-1938\)](#), along with four of his fellow countrymen, landed at Massawa.²⁰ Officially Frobenius had come to Eritrea for scientific reasons; in reality his intention was to push into the interior and exhort the local populations to rise up against the governments of Asmara and Khartoum. The small band was then supposed to have made its way to Ethiopia. Nonetheless, the real aims of the German mission were covered up by the Italian authorities and the secret agents were hurried out of the colony.

Eritrea, if we set these clumsy propagandistic efforts aside, was not directly involved in military operations. All the same, the instability of the Libyan context had a significant impact upon the little colony in the Horn of Africa, forced as it was to send thousands of men to try to stem (in vain) the revolt that had broken out in Libya. The enrolment of native soldiers had the effect of withdrawing manpower, creating an imbalance in the local labour market, due to the resulting rise in wages. The involvement of the little colony facing the Red Sea was not limited, however, to the sending of battalions into Libya (but not into the European theatre of war). Indeed, Eritrea specialised in the production of certain products that were necessary to the Italian army: potash, cattle hides and tinned meat. Involvement in production gave rise to a rapid impoverishment of the colony, in particular the decimation of its livestock. It therefore became necessary to import [raw materials](#) from abroad, notwithstanding the general context of the war and the partial commercial blockade imposed by the British in the Red Sea. The strict limitations imposed by London on Italian shipments led to the open expression of disagreements between the two allies, linked to the reinforcing of the British presence on the Arabian peninsula.²¹

Relations between Rome and Paris in the Horn of Africa would prove to be still more

problematic. For the Italian government viewed the French presence in Djibouti as a grave threat, especially in relation to the trade in arms that the French conducted with Ethiopia. This was without taking into account the fact that in May 1918 the Djibouti government had banned all exports to Massawa: a measure that was greatly to the detriment of Eritrea, since in the war years it had indeed intensified its commercial dealings with Djibouti.²²

In the military context of the period 1914-1918 Eritrea had functioned as a territory dedicated to the production of goods useful to the war effort, along with the sending of thousands of *askari* into Libya. The risks as regards the security of the colony arose from Ethiopia, from Turco-German propaganda, but also, as we have seen, from the conflicting interests of the three allies, Italy, France and Great Britain.²³

Conclusion

As regards the colonial territories, the Italian balance sheet was somewhat unsatisfactory: Libya had been lost, Eritrea had been impoverished through the exploitation of its (scarce) resources, in Somalia the socio-economic context was in a state of collapse, and finally the Dodecanese was riven by tensions between its various ethnic communities. Rome's ambitions, among them the capture of Djibouti and the recognition of its influence over Ethiopia, had been brusquely rejected by Paris and London, thereby bringing to light the deep disagreements between the three allies and Italy's own diplomatic and political weakness.

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External Links

- [Agreement between France, Russia, Great Britain and Italy, signed at London, April 26, 1915 \(Internet Archive\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
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