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## **Why the Italians Set their Sights on East Africa: Developments and Unfulfilled Aspirations in the Mediterranean during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

In the wake of the Unification, the Italian expansionist designs were aimed, as expected, towards Africa. The fear of French aggression on the coast of North Africa drove Rome to the camp of the Central Powers, a diplomatic event of colossal importance for Europe's historical evolution until the First World War. The disturbance of the Mediterranean balance, when France occupied Tunisia and Britain Cyprus and Egypt, caused stress, anxiety and confusion among the statesmen of Italy, a fact which is reflected in their subsequent erroneous choices. The frustrations, the inability to find a colony in proximity to Italy's geographical area and the diplomatic defeats led Rome by inference to the Red Sea and Eritrea.

*Keywords:* Italy, East Africa, Mediterranean, 19<sup>th</sup> century

### **Introduction**

In the wake of the Unification, the Italian expansionist designs were aimed, as expected, at the opposite shore of the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> The barrage of developments that were taking place in this vital area for Rome would shape the future alliances and its colonial policy in Africa. The fear of French aggression on the coast of North Africa drove Rome to the camp of the Central Powers, a diplomatic fact of colossal importance for Europe's historical evolution until the First World War. The disturbance of the Mediterranean balance, when France occupied Tunisia and Britain Cyprus and Egypt, caused cracks, anxiety, and confusion among the statesmen of Italy, a

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<sup>1</sup> In post-war Italy, the first impartial work on this subject that fully met the scholarly historiographical criteria was *La Prima Guerra d'Africa* (Turin: Einaudi, 1958) by Roberto Battaglia, published in 1958. The second one chronologically was *La Guerra Libica (1911-1912)* (Rome: Ed. di storia e letteratura, 1970) by Francesco Malgeri in 1970. In the last 20 years, the removal of restrictions and the renewed interest of the historians for this period has given new impetus to the development of courses and studies about the Italian presence in Africa. The works of G. Calchi Novati, R. Mori, G. Rochat, G. Procacci, C. Zaghi, F. Surdich, N. Labanca, and A. Del Boca have offered new interpretations and scholarly substance in the study of Liberal Italy's position and role in Africa.

fact that is reflected in their subsequent erroneous choices. The frustrations over the inability to find a colony in proximity to Italy's geographical area and the diplomatic defeats led Rome by inference to the Red Sea and the destruction of 1896. Had Italy occupied Tunisia or Libya in the period 1870-1885, could it have avoided the attack in Ethiopia, costly in both blood and money? It is a sound but improper question. This chapter examines the actions of the Italian governments during the most important Mediterranean crises until 1890, attempting to understand the reasoning and the impact of their decisions. By elucidating the European diplomatic backstage of the era and by scrutinizing the reasons behind the Italian inability to impose its rule over hypothetically achievable targets, the underlying causes of the Italian colonial phenomenon during the 19<sup>th</sup> century will be analysed and interpreted. Starting, then, from the Tunisian issue of catalytic importance, the Egyptian crisis of 1882 and the repeated suggestions to capture Libya will be examined, without neglecting the diplomatic factor, an element of utmost importance for the interpretation of Italian (and not only) colonialism.

### **Liberal Italy and the regency of Tunisia**

Tunisia was many times the field of antagonism between the Great Powers because of its strategic position in the middle of the Mediterranean. Since 1574, it had been a dominion of the Ottoman sultan, but the great distance from the centre of authority, Constantinople, the administrative difficulties, and the European scheming rendered it virtually independent. The governor bore the title of Bey and the country that of Regency (Reggenza), demonstrating the very loose ties between Constantinople and Tunis. Its independence was rendered precarious after the occupation of the neighbouring Algeria by the French in 1830, whereas Libya in the East was under Ottoman control. In 1835, the Ottomans tried to restore their absolute rule in Tunisia, but failed because of the French reactions, and thus the province retained its precarious existing regime.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, defending the bey's freedom on the part of Paris served its own interests. Acting upon French "advices", Soddok Bey (Mohammed es Soddok 1859-1882) proclaimed a constitution in 1859, organized a military force, and attempted to associate his country more closely with the European socio-economic system.<sup>3</sup> The imposed western influence promoted modernization and subsequent taking loans from the financial institutions of Europe.<sup>4</sup> The construction of railways and ports led the country into bankruptcy by 1869 and placed it under the direct control of its Italian, French, and British creditors.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Nikos Psiroukis, *History of Colonialism, the Culmination*, vol. 3 (Nicosia, 1993), 252.

<sup>3</sup> Tommaso Palamenghi-Crispi, *L'Italia coloniale e Francesco Crispi* (Milan: F.lli Treves, 1928), 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Psiroukis, *Colonialism, the Culmination*, 252.

<sup>5</sup> Psiroukis, *Colonialism, the Culmination*, 254.

When Tunisia was “gifted” to Rome during the Congress of Berlin as a counterweight to the disturbance of balance in the Mediterranean and Europe, Italy refused the proposal. Since it did not proceed to occupy Tunisia when it had the momentum, it contented itself with strengthening its position and influence, evading a direct rift with Paris.<sup>6</sup> The only sensible choice that now remained to Rome was to maintain the status quo.<sup>7</sup> Besides, according to the French proclamations, there was no latent danger for Italy. President of the French Republic, Grévy (François Paul Jules Grévy 1807-1891), declared: “The issue of Tunisia does not merit losing the Italian friendship, which is valuable to us,” and Waddington stated on the same wavelength: “France does not, nor will it ever contemplate the occupation of Tunisia, since we are not willing to turn Italy into an enemy.”<sup>8</sup> The latter also comfortingly assured Rome that “we would never do anything in the Mediterranean without a prior consultation with Italy.”<sup>9</sup> The relaxed Italian government naively trusted the misleading French statements about maintaining the status quo in the Regency. In 1878, the Italian consul in Paris, Cialdini (Enrico Cialdini 1811-1892), accurately and prophetically said about the matter: “trusting is good, but not trusting is better.”<sup>10</sup>

In April 1881, the French government found the occasion that it had been searching for. A nomadic tribe, the Khroumirs of Algeria, rose against the French colonial rule and crossed the borders in search of asylum in Tunisia.<sup>11</sup> The French, with a view to “enforcing order at their borders,” dispatched a military force with “provisional” and “limited” objectives.<sup>12</sup> Paris notified Rome that this expeditionary corps would withdraw immediately after the arrest of the defectors. However, the French troops occupied Biserta and Tunis instead, imposing to Sadiq Bey (Muhammad as-Sadiq 1813-1882) the treaty of Bardo on 12 May 1881 and thus officially turning the country into a French protectorate.<sup>13</sup> The diplomatically isolated Italian government was stunned by the barrage of developments and resigned on 13 May in a climate of crisis and national outcry. All the efforts, funds, cultural penetration, political struggles, commitments, successes and promises collapsed like a house of cards with that single, decisive French blow. The attempt to carve out a policy that would be active and expansive failed amid booing, fury, and frustration. Rome had acted as a Great Power, clashed on a seemingly equal footing with Paris, and now seemed, albeit belatedly, to understand the rules of the game, yet without obtaining any practical benefit. On the contrary, the position of the Italians in Tunisia, until recently privileged, deteriorated

<sup>6</sup> Luigi Salvatorelli, *Sommario della storia d'Italia dai tempi preistorici ai nostri giorni* (Turin: Einaudi, 1969), 474.

<sup>7</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XI (Rome, 1986), 196.

<sup>8</sup> Renato Camussi, *Diritti Italiani nel mondo, Corsica, Nizza e Savoia, Tunisi, Suez, Gibuti* (Milano: Dottrina fascista, 1939), 86.

<sup>9</sup> Mario Missiroli, *Da Tunisi a Versailles* (Rome: Novissima, 1937 – 1938), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Attilio Brunialti, *Le colonie degli Italiani, i primi tentativi e le prime ricerche di una colonia in Italia (1861-1882)* (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice, 1897), 364.

<sup>11</sup> Missiroli, *Da Tunisi*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Missiroli, *Da Tunisi*, 30-31.

<sup>13</sup> Giuliano Procacci, *Storia degli Italiani* (Rome; Bari: Laterza, 1993), 423.

and their rights evaporated after the imposition of the protectorate.<sup>14</sup> The matter was partially settled with a bilateral treaty in 1896, but would cause frictions until the fascist period.<sup>15</sup>

The popular rage after the Tunisian fiasco translated into riots and anti-French demonstrations in all the major cities of the country, while anti-Italian incidents occurred in Marseilles on 17-18 June 1881. France had not merely deprived Italy of a dominion, but of a region so crucial for the Italian interests that many believed that the country would never be able to recover and find its own place under the sun, i.e. among the powerful nations of the world. Paris was no longer considered an obstacle, but a danger to the Italian security. This fear and anxiety led to consequences of utmost importance. The fact that the frustrated crowd was not in a position to know was that the largest share of the blame belonged to the Italian government, which had carried out a series of mistaken handlings, and that the French annexation of Tunisia was almost a foregone decision, as has been seen, since the Congress of Berlin.<sup>16</sup>

The psychological slap of 1881 was the catalyst that prompted Rome to join the camp of the Central Empires. Initially, Depretis did not consider alliance with these Powers as self-evident. Italy could not afford to break off all diplomatic relations with France. Besides, 400,000 Italian immigrants were residing there and 100,000 more in Tunisia. Thus, Mancini (Pasquale Stanislao Mancini 1817-1888), desiring to maintain some avenues of communication with Paris open, proposed the conclusion of a trade agreement, which was ratified in November 1881. Sonnino (Baron Sidney Salone Costantino Sonnino 1847-1922), a successful economist and a charismatic statesman who served the Italian government in many positions until the end of the First World War,<sup>17</sup> believed that there was no time for vacillation and that "Italy had to decide if it wanted to be worth something in Europe."<sup>18</sup> It was certain that, regardless of which side the Italians aligned themselves with, the other one would be displeased. Ultimately, the whole of the political world, the deputies, but also the Dynasty spoke out in favour of approaching Berlin and Vienna.

In June 1881, nine years after the signing of the first treaty, a new alliance of the Three Emperors was concluded between Germany, Austria, and Russia. However, during the first months of 1882, the latent Austro-Russian antagonism in the Balkans came to the surface. The perpetual flaw in Bismarck's system reappeared. So, when a rebellion broke out in Herzegovina and southern Dalmatia at the beginning of 1882, the

<sup>14</sup> After the abolition of the Italian privileges, the government turned to Britain for backing and mediation. See Ferrero to Blanc, 21 August 1895, London, A.C.S., Carte Crispi /510, 1662.

<sup>15</sup> Egidio Moleti di S. Andrea, *Dallo Stretto di Gibilterra al canale di Suez. l'Italia e gli altri nel Mediterraneo e nei possedimenti coloniali d'Africa* (Lecco: Tip. Sociale, 1928), 74.

<sup>16</sup> Rinaldo Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza, le scelte di politica estera dell'Italia dopo l'Unità* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987), 259-261.

<sup>17</sup> Aggeliki Sfika-Theodossiou, *Italy in the First World War. Its Relations with the Great Powers and Greece* (Athens, 2004), 38.

<sup>18</sup> Sfika-Theodossiou, *Italy in the First World War*, 275-278.

Austrians, alarmed by the proclamations of Pan-Slavism,<sup>19</sup> suspected Russian involvement. On the opposite end, Saint Petersburg never forgave Vienna for the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 and took part in the new alliance only to avoid diplomatic isolation.<sup>20</sup> The antagonism in the Balkans and the cracks that it was causing to Bismarck's edifice was Rome's ticket for the alliance. So, on 20 May 1882 the Triple Alliance (Triplice Alleanza) between Berlin, Vienna, and Rome was signed to last for five years. This defence pact had an anti-French nature, since it threw Paris in complete isolation. Paris could approach neither Russia because of its association with the Central Empires, nor Britain because of their colonial antagonism. Furthermore, if Italy was attacked by France, it provided that the two other allies would rush to its support (*casus foederis*), whereas if Berlin came under French attack, Rome was obliged to provide military assistance.<sup>21</sup> In the eventuality of an Austro-Russian war, Italy pledged to remain neutral. After a special clarification by the Italian side, the alliance would not be directed against Britain.<sup>22</sup> The treaty proclaimed the solidarity of the three governments involved for the preservation of peace and it offered Rome the coveted security that it was seeking in that turbulent period. Italy, directly or indirectly, was securing its territorial integrity: assistance in the event of a war with the hostile France, moral support for the always topical problem of the Vatican, and a truce with Vienna in the irredentist issue.<sup>23</sup>

The disadvantages of Italy's new diplomatic position were not, of course, negligible. Firstly, it had to abandon, at least temporarily, the question of the Italian regions under Habsburg control, which was perceived as treason and caused strong discontent of the Catholics, mainly in the Italian parliament's right-wing, but also among the leftists. In spite of the alliance, the tensions over the irredentist zones and for the primacy in Albania did not fade.<sup>24</sup> Germany's and Austria's adherence to the conservative monarchic values formed a hurdle in their relations with Italy. The "radical leftist Italy" was an obstacle for Berlin, which distrusted Italy avoided full co-operation with its government.<sup>25</sup> Also, in the agreement with the Central Empires there was no mention

<sup>19</sup> Pan-Slavism was a movement which set the target of unifying all Slavic nations into a single state, a vision that started crystallizing in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in the minds of the Poles, the Russians, the Czechs, and the Bulgarians. See Burns, *European History*, 620. Cf. Lenard J. Cohen, "Russia and the Balkans: Pan-Slavism, Partnership and Power", *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 49 (1994), no. 4: 814-845; David MacKenzie, *The Serbs and Russian Pan-Slavism, 1875-1878* (Michigan: Cornell University Press, 1967); Hans Kohn, *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1953); Louis Levine, "Pan-Slavism and European Politics", *Political Science Quarterly* 29 (1914), no. 4: 664-686.

<sup>20</sup> Serge Berstein, Pierre Milza, *History of Europe: The European Agreement and the Europe of Nations 1815-1919*, trans. Anastasios K. Dimitrakopoulos (Paris, 1992), 158-161.

<sup>21</sup> Berstein, Milza, *History of Europe*, 159.

<sup>22</sup> Procacci, *Storia degli Italiani*, 422-423.

<sup>23</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 323-324.

<sup>24</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 277.

<sup>25</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 419. The chaotic difference in regimes between Germany, oriented towards autocratic ideals, and the liberal Italy with its transparent foreign policy was an impenetrable obstacle to their bilateral relations. The foreign minister of Austria-Hungary

of protecting the Italian interests in the Mediterranean and Africa, a fact that demonstrates Rome's anxiety and rush to conclude a treaty at any cost as long as it avoided another slap on the part of France. Indeed, during the last stages of the Tunisian issue but afterwards too, a French attack at the Italian frontier was rumoured to be very likely.<sup>26</sup> Paris, for its part, did nothing to reassure the Italian concerns. Instead, it began to fortify the strategic port of Biserta in Tunisia, confirming and intensifying the Italian and British fears.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the limitations and difference in strength between Germany and Italy meant that the latter was no longer allowed to pursue an independent foreign policy, a policy that, judging by its results, had not been particularly favourable. Yet the Triple Alliance strengthened Italy's international position in a period of economic protectionism, political antagonism, and general mistrust. Rome, attached to the German bandwagon, may have paid the price of its participation in the Alliance, but it had won its security in Europe, a fact that would allow it to venture, dedicated and without distractions, a policy of expansion in Africa. The time margins and options in the Mediterranean basin were narrowing. Algeria and Tunisia were converted into French dominions and Egypt, as will be seen further on, would suffer the British invasion. Morocco and Libya, neighbouring to Sicily, were lending themselves as potential dominions and were considered by the Europeans as "free" despite the Ottoman suzerainty. The Italians turned their ambitions towards the latter, believing that they too, like the rest of the Powers, were entitled to expansion and to civilizing work. This time they had to act cynically, dynamically, and in a flash since there were suspicions that sooner or later Libya would become a French target as well.<sup>28</sup>

### Liberal Italy and Libya

The name "Libya" used above was not the one used by the Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, the term "Tripolitania" was used to describe the western part of today's Libya, which also included the capital Tripoli. Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and

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said in 1884: "The reason why the Italian importance was gradually declining was its democratic development," i.e. Italy distancing itself from the monarchic ideals.

<sup>26</sup> In December 1882, French mobility forebode the outbreak of yet another European war. French troops were placed on alert at the common borders whereas their number also increased dramatically. Rumours leaked about the likely shelling of the La Spezia naval base too, situated on the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea. According to the Italian view, the French were acting once more "aggressively" as they did in Tonkin, Madagascar, Congo, Tunisia, and possibly in Libya. See Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XV-XVI (Rome, 1993), 372. The risk of a war declaration was hanging as a sword of Damocles over Italy throughout this tumultuous period. In 1887, the Italians diplomats once again mentioned a possible Italo-French conflict. See Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XXI (Rome, 1968), 385.

<sup>27</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XXIV (Rome, 1996), 573 and Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XX (Rome, 1998), 240.

<sup>28</sup> Rumours about the designs and machinations of the French in Libya were putting the Italian authorities on alarm. According to the news reports, on 15 October 1887 Paris persuaded the sultan with threats to cede parts of the country's western zone to be incorporated in the French Tunisia. See Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XXI, (Rome, 1968), 190-191.

Fezzan formed a dominion under the suzerainty of the sultan and were perhaps the only zone of North Africa in which the European powers had not yet expressed any interest. The Ottomans occupied Cyrenaica in 1517 and Tripolitania in 1551, while the southern part of the country, isolated and arid because of the Sahara, remained virtually inaccessible.<sup>29</sup> The Ottoman rule was limited to the coastal areas and large cities with the sole purpose of collecting taxes, whereas the country's administration was delegated to local lords under the supervision of a governor (pasha).<sup>30</sup> The entire country was named the "Vilayet of Tripolitania" and that is why the term Tripolitania came to describe, with the passing of the centuries, all three Libyan provinces. The economically insignificant and rebellious Ottoman province suddenly acquired strategic interest after the occupation of Algeria by the French. So, the High Porte, pre-empting the Europeans, organized three campaigns after 1835 to fully subjugate the troubled region, an objective that was achieved after twenty-four years of clashes.<sup>31</sup> The area was well known and had constituted a field of antagonism between Greeks, Egyptians, and Romans since antiquity.<sup>32</sup> In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was inhabited by rugged nomadic tribes over whom Constantinople exercised suzerainty only in name.

Because of the climatic similarity with Sicily, many Italians immigrated to Tripolitania.<sup>33</sup> The oppressed Italian community in the now French Tunisia could cross the frontiers and continue its beneficial work there where "millions of hectares of uncultivated land were waiting for the care of our industrious farmers." According to others, the province resembled rather a large sandbox (*scatolone di Sabbia*).<sup>34</sup> The country was not exactly the most irresistible attraction, a fact that was attested to by the small number of European residents and the minimum capital that was invested there.<sup>35</sup> Yet Rome put in place a policy of influence and economic penetration in the region, since as "free", still alienated from the European designs, it was lending itself for something like this.

Italy could not remain indifferent to any attempt by another Power to capture Cyrenaica or Tripolitania, since it was maintaining its "legitimate rights" there.<sup>36</sup> The region's importance for Rome is evident from the frequent exploratory missions starting

<sup>29</sup> Dirk Vandewalle, *A History of modern Libya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 16.

<sup>30</sup> Vandewalle, *A History of modern Libya*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Psiroukis, *Colonialism, the Culmination*, 258.

<sup>32</sup> Today's Libya was also part of the Roman Empire in ancient times, a fact of crucial importance for the expansionist aspirations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian imperialists that should not be neglected. See De Martino, *Tripoli, Cirene*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Moleti di S. Andrea, *Dallo Stretto di Gibilterra al canale di Suez*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Moleti di S. Andrea, *Dallo Stretto di Gibilterra al canale di Suez*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare, storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino, 2002), 47. A minimum number of exploratory missions headed to Libya reveals the universal indifference of Europe towards the country. The most famous exploratory mission was that of the German Nachtigal (Gustav Nachtigal 1834-1885) in 1869 and on the Italian side that of Manfredo Camperio (Manfredo Camperio 1826-1899), two millennia after the first description by Herodotus.

<sup>36</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XV-XVI (Rome, 1993), 480.

from January 1881, which were organized to study its commercial and agricultural potential with the sultan's knowledge.<sup>37</sup> In 1882, Italy lost the opportunity to consolidate its dominance over the Mediterranean and thus public opinion and the Parliament began demanding the colonization of any dominion, an event that would restore the international standing of the country.<sup>38</sup> So matured the "predisposition", the thought that Rome, in the framework of its policy concerning Libya, ought to act instantaneously in the first favourable juncture to avoid yet another unpleasant surprise.<sup>39</sup> If this area also came under foreign control, the financial and strategic position of Italy would receive an irreparable blow, from which it might never be able to recover.<sup>40</sup> There were no longer any margins for hesitations, mistaken calculations, and clumsy moves.

In autumn 1884, the Italian military staff drew up, with absolute secrecy, plans about landing and occupying Tripolitania.<sup>41</sup> When the Triple Alliance was renewed in 1887 and 1891, Italy, still attached to the German bandwagon and having partially overcome its Francophobia, requested favourable clauses for itself, or at least more favourable than those of 1882.<sup>42</sup> The event is explainable by the improvement of its international position in the meantime.<sup>43</sup> Foreign Minister di Robilant (Carlo Felice Nicolis Count di Robilant 1826-1888) demanded exchanges in terms of a potential change of the Balkan status quo, thus leaving the issues of Trieste and Trento open. To avoid an Italo-French understanding, Bismarck and the foreign minister of Austria-Hungary, Kálnoky (Gustáv Zsigmund Count Kálnoky 1832-1898), accepted the Italian proposals for the Mediterranean basin. Berlin and Vienna reluctantly agreed to protect the Italian interests, even with arms, in case of a new French challenge. Italy was now enjoying the security that was necessary in order to reorganize internally, although its military obligations arising from the Alliance were burdening the state budget far too much.<sup>44</sup> Rome, having no other choice and fearing that Tripolitania would have the fate of Tunisia, approached Austria-Hungary, Britain, and Spain aiming to maintain

<sup>37</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XV-XVI (Rome, 1993), 255-256.

<sup>38</sup> Renzo de Felice, *Storia dell' Italia Contemporanea Stato e Società*, vol. 1 (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1976), 224.

<sup>39</sup> Felice, *Storia dell' Italia Contemporanea Stato e Società*, 224.

<sup>40</sup> The case of Tripolitania "has nothing to do with megalomania, but rather the need, political as well as economical, of an actual biological law, which imposes colonial expansion on maritime states and in the opposite case decline." See Alberto Aquarone, *Dopo Adua: politica e amministrazione coloniale* (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1989), 372.

<sup>41</sup> Labanca, *Oltremare, storia dell'espansione*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Francesco Barbagallo, "Da Crispi a Giolitti. lo Stato, la politica, i conflitti sociali", in: *Storia d'Italia, Liberalismo e Democrazia 1887-1914*, eds. G. Sabbatucci and V. Vidotto (Bari: Laterza, 1995), 27.

<sup>43</sup> One of the reasons that enhanced the value of the Italian alliance was the fierce rivalry between Austria and Russia in their influence on Bulgaria in 1886-1887. The possibility of Russia seceding from the alliance made the Italian co-operation more valuable for Berlin. See Berstein, Milza, *History of Europe*, 160. When there was peace in Europe, Italy's value was minimal, but when a crisis threatened, the esteem of Rome rose miraculously.

<sup>44</sup> Barbagallo, "Da Crispi a Giolitti", 24-27.



the status quo in the Mediterranean.<sup>45</sup> Salisbury stated that “the day that the status quo is altered in the Mediterranean it is necessary for Tripolitania to be captured by Italy.” To ensure its future consolidation, Rome approached even its great opponent, Paris, offering support in Morocco in exchange for the freedom of action in Libya.<sup>46</sup> Besides, the French had initially “offered” the Ottoman province to Italy, trying to restore the bilateral relations that had received a blow after the Tunisian fiasco.<sup>47</sup> In this way, Italy, despite the Porte’s irritation, slowly but steadily formulated a policy of economic penetration, a policy that would pave the way for its future occupation. Tripolitania, three times the size of Italy, became a constant and fixed ambition, which additionally would bring political balance to the Mediterranean, as it was believed, a balance that had been disrupted in favour of France and against Italy with the treaty of Bardo.<sup>48</sup>

The Italians claimed that they desired only the preservation of balance and the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, as it had been agreed upon in 1856.<sup>49</sup> If the Porte relinquished territories or privileges in the region to any other Power, Italy was “obliged to act.”<sup>50</sup> In this way, the enormous importance of this area, vital for Rome, becomes clear. In 1885, “few are those now in Italy who do not recognize the need to make Tripolitania our own.”<sup>51</sup> The Italians, by using their African experience until then, began to address the issue with vigour and suspicion. When in September 1885 armed clashes broke out between two nomadic tribes on the borders of Tunisia-Tripolitania, the Italians, anticipating a motive that the French would surely use, rushed to support and expand their co-operation with the pasha of the country but also with the sultan, as a counterweight to the French threat.<sup>52</sup> As the memories of the 1881 slap were still fresh, Rome knew in advance that Paris, with the pretence of ensuring order, would send a military force from the neighbouring Tunisia.<sup>53</sup> After so many Francophobic

<sup>45</sup> Missiroli, *Da Tunisi*, 38.

<sup>46</sup> Missiroli, *Da Tunisi*, 39-41.

<sup>47</sup> Brunialti, *Colonie degli Italiani*, 373.

<sup>48</sup> Giovanni Bosco Naitza, *Il Colonialismo nella storia d'Italia (1882-1949)* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1975), 12.

<sup>49</sup> During the Congress of Paris in March 1856, after the end of the Crimean War, all the Great Powers and Italy, as the then Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont, agreed to respect the independence and territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. This commitment, which all the Powers violated sooner or later, would preserve the peace in Europe. See Tullio Scovazzi, *Assab, Massaua, Uccialli, Adua, gli strumenti giuridici del primo colonialismo italiano* (Turin: Giappichelli, 1996), 65.

<sup>50</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XX (Rome, 1998), 81.

<sup>51</sup> Brunialti, *Colonie degli Italiani*, 374.

<sup>52</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XX (Rome, 1998), 108. In the same year, the Italians had their attention turned to the Red Sea as well, where they had been consolidated at Massawa with uncontrollable consequences, as will be seen further on.

<sup>53</sup> The Italians, when the rumours about a French attack in Libya intensified, had already imagined the French arguments: “You Turks are not able to guarantee the safety of Tunisia from your position in Tripolitania.” In this way, occupation of the region would not have brought about a total rupture with the Porte, since the French would, justifiably, be defending their legitimate rights and the Mediterranean security. See Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XIV (Rome, 1991), 684.

crises and disappointments, the Italians understood the methods and tactics to adopt if they wanted to turn from stooges to protagonists of the colonial adventure. Each incorrect handling, each setback, each defeat had been a painful lesson, the teachings of which they now had to implement in other African regions. In regard to Tripolitania, however, they did not manage to gain a “dominant influence” and so in 1884, like in 1878, they remained “with clean hands.”<sup>54</sup> The indecision, the unprepared Italian army, and the economic difficulties would delay taking action up until 1911.

### Liberal Italy and Egypt

The turbulent two-year period of 1881-1882, when the Egyptian crisis broke out after the developments in Tunisia, shall now be examined. Egypt, because of its inconsistent fiscal policy, stratospheric expenditures during the campaigns in Sudan, and unjustifiable expenses on behalf of the khedive,<sup>55</sup> found itself at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a deplorable financial state. The British and the French, anticipating the golden opportunity to subjugate the country and primarily to control more directly the Suez Canal, agreed to oversee the state finances themselves. Italy attempted to join this control regime, which had developed into a protectorate, in 1878 and 1879, seeking to safeguard its own interests there, but the French reaction ruled out this eventuality.<sup>56</sup> Because of the stifling European suzerainty, a revolution of national liberation character broke out in the summer of 1882, with the military officer Orabi Pasha as the prime mover.<sup>57</sup>

While the danger of military intervention and therefore of violent alteration of the already upset Mediterranean balance was becoming visible, Rome argued that the problem ought to be resolved by the internal mechanisms of the Ottoman Empire. Mancini, who wanted to avoid a unilateral military action, approached his German and Austrian allies to find a mutually acceptable and moderate solution. The latter's indifference concerning the Egyptian crisis became evident during the proceedings of the international conference in Constantinople, which was convened precisely to resolve this problem.<sup>58</sup> The British Prime Minister, Gladstone (William Ewart Gladstone 1809-1898), encouraged by German support, declined every French proposal of co-operation and decided to act unilaterally. So, on 11 July, the British fleet shelled Alexandria, revealing London's disposition to become the sole ruler not only of the canal but of the whole country. The now late proposal to Paris for co-operation was

<sup>54</sup> Brunialti, *Colonie degli Italiani*, 402.

<sup>55</sup> The role of the khedive in Egypt was essentially that of a regent or governor in the name of the Sultan, to whom he was subjected.

<sup>56</sup> Palamenghi-Crispi, *L'Italia coloniale*, 50.

<sup>57</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 352-356.

<sup>58</sup> The conference was held in June 1882, after an Italian proposition, and had the stated aim of finding a golden mean with regard to the Egyptian revolution. The conference launched an appeal to the sultan to dispatch troops for the cessation of hostilities and all its members agreed not to obtain territorial gains from that fluid situation. See Psiroukis, *History of Colonialism, the Culmination*, vol. 4, 222.

rejected and the perplexed French government ordered the withdrawal of its warships from the Egyptian territorial waters, at a time when the sultan suddenly found himself before a *fait accompli*.<sup>59</sup>

On 26 July, the British foreign minister, Granville (Granville George Leveson Gower, Count Granville 1815-1891), delivered to the Italian consul in London an invitation to act jointly and to enforce order in Egypt. Mancini declined, arguing that since the sultan had pledged to send troops for the pacification of the region, Italy had no reason to intervene and upset the European balance.<sup>60</sup> The opportunity of consolidating its presence in a Mediterranean zone of crucial importance was thus lost again. Much ink has been spilled over the reasons of Mancini's refusal. It is believed that he considered it unwise for Rome to become involved in a campaign of this kind at a time when the elections and a reconfiguration of the old electoral system were pending. Furthermore, the press and the public opinion would not have consented to an unprovoked attack against a nation that was fighting heartily for their independence. In addition, the Italian foreign minister may have hesitated to assume the initiative without the consent of the Triple Alliance members, whose stated position was defensive and conservative, having in view the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>61</sup> Of course, Bismarck had previously backed the British ambitions in Egypt behind-the-scenes, aiming to a yet wider isolation of France. The uncertain outcome of the military operations, the French distress, the lack of means, the military expenditures, and the inability of the Italian army to operate so far away from its base weighed in on Mancini's decision.<sup>62</sup> The easy victory that the British had achieved and the subsequent occupation of Egypt proved that the danger and the risk of intervention had been overestimated by Mancini, who with his unwise action condemned Italy to a disadvantageous and problematic position in the Mediterranean. The former minister of agriculture and finance, Minghetti (Marco Minghetti 1818-1886), declared in October 1882: "I would have liked the Italian flag flown next to the British on the Egyptian coast," while Crispi stated that: "Austria from the Alps to the Aegean is blocking our path, while Britain and France are smothering us in the Mediterranean."<sup>63</sup> The same statesman claimed that the New Italy lacked courage for something that the small Piedmont had more than enough.<sup>64</sup>

When Mancini's colleagues realized that the campaign did not pose grave dangers and complications, the atmosphere was charged and there was no lack of verbal at-

<sup>59</sup> Psiroukis, *History of Colonialism, the Culmination*, 223.

<sup>60</sup> Carlo Giglio, *L'Impresa di Massaua* (Rome: Istituto italiano per l'Africa, 1955), 13.

<sup>61</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 357-360.

<sup>62</sup> Miège, *L'Imperialismo coloniale Italiano*, 38.

<sup>63</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 359-360.

<sup>64</sup> Cavour dragged Piedmont into the Crimean War (1853-6) against Russia aiming only at the creation of a positive climate and at obtaining the diplomatic support of the British and the French concerning the Italian Unification. Eleutherios Venizelos (1864-1936) acted in an analogous manner in 1918/19, once again in the Crimea against the Bolsheviks, in collaboration with the Western powers. So perhaps Mancini would have also served the Italian interests better if he had acted jointly with Britain in Egypt with an eye to a future co-operation and support on other fronts.

tacks against him. He defended his positions by arguing that he had rejected the British proposal because of “respecting the rights of other states,” and on account of “international law.” As a scholar and thinker of international law, he assigned special importance to the ideals of independence and the principles of justice and morality. On 22 May 1884, he stated before the Parliament: “I can say without hesitation that, as a minister and a deputy, I shall always consider it unwise and harmful to incite Italy, a young nation that above all else needs security, peace, fruitful activity, internal stabilisation and developing its prosperity, means, and strength, to throw itself into costly and dangerous adventures in faraway lands, and to initiate something that is commonly called a colonial policy.”<sup>65</sup> The same person, in an oxymoronic manner, would come to link his name with a policy of informal or indirect imperialism.<sup>66</sup> His later actions were of catalytic significance leading to Italy’s expansion to the Red Sea and its acquisition of its first colony. The name of the “humanitarian” Mancini is today associated with one of the most resounding contradictions of modern Italian history. Germany, which maintained friendly relations with London, secured the alliance of Russia and Austria, and flirted occasionally with France, was safe and powerful. That is why the Italian alliance took on even less importance. This can explain the absence of any form of co-operation between the allies during the Moroccan crisis of 1884. At that time, once again on the occasion of actions taken by some rebelled nomadic tribes, Paris demanded the readjustment of the Algerian-Moroccan borders. The Italians, suspicious and alarmed by the development, considered the French request to be a pretext for annexing Morocco as well. Berlin was indifferent about the matter, which disappointed the Italians, and unwilling to engage in quarrels with Paris “because of some vague concerns apropos of the Italian interests... in Morocco, in the Red Sea, in Tunisia or in Egypt.” The relations of the Triple Alliance members had reached their nadir.<sup>67</sup>

Morocco, an independent state in the form of sultanate, was one of the few African lands that had yet to be placed under foreign guardianship. The position of Europeans in Morocco was settled by the agreement of 1880, a result of the Madrid conference, which was ensuring the economic interests of fourteen states in the country.<sup>68</sup> The Italian investors had this kind of interests too, such as an arms factory in Fes, while settlers and funds were progressively pouring into the country.<sup>69</sup> The sultan of Morocco was reassured that the Italians, unlike the French, did not nourish expansionist designs against his territory and fully co-operated with envoys from Rome at each given time. To maintain its privileged position and the status quo in Morocco against the French aspirations, Rome signed a similar agreement with Madrid in 1887 and 1891.<sup>70</sup> Mancini, enjoying the support not of his allies but of Spain and Britain, addressed Paris directly, making known that Italy was against any plans of French expansion in

<sup>65</sup> Giglio, *L’Impresa di Massaua*, 15.

<sup>66</sup> Giglio, *L’Impresa di Massaua*, 16.

<sup>67</sup> Petriani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 369-371.

<sup>68</sup> Psiroukis, *Colonialism, the Culmination*, vol. 3, 256-258.

<sup>69</sup> Palamenghi-Crispi, *L’Italia coloniale*, 69.

<sup>70</sup> Missiroli, *Da Tunisi*, 38.

Morocco. Rome could not allow and tolerate “the dominance of any nation from Morocco to the Nile,” that is, the consolidation of exclusive (French) interests.<sup>71</sup> France, without allied support and in dispute with Britain after the occupation of Egypt, seemed conciliatory on the issue of Morocco in an attempt to gain Italian sympathy. At that time, the President of the French Republic, Ferry (Jules François Camille Ferry 1832-1893), proposed as a counterweight to the French influence in Morocco the Italian freedom of movement in Tripolitania.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion

By 1884, Italy had virtually turned into an observer of the Mediterranean developments. Russia had acquired territorial footholds and influence in the Balkans as a result of the Russo-Turkish war in 1877-1878, Austro-Hungary had occupied Bosnia and Herzegovina, Britain had won Egypt and Cyprus, France Tunisia, Greece Thessaly, and even Montenegro had expanded its territories by annexing Bar and Dulcino (Ulqin). As if that were not enough, Austria-Hungary was having designs on Macedonia and Britain was seeking to acquire a port in Asia Minor. In order not to remain mere “isolated spectators” of the developments and have “all the booty” shared before Italy could provide for its interests, the Italians approached London with the aim of taking joint action in all matters relating to the Mediterranean.<sup>73</sup> The rift between the Central Empires and Russia on the issue of primacy in Bulgaria forced Bismarck to seek the British friendship. Britain, in addition to its traditional rivalry with France in Africa and elsewhere, felt threatened by the Russian progress in the Balkans and especially in Central Asia.<sup>74</sup> So, exiting from its famous diplomatic isolation, it began to co-operate and cultivate cordial relations with Germany and Italy.<sup>75</sup> British friendship and diplomatic backing starts from the period of the Risorgimento. Italy, because of the all-powerful British Navy and the vulnerability of its shores, could not in any case maintain a hostile attitude towards London. The British manifested their friendship – besides the abovementioned invitation during the campaign in Egypt – in the Red Sea as well. This collaboration constituted the bulwark of Italian foreign policy in the period 1882-1885.<sup>76</sup>

The Italo-British diplomatic contacts from 1882 until 1887 were aimed at the joint protection of individual interests in the Mediterranean from the Russian and French peril. With Bismarck’s blessing, di Robilant proposed to London an understanding for

<sup>71</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XI (Rome, 1986), 463-465.

<sup>72</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 368-370.

<sup>73</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XI (Rome, 1986), 151-152.

<sup>74</sup> Emmanuel Roukounas, *Diplomatic History: 19th Century* (Athens, 1975), 127.

<sup>75</sup> Foreign Minister di Robilant stated in January 1887: “With Britain we maintain and we will always improve, when the circumstances require it, those relations of special friendship which constitute a traditional area of Italian policy.” See Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XX (Rome, 1988), 406-407.

<sup>76</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 413-416.

the maintenance of the status quo in the Aegean, the Adriatic, the Red and the Black Sea, as well as diplomatic support in Egypt in exchange for the British support in Libya.<sup>77</sup> On this basis, in February 1887 a secret agreement on the Mediterranean was signed between London and Rome, which automatically became tripartite because of the latter's alliance to Vienna.<sup>78</sup> This triple Mediterranean alliance also bound Spain due to its prior agreements with Italy about Morocco and the Mediterranean. The "necessity" of a consortium on the defence of the Mediterranean status quo and of the Ottoman Empire in the event of war had led to the signing of the agreement.<sup>79</sup> Germany, now indirectly associated with Britain, strengthened its position in relation to the French and the Russians, who were understandably feeling threatened. The common German danger in Europe and the British peril throughout the world during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led these two pariahs of the new order to come closer to one another and ultimately conclude an alliance in 1892.

For Italy, the agreement and the consequent system of security meant stability and peace, while for di Robilant it was a personal triumph. The representatives of the Parliament's right and left wing realized that because of the geographical location, the political situation in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the lack of means, Italy would always have to ally itself with a stronger state, paying the appropriate price. Amidst hesitations and reservations, it had to surrender part of its diplomatic independence, constantly falling in line with Britain or Germany and abandoning an energetic policy that posed risks. Diplomatic isolation was certainly not favouring the policy of expansion in the Balkans and Africa. The imperialist policy, "politica di grandezza," could be pursued only through alliances and with a backing.<sup>80</sup> The Triple Alliance, although conservative and restrictive, offered Italy a place among the powerful, a regime of security, and the necessary prestige, which sometimes as a medium and sometimes as an end in itself was paving the way for a policy of expansion. A natural consequence of Italian co-operation with the Central Empires was rupture with France, with serious political and economic ramifications for Rome.<sup>81</sup>

This was Italy at the time when it was implementing its expansionary plans in the Red Sea. The cards that shaped its foreign and, up to a certain point, its colonial policy in this period, were laid on the table in the present article. The stress about security and balance in the Mediterranean, the British co-operation, the French rivalry, the belief about a fair territorial compensation in Africa due to the previous failures, the general political atmosphere, the rising nationalism, and the sometimes cold, sometimes indifferent, and sometimes cordial relations with the German and Austrian allies are facts that must be taken into account in order to comprehend Italian colonialism.

<sup>77</sup> Roukounas, *Diplomatic History*, 128.

<sup>78</sup> Berstein, Milza, *History of Europe*, 161.

<sup>79</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *D.D.I.*, vol. XX (Rome, 1988), 766.

<sup>80</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 421.

<sup>81</sup> Petrignani, *Neutralità e Alleanza*, 426.

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## **Zašto su Talijani bacili pogled na Istočnu Afriku: Razvoj i neostvarene težnje na Sredozemlju tijekom 19. stoljeća**

### **Sažetak**

U jeku talijanskog ujedinjenja, talijanski ekspanzionistički nacrti bili su, kako se i očekivalo, usmjereni prema Africi. Strah od francuske agresije na obali sjeverne Afrike odveo je Rim na stranu Centralnih sila, što je bio diplomatski događaj od kolosalnog značaja za povijesni razvoj Europe do Prvoga svjetskog rata. Poremećaj mediteranske ravnoteže, kada je Francuska okupirala Tunis, a Britanija Cipar i Egipat, izazvao je nervozu, tjeskobu i zbunjenost među talijanskim državicima, što se odrazilo na njihove kasnije pogrešne odluke. Frustracije, nemogućnost pronalaska kolonije u blizini talijanskog zemljopisnog područja i diplomatski porazi vodili su Rim do Crvenog mora i Eritreje. Napetost o sigurnosti i ravnoteži na Mediteranu, britanska suradnja, francusko rivalstvo, uvjerenje o teritorijalnoj kompenzaciji u Africi zbog prethodnih neuspjeha, opće političko ozračje, rastući nacionalizam i ponekad hladni, ponekad ravnodušni, a ponekad i srdačni odnosi s njemačkim i austrijskim saveznicima su činjenice koje se moraju uzeti u obzir kako bi se shvatio talijanski kolonijalizam.

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