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The Economic Policy of the Italian Administration in the Eritrean Colony in the Early 1920s: The Case of the Asmara Chamber of Commerce

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the brief history of the Eritrean Colony's Chamber of Commerce in the early 1920s and the intertwining of that institution's history with the advent of the Fascist regime. Upon taking power, Fascism did not immediately overturn Italy's approach to colonial and foreign policy. At least in the early years of the regime, it limited itself to breaking the chains of prudent liberal politics. The Chamber of Commerce of Asmara, which was supposed to represent, in an independent form, the economic and commercial interests of the companies of Italy's first-born colony, became a victim not of a new colonial policy but, rather, of the ideological straitjacket imposed by the regime. The Fascists had not formulated any programmes for the Italian colonies and would not devise a specific policy until the war with Ethiopia in the second half of the 1930s. This paper, drawing on both previously unpublished and already familiar documents in the Historical Archive of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, investigates the social and economic context in which the Asmara Chamber of Commerce came to be established and the reasons for its premature dissolution.

1. Introduction

This article analyses the brief history of the Eritrean colony's Chamber of Commerce in the early 1920s, from its inauguration to its dissolution at the behest of the colonial administration. Chambers of commerce had a long history in Italy, but the institution failed to take root as a permanent structure in Italy's first-born

colony. This is probably why historians have only viewed the Asmara chamber as a source of information on the economic health of the colony and not as actor in developments in Eritrea. Following the establishment of the Italian colonial presence on the coasts of Eritrea, several generations of entrepreneurs, lured by what were thought to be rich investment opportunities in the new territories, tried to strengthen their own and Italy's influence on trade passing through Eritrean ports. It soon turned out that Eritrea could not produce enormous profits for an Italy eager to establish itself as a player on a par with other European colonial powers. The lands on which Rome established its control were either poor in natural resources, or, as in the case of Ethiopia, were conquered too late for Italy to exploit their potential. The Asmara Chamber of Commerce was born in the period of the transition from the liberal state to the Fascist regime and was therefore an important marker of structural change in the colonial administration of Eritrea. Decades earlier, in 1886, a group of entrepreneurs of various nationalities had tried but failed to promote the creation of such an institution. Later, in 1893, they succeeded in creating a chamber of commerce, based in Massawa, with jurisdiction over the whole Eritrean territory.¹

This study draws largely on sources and documents belonging to an archival collection not previously inventoried or consulted. They are, therefore, unpublished. The documents considered come from the Historical Archive of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and include an important correspondence between the Director of the Chamber of Commerce, the management of the Società per le Saline Eritree and senior officials of the Eritrean Colony and the Min-

¹ Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome (hereafter ASDMAE), *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 27, f. 5, Gené to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 22 July 1886; ASDMAE, Archivio Storico del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (hereafter ASMAI), *Africa III*, b. 75, f. 2, Baratieri to the Foreign Ministry, 25 December 1892; ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 1051, f. 1, Report on the progress of the Chamber of Commerce for the year 1896, 29 December 1896. On the Eritrean Chamber of Commerce during the liberal regime, see: E. Bidischini and L. Musci (eds.), *Guida agli archivi storici delle Camere di commercio italiane*, Rome, 1996; L. Einaudi, *Un principe mercante. Studio sull'espansione coloniale italiana*, Turin, 1900.

istry of Colonies. Other selected archival sources consulted were the “Fondo Eritrea” and the “Direzione Generale Affari Politici”: documents regarding directives from the Italian Ministry for Africa, reports by the Asmara Chamber, correspondence of the Chamber’s directors with the governor of Eritrea and the Minister of Colonies. In addition, I examined extracts from publications of the government of Eritrea and of the Chamber of Commerce, royal decrees and previously exploited archival sources. The aim is to understand the social and economic context in which the Asmara Chamber of Commerce was founded and the reasons for its premature dissolution. Furthermore, I seek to show the connections between the history of that particular institution, active for only two years in the territory of Eritrea, and the Fascist regime’s initial approach to colonial policy. The history of the Chamber of Commerce in Eritrea is intertwined with early projects for the “enhancement” of Italy’s colonies, carried out much later by the Fascist regime. The information derived from the new sources throws light on the intentions of the Fascist leaders, who had not devised clear programmes regarding foreign policy and the colonies. Indeed, to overcome this void, Fascism turned to the men of the Nationalist movement, who were crucial for the development of an aggressive colonial policy. Ideology alone, however, did not suffice for these projects to be carried out: that only happened after the regime’s decision to commit to the conquest of Ethiopia.

2. Problems of periodisation of Fascist colonial economic policy

A classic periodisation of Italian colonial economic policy in Eritrea divides the period of Italian domination into four phases of exploitation or economic and non-economic functions:

- 1) from 1890 to 1895 Eritrea was exploited as a colony to be settled by landless Italian peasants;
- 2) simultaneously and subsequently, Eritrea was a source of raw materials to be shipped to Italy and a warehouse for goods in transit from Ethiopia and the Arabian peninsula;

- 3) from 1908 to 1910 for Somalia, from 1912 to 1932 for Libya and from 1935 to 1941 for Ethiopia, Eritrea was a source of soldiers for Italian expansion in those territories;
- 4) from 1935 to 1941, Eritrea was destined for commercial and industrial “enhancement.”²

The Eritrean colony, therefore, remained an unproductive possession for many years, demanding an infusion of resources from the mother country.³ Practically throughout the period of Italian presence, the economy of the overseas territories was “artificially” supported by the state. Until 1935, Eritrea supplied colonial militias and constituted the commercial centre for the diffusion of Italian goods in Ethiopia and the ports of the Red Sea.⁴ The Fascist regime’s first objective was substantially achieved, because the recruitment of troops proceeded regularly, while the second was mostly a failure: economic enhancement of the territory remained a dead letter. The economic constraints imposed by the reorganisation of the state budget, the onset of the Great Depression and the difficulties that beset the national economy in the early part of the 1930s made economic valorisation impossible. The result was an insufficient contribution of the state to the requisite infrastructural development of the overseas territories, which lacked support from private investment.⁵ This situation, however, was also a consequence of Fascism’s determina-

² T. Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941. Policies, Praxis and Impact*, Uppsala, 1987, p. 32.

³ A. Gagliardi, “La mancata ‘valorizzazione’ dell’impero. Le colonie italiane in Africa orientale e l’economia dell’Italia fascista”, in *Storicamente*, 2016, pp. 1-32; T.C. Killion, “The Eritrean Economy in Historical Perspective”, in *Eritrean Studies Review*, no. 1, 1996, pp. 91-118; G.L. Podestà, “Da coloni a imprenditori. Economia e società in Africa Orientale Italiana”, in F. Amatori and A. Colli (eds.), *Imprenditorialità e sviluppo economico. Il caso italiano (secc. XIII-XX)*, Società Italiana degli Storici Economici, Università Bocconi, 14-15 novembre 2008, Milan, 2009, pp. 1069-1094.

⁴ G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell’impero. Economia, politica e lavoro nelle colonie italiane dell’Africa orientale. 1898-1941*, Turin, 2004, p. 162, p. 171.

⁵ A. Tségai, “Historical analysis of infrastructural development in Italian Eritrea: 1885-1941. Part One”, in *Journal of Eritrean Studies*, no. 1, 1986, pp. 19-33; G.L. Podestà, “Building the Empire. Public works in Italian East Africa (1936-1941)”, in *Entreprises et Histoire*, no. 1, 2013, pp. 37-53.

tion to put the creation of a great empire before the economic enhancement of colonial domains. The empire could only be created through a prolonged effort, but according to the Fascist leaders it would assure Italy's prosperity and development.⁶ Until then, the colony's history would be shaped by developments and events that left little scope for enrichment possibilities. Italian colonialism was not accompanied by strong economic interests; indeed, financial capital only moved after the conquest of Ethiopia, that is, when the possibility of exploiting a boundless territory rich in investment opportunities was more than certain. Both the proponents of colonial expansion and its critics treated the broad economic interests in play as real protagonists, thereby contributing to the success of colonial enterprises in the public imagination.⁷ Italy's "poor" colonialism could not vie with the empires of the other European powers on an equal footing, which prompted Lenin to contemptuously call the Italian expansion "beggar imperialism."⁸ Meanwhile, advocates of an active colonial policy during the liberal period often complained that capital did not follow the flag. Economic interests did mobilise in considerable numbers to exploit territories which, however, did not have much to offer.⁹ The scale of business investment and commerce linking Italy and the colonies was certainly modest, but growing. Italian policies led, however, to the widespread impoverishment of the occupied territories. Italian colonialism in East Africa was cel-

⁶ G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, p. 170.

⁷ N. Labanca, *Oltremare, Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*, Bologna, 2002, p. 267. See also D.K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire 1830-1914*, London, 1973; D.K. Fieldhouse, *Politica ed economia del colonialismo 1870-1945*, Rome-Bari, 1980; A. Hodgart, *The Economics of European Imperialism*, London, 1977.

⁸ V.I. Lenin, *L'imperialismo, fase suprema del capitalismo*, 1916; V.I. Lenin, *Quaderni sull'imperialismo*, Rome, 1971; G. Maione, *L'imperialismo straccione: classi sociali e finanza di guerra dall'impresa etiopica al conflitto mondiale 1935-1943*, Bologna, 1979.

⁹ N. Labanca, *Oltremare*, pp. 267-268. See also G.L. Podestà, *Sviluppo industriale e colonialismo. Gli investimenti italiani in Africa Orientale. 1869-1897*, Milan, 1996; E.Q.M. Alamanni, *La Colonia Eritrea e i suoi commerci: esame analitico del movimento generale d'importazione ed esportazione dei possesi e protettorati italiani*, Turin, 1891; D. Strangio, "Italian colonies and enterprises in Eritrea (XIX-XX centuries)", in *The Journal of European Economic History*, no. 3, 2010, pp. 599-623.

ebred by contemporary colonial historians and by the ruling class of liberal and Fascist Italy, who assumed that the arrival of the occupier would allow the lands of the Horn of Africa to enter the international market circuits. In fact, however, the lands facing the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula were already fully involved in the networks of international trade passing through the Red Sea. Furthermore, domestic and intra-African trade had already been very substantial in the centuries preceding the Italian occupation: Massawa was the transit centre for goods coming from the interior of Africa destined for markets in Arabia and India (and vice versa); from the Somali coast, cattle and other products were shipped to the Arabian Peninsula; from Tripoli and Benghazi, goods were exported to the East and to the West and Europe.¹⁰

Italy's policies for the exploitation of the colonies' resources had to adapt, not without difficulty, to political and economic circumstances and to the response of the local populations, as well as to the occupied lands' capacity to interact with Italian and international markets.¹¹ The occupier, however, did not promote the inclusion of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 270. See also M. Zaccaria, "Italian Approaches to Economic Resources in the Red Sea Region", in *Eritrean Studies Review*, no. 1, 2007, pp. 113-155; Y. Mesghenna, *Italian colonialism: a case of study of Eritrea, 1869-1934. Motive, praxis and result*, Lund, 1988; G.B. Beccari, *Guida descrittiva economica e commerciale dei porti più ragguardevoli del Mar Rosso. Il pellegrinaggio mussulmano ed il canale di Suez*, Montevarchi, 1880; E. Kurimoto, "Trade relations between western Ethiopia and the Nile valley during the nineteenth century", in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, no. 1, 1995, pp. 53-68; R. Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia, from Early Times to 1800*, London, 1961; R. Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia 1800-1935*, Addis Ababa, 1968; R. Pankhurst, "The 'banyan', or Indian, presence at Massawa, the Dahlak islands and the Horn of Africa", in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, no. 1, 1974, pp. 185-212; R. Pankhurst, "Indian Trade with Ethiopia, the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", in *Cahiers d'études africaines*, no. 55, 1974, pp. 453-497; R. Pankhurst, "The history of Ethiopia's relations with India prior to the nineteenth century", in *Proceedings of the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (Pices)* 4, no. 1, 1974, pp. 205-311; J. Miran, *Facing the land, facing the sea. Commercial transformation and urban dynamics in the Red Sea port of Massawa, 1840s-1900s*, Ph.D. (History), Michigan State University, 2003; J. Miran, "Endowing Property and Edifying Power in a Red Sea Port: Waqf, Arab Migrant Entrepreneurs, and Urban Authority in Massawa, 1860s-1880s", in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, no. 2, 2009, pp. 151-178.

¹¹ D. Strangio, *Italian colonies and enterprises in Eritrea*, p. 600.

those lands in the international trade circuits, but simply re-directed trade, modifying and developing the existing routes. Given the poverty of Italy's colonial possessions and their lack of natural resources, the "enhancement" of the territories was mainly oriented towards trade and, especially, towards agriculture.¹² Yet, the political, diplomatic and strategic choices made by a succession of governments of liberal Italy, which desired to gain control over the entire Horn of Africa, had economic consequences that compromised the correct implementation of colonial policies, often rendering them confused and largely ineffective.¹³

The confused expansionist policies that the young Kingdom of Italy undertook towards the end of the 1800s in response to the mounting tensions between European powers revealed all the political, economic and organisational weaknesses of the liberal state. They were improvised, muddled, lacked organisational clarity, and allowed the evolution of international power relations to largely condition the government's action.¹⁴

The only clear objective of a succession of liberal governments was to preserve Italy's colonial conquests at minimal economic and political cost. The cost, however, was quite high both economically, considering the outlays required for gaining and holding colonies, and politically, due to a series of painful military defeats.¹⁵

¹² N. Labanca, *Oltremare*, p. 274. See also I. Taddia, "Sulla politica della terra nella colonia Eritrea. 1890-1950", in *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, no. 1, 1984, pp. 42-78; I. Taddia, "Intervento pubblico e capitale privato nella Colonia Eritrea", in *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, no. 2, 1985, pp. 207-242; I. Taddia, *L'Eritrea-colonia. 1890-1952. Paesaggi, strutture, uomini del colonialismo*, Milan, 1986; R. Rainero, *I primi tentativi di colonizzazione agricola e di popolamento dell'Eritrea, 1890-95*, Milan, 1960.

¹³ *Ibid.* See also: A. Aquarone, *Dopo Adua: politica ed amministrazione coloniale*, Rome, 1989; M. Romandini, "Da Adua al governo civile in Eritrea nelle considerazioni di Ferdinando Martini", in *Africa*, no. 4, 1983, pp. 628-646; M. Romandini, "Il 'dopo Adua' di Ferdinando Martini, governatore civile in Eritrea (1897-1907)", in *Studi Piacentini*, 1996, pp. 177-204; I. Rosoni, *La Colonia Eritrea. La prima amministrazione coloniale italiana (1880-1912)*, Macerata, 2006.

¹⁴ L. Monzali, "Politica ed economia nel colonialismo africano dell'Italia Fascista", in *Clio. Rivista trimestrale di studi storici*, n. 3, 2001, p. 407.

¹⁵ G. Calchi Novati, *L'Africa d'Italia. Una storia coloniale e postcoloniale*, Rome, 2011; G.

Following the First World War, territorial expansion remained a key interest of the Italian ruling class, but the disappointing post-war settlement, the so-called “mutilated victory” for Italy, excluded Italy de facto from the small circle of claimants to the former German colonies.¹⁶ In any event, Italy’s political, social and economic situation would not have allowed it to cope with the territorial expansion then required.¹⁷ Rome was not in a position to foot the enormous bill for military control and economic enhancement of new territories.¹⁸ Given the problems besetting Italy, the government headed by Francesco Saverio Nitti opted for a stringent cost containment programme that envisaged the reduction of civilian expenses and even the suppression of the Ministry of Colonies.¹⁹

The handover with the Mussolini government in October 1922 did not immediately change Italy’s colonial plans. Foreign and colonial policy were not immediate priorities for the Duce, much less for the Fascist party, and the Fascist regime at first did not articulate a colonial programme of its own. In the years that followed Mus-

Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano. Documenti*, Turin, 1973; J.-L. Miège, *L'imperialismo coloniale italiano dal 1870 ai giorni nostri*, Milan, 1976.

¹⁶ P. Soave, *Una vittoria mutilata? L'Italia e la Conferenza di Pace di Parigi*, Soveria Mannelli, 2020; G. Calchi Novati, *Fra Mediterraneo e Mar Rosso. Momenti di politica italiana in Africa attraverso il colonialismo*, Rome, 1992; G.A. Costanzo, *La Politica italiana per l'Africa orientale*, Rome, 1957.

¹⁷ R.L. Hess, “Italy and Africa: Colonial Ambitions in the First World War”, in *The Journal of African History*, no. 1, 1963, pp. 105-126; L. Monzali, “La politica estera italiana nel primo dopoguerra 1918-1922. Sfide e problemi”, in *Italia contemporanea*, no. 256-257, 2009, pp. 379-406; L. Monzali, “Il governo Orlando-Sonnino e le questioni coloniali africane alla conferenza della pace di Parigi nel 1919”, in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, no. 1, 2013, pp. 67-132.

¹⁸ G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero. Economia, politica e lavoro nelle colonie italiane dell'Africa orientale. 1898-1941*, Turin, 2004, pp. 159-160. See also R. Ciasca, *Storia coloniale dell'Italia contemporanea. Da Assab all'impero*, Milan, 1938; A. Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. Dall'Unità alla marcia su Roma*, Rome-Bari, 1976; A. Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. La conquista dell'impero*, Rome-Bari, 1979; A. Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. La caduta dell'impero*, Rome-Bari, 1982; A. Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. Nostalgia delle colonie*, Rome-Bari, 1984.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160. On the colonial policy of liberal Italy, see: G. Toniolo, *Storia economica dell'Italia liberale 1850-1918*, Bologna, 1988; V. Castronovo, *Storia economica d'Italia: dall'Ottocento ai giorni nostri*, Turin, 1995.

solini's rise to power, colonial policy gradually included elements characteristic of a totalitarian regime, but, as nothing had been prepared in advance, the only innovation was the break with liberal Italy's "low-profile" management of its relations with other powers.²⁰ Italian foreign policy took a more aggressive and resolute stance, but, in reality, there were no fundamental changes: rather, the element that stood out before the second half of the 1930s was the radical modification of Italian colonial policy's ideological orientations, programmatic directives, and economic and social relations with the countries in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea areas.²¹

In the period of the ascendancy of Mussolini's regime between 1922 and 1940, we can identify three phases that exemplify the maturation of the colonial orientation of Fascist Italy:

- 1) the years of transition, 1922-26;
- 2) the years of definition, 1927-36; and
- 3) the years of maturity and apogee, 1936-40.²²

The first period was distinguished by "strong government", based on a change of style in foreign policy and on a more resolute and aggressive stance. A cogent expression of this period was the appointment of Luigi Federzoni as Minister of the Colonies from 1922 to 1924 and from 1926 to 1928. During the years of definition, the peculiarities of Fascist colonial policies began to become explicit in the ideology, programmes and political, economic and military actions of the government.²³ The colonial strategies implemented in this period departed from those of previous years and shifted the focus to different areas at different times. The programmes con-

²⁰ G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, p. 160. See also E. Collotti, *Fascismo e politica di potenza. Politica estera 1922-1939*, Florence, 2000; G. Carocci, *La politica estera dell'Italia fascista (1925-1928)*, Bari, 1969.

²¹ R. De Felice, *Storia dell'Italia contemporanea. Crisi europea e guerra mondiale 1930-1943*, Naples, 1980, p. 46; L. Goglia and F. Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'impero*, p. 203.

²² L. Goglia and F. Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'impero*, p. 204

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

ceived in this period were mostly a jumble, indicated a congeries of interests, first in Africa and then in the Mediterranean, and were intended to favour penetration into several countries, namely Libya, Ethiopia and Yemen.²⁴ This phase is remembered above all for the growing rhetoric in favour of territorial expansion by military force and for the start of the war with Ethiopia.²⁵ The third period, finally, saw the full unfolding of Fascist colonial imperialism in its ideological and political components. Nevertheless, Italy's success in the war against Ethiopia did not solve the problem of controlling the territory, owing to the strong resistance of the Ethiopian people.

In light of the above, it can be argued that there were no major differences between late liberal colonialism and Fascist colonialism until the mid-1930s. In essence, Italian colonial policy did not change much from the ascent of Fascism to the regime's epochal decision to engage in conquest to create an Italian empire. The real turning point in colonial policy came with the aggression against Ethiopia, which raised Italy to the rank of great power with a colonial empire.²⁶ The period from the March on Rome in October 1922 to the end of 1934 was a long phase of transition, during which the regime struggled to carry out the confusing programmes designed for the "valorisation" of the East African colonies. Consequently, we can divide the history of the Italians in East Africa into two macro phases: a "colonial" phase, from 1885 to 1935, and an "imperial" phase, from 1936 to 1941.²⁷ The characteristics of the colonial phase were comparable to those of the imperialist phase of the other European powers.²⁸ In

²⁴ G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, p. 161.

²⁵ L. Goglia and F. Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'impero*, pp. 206-207. See also N. Labanca, *Oltremare*, pp. 504-506; G. Rochat, *Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d'Etiopia. Studio e documenti 1932-1936*, Milan, 1971.

²⁶ G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, p. 161. See R. Ben-Ghiat and M. Fuller (eds.), *Italian Colonialism*, New York, 2005.

²⁷ G.L. Podestà, "Le città dell'Impero. La fondazione di una nuova civiltà italiana in Africa orientale", in *Città e Storia*, no. 1, 2009, p. 111.

²⁸ G. Carocci, *L'età dell'Imperialismo*, Bologna, 1979; W. Reinhard, *Storia del colonialismo*, Turin, 2002; E. Hobsbawm, *L'età degli imperi 1875-1914*, Rome-Bari, 1987; F. Betts, *L'alba illusoria. L'imperialismo europeo nell'Ottocento*, Bologna, 1986.

the Italian case, the only difference concerns the ideological pre-eminence of the demographic question from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Until 1935, the features of colonial policy did not really change with respect to the liberal period: it was the war on Ethiopia and the drive to create the empire that favoured the growing totalitarian thrust of the regime.²⁹

3. The rebirth of the Eritrean Colony Chamber of Commerce in 1921 and the onset of friction with the colonial government

After a long absence, on 10 April 1921, the autonomous institution representing the interests of entrepreneurs and traders was revived. The founding of the Chamber of Commerce, based in the city of Asmara and with jurisdiction over the entire territory of the colony, was sanctioned by Royal Decree 551 of 10 April 1921.³⁰ The operations of the Chamber, which, in addition to dealing with the few Italian enterprises present in the area, would be responsible for monitoring the economic and commercial conditions of the colony, were already in full swing at the end of July: the institution, indeed, was already in contact with the public to carry out its operations and

²⁹ G.L. Podestà, *Le città dell'Impero*, p. 111. See also G. Calchi Novati, *L'Africa d'Italia*, pp. 183-212; G.L. Podestà, "Economia e popolazione in Africa Orientale Italiana e Libia, (1936-1941)", in A. Messina (eds.), *L'Economia nello Stato Totalitario Fascista*, Ariccia, 2017, pp. 215-234; N. Labanca, *Oltremare*, p. 129.

³⁰ For a history of Chambers of Commerce during the liberal age, see: G. Sapelli, *Storia dell'Unione italiana delle Camere di commercio, 1862-1994*, Rome, 1997; M. Malatesta, "Stato liberale e rappresentanza dell'economia. Le Camere di commercio", in *Italia contemporanea*, no. 171, 1988, pp. 36-66; M. Malatesta, "Le Camere di commercio nel periodo liberale", in C. Mozzarelli (ed.), *Economia e corporazioni. Il governo degli interessi nella storia d'Italia dal Medioevo all'età contemporanea*, Milan, 1988. The Chamber of Commerce of the Eritrean Colony, founded in 1893, was replaced in 1900, after seven years of activity, by an internal committee of the government of the Eritrean Colony. The Chamber of Commerce had the purpose of representing the commercial and industrial interests of the colony in the colonial government and of cooperating in their development. It was also tasked with collecting news and statistical data for the colonial government and providing it with advice and information, upon request, regarding Eritrea's trade, industry and economic development.

it was therefore urgent to approve the rates of chamber taxes and the fees on certificates. The first communications were signed by the president, Pasquale Vaudetto,³¹ and by the councillor secretary, Giuseppe Paternostro,³² and among these were indicated the rates for each administrative act and the quantity of bulletins for the collection of Chamber taxes sent to each regional commissioner.³³ Vaudetto was appointed president in the Chamber Council's meeting of 13 June 1922.³⁴ At the beginning of 1923 the institution estab-

³¹ See S. Maggi, *Colonialismo e comunicazioni. Le strade ferrate nell'Africa italiana (1887-1943)*, Naples, 1996; F. Schupfer, *Del problema ferroviario con speciale riguardo al sistema finanziario più adatto alla costruzione di ferrovie nelle nostre colonie (Eritrea)*, Rome, 1911.

³² The trader Giuseppe Paternostro represented the Chamber of Commerce as secretary and was director of Chamber's magazine, *L'Eritrea Commerciale*, which was closed in March 1923.

³³ ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 915, f. 2, Schedule of secretarial fees, 1 August 1922; ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 915, f. 2, Note of the Finance Department, 22 June 1922. The number of payment bulletins of the Chamber provided for each Commissariat allows us to make a hypothesis on the presence of entrepreneurial activities in the Eritrean territory, since 800 were assigned to Hamasien, 300 to Massawa, 200 to Adi Ugri and Adi Caieh, 150 to Cheren, 100 each to Agordat and Barentù, and 50 to Assab, for a total of 1,900. These numbers show that the presence of companies in the Italian colony was concentrated above all in the major centres. See also G.L. Podestà, "I censimenti nei domini coloniali come fonte per la storia sociale", in *Annali di statistica*, 2, 2012, pp. 253-280. Official estimates were never made, apart from some episodic and unsystematic surveys, until 1936, presumably because the failure of the settlement policy had to be concealed. The numbers, in fact, were rather low: the number of Italians residing in Eritrea was 3,571 (of whom 1,163 women) in 1921 and only reached 4,188 (of whom 1,717 women) ten years later. The native population, however, numbered 300,000 in 1905 and reached 500,000 in 1928. See: G.L. Podestà, "Race as a Myth. The Empire, Mixed-Blood People, Apartheid, Fascist Racism", in G. Brunet (ed.), *Mariage et métissage dans les sociétés coloniales, Marriage and Misgeneration in colonial societies. Amériques, Afrique et Îles de l'Océan Indien (XVI^e-XX^e siècles). Americas, Africa and island of the Indian ocean (XVIth-XXth)*, no. 19, 2015, pp. 321-338; G.L. Podestà, "L'émigration italienne en Afrique orientale", in *Annales de Démographie Historique*, no. 1, 2007, pp. 59-84; G.L. Podestà, "Colonists and 'demographic' colonists. Family and society in Italian Africa", in *Annales de Démographie Historique*, no. 2, 2011, pp. 205-231; V. Castellano, "Il censimento del 1939 della popolazione indigena dell'Eritrea e lo sviluppo della popolazione indigena dell'Eritrea storica, in un cinquantennio di amministrazione italiana", in *Società Italiana di demografia e Statistica, Atti della IX Riunione*, Roma 15-16 aprile 1947, Rome, 1947, pp. 264-290; V. Castellano, "La popolazione italiana dell'Eritrea dal 1924 al 1940", in *Rivista italiana di demografia e statistica*, no. 4, 1948, pp. 530-540.

³⁴ ASDMAE, *Varie riguardanti l'economia eritrea* (provisional classification), b. 3, f. 4, Private agreement for building lease, 1 February 1923.

lished its headquarters in some rooms on the first floor of the building of the Società per le Saline Eritree in Piazza Roma in Asmara. The lease stipulated with Giovanni Golini, deputy director of the Società per le Saline Eritree, ran from 1 July 1922 to 30 June 1925, with an annual rent of 12,000 lire.³⁵

During its brief life, the Chamber was often accused of going beyond its assigned tasks. Its managers did tend to overstep their duties, especially in articles published in the Chamber's Bulletin.³⁶ The government found that the conduct of the leaders of the Chamber had contributed to fostering an environment conducive to the "disturbances" reported in Decrees no. 4032 of 13 February 1923,³⁷ no. 4056 of 10 April 1923 and no. 4060 of 2 May 2 1923.³⁸ In particular, Decree no. 4056 ordered the expulsion from the Eritrean Colony and repatriation to Italy of Giuseppe Paternostro, the Chamber's councillor secretary, and other Chamber officials for having threatened the internal order and tranquillity of the colony by fomenting unrest, defaming the authority and prestige of the colony's government, including among the indigenous community, misusing the press and acting in defiance of the governor's authority. Furthermore, from the official publication of the Eritrean government we learn that, despite numerous warnings and measures taken by the authorities, the state of unrest persisted at the end of April 1923. To ensure discipline and respect for authority, the decrees were applied in order to expel those guilty of disturbances in the colony.³⁹ In particular, Decree no. 4060

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 927, f. 3, Governor's Decree no. 4061 on the dissolution and liquidation of the Eritrean Chamber of Commerce, 2 May 1923.

³⁷ ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 927, f. 3, Cerrina Feroni to Marchi, 27 February 1923. On 27 February 1923, Governor Cerrina Feroni sent a note to Undersecretary of State for the Colonies Giovanni Marchi. This document, expressly requested by the Undersecretary, was accompanied by a thirteen-page memo on the Asmara Chamber of Commerce, two annexes and six issues of the Chamber's Bulletin. An investigation was opened in concert by the Ministry of Colonies and the administration of the Eritrean Colony, leading to the dissolution of the institution.

³⁸ ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 927, f. 3, Governor's Decree no. 4061, 2 May 1923.

³⁹ *Bullettino Ufficiale della Colonia Eritrea*, no. 8, 30 April 1923, pp. 161-163. The other Italian citizens regarded as the main promoters and leaders of the state of unrest and, there-

of 2 May, published on same the day that the Chamber of Commerce was dissolved, abolished the Fasci of Eritrea and its sections, the local Fascist Vanguard organisation and every other organisation and association affiliated with the Fasci of Eritrea: the accused, according to the government, spread dangerous ideas using the local sections of the Fasci as centres of action and propaganda.⁴⁰ Subsequently, recourse was had to Article 22 of the decree establishing the Chamber: the Chamber was to be considered dissolved and its affairs were entrusted to a special commissioner, Ugo Mancinelli, a prominent lawyer, who would initiate the winding-up procedures.⁴¹

Against the backdrop of these events, one notices the change in style of Fascist colonial policy, which quickly produced a change in the tone of the documents describing the conditions of the colonies. Some of these documents highlight the extreme state of abandonment in which Eritrea was languishing as a result of the conduct of previous governments.⁴² Precisely for this reason, a profound political, moral and administrative restructuring of the colony was initiated with the efforts of the new governor, Jacopo Gasparini, and supervised by the Undersecretary for the Colonies, Roberto Cantalupo. The latter visited the colony and recorded the improvements following the change of administration. He underlined that discipline, order and harmony were being restored through the elimination of abuses and errors facilitated by the previous administration. Cantalupo also explained that the new government had initiated a comprehensive programme for the economic revaluation of the colony, based mainly on the resumption of commercial relations with the Ethiopian hinterland.⁴³

fore, expelled from the colony, were the accountant Dameno Arturo, the member of the Fasci of Eritrea Fontana Sardus, the pharmacist Giusti Antonino and the merchant Remotti Alessandro.

⁴⁰ ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 927, f. 3, Draft of Governor's Decree no. 4060, 2 May 1923.

⁴¹ ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 927, f. 3, Governor's Decree no. 4061, 2 May 1923.

⁴² G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, p. 171.

⁴³ ASDMAE, ASMAI, *Direzione Generale Affari Politici* (hereafter DGAP), b. 18, Memorandum for the Prime Minister, 28 August 1923.

Although it appeared that the history of the Asmara Chamber of Commerce had come to an end, the institution survived in the years to come, albeit in another form and with a renewed structure. Some documents from late June 1923 show that, despite the dissolution order, the Asmara Chamber continued to operate under a special administrator appointed by the government.⁴⁴ This made it necessary, in accordance with Governor's Decree no. 3835 of 15 November 1921, to renew the institution's management positions and value of the Chamber tax. The documents indicate that the colonial administration was of the view that the independent Chamber of Commerce had not proved useful and had, on the contrary, caused many problems. The Ministry of Colonies and the new Eritrean administration therefore intended to replace it with an institution that could be subjected to more systematic control. The change of regime, in addition to producing a gradual ideological evolution of Italian colonialism and its officials, entailed greater certainty for the latter. With its anti-democratic and anti-parliamentary orientations and the legislation enacted between 1925 and 1926, the Fascist regime allowed colonial officials and, in particular, those with the highest responsibilities in colonial governance, to enjoy greater security and protection in the exercise of their duties.⁴⁵ Because of the personalisation of politics made possible by the totalitarian regime, all Fascist leaders and officials wielded more extensive and more stable powers.⁴⁶ Governor Gasparini therefore observed that, following the advent of the Fascist regime, everyone was able to carry out a strong policy, knowing that they were protected by a stronger government.⁴⁷ In the first years of the Fascist regime, therefore, the contribution of the leaders of the Italian Nationalist movement was fundamental: it was they who bequeathed that

⁴⁴ ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 927, f. 3, Telegram no. 5190, Gasparini to Ministry of the Colonies, [18 June 1923].

⁴⁵ L. Goglia and F. Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'impero*, p. 205.

⁴⁶ G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, p. 161.

⁴⁷ R. Cantalupo, "Jacopo Gasparini", in *Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, no. 4, 1941, p. 687.

movement's imperialist nature to the regime and theorised overseas expansionism.⁴⁸

4. The end of the disturbances and the creation of the Commercial Office

Commissioner Mancinelli, having to manage the meagre finances of the institution being wound up, informed the Chamber's landlord that it was no longer able to meet the rent.⁴⁹ As a result of the dissolution decree, the institution's functions were reduced to administration of the proceeds of the commercial tax for the last financial year. In July, discussion about the fate of the Asmara Chamber of Commerce and its structure got underway. In a telegram signed by the minister of the colonies, Luigi Federzoni, the hypothesis of preserving the Chamber, albeit with appropriate modifications, began to emerge.⁵⁰ As we have seen, Federzoni was anxious to make structural changes to the colony and its main institutions. Starting in 1923, he proceeded to reorient the colonial administration in accordance with Fascist ideals.⁵¹ His opinion regarding the possibility of allowing the Chamber to survive stemmed from his observation that the spirit and disposition of the commercial class of the colony appeared much changed from the regrettable ones of the past.

During its early years, the regime paid special attention to instilling a "colonial awareness" in national public opinion, including by

⁴⁸ G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, pp. 161-162. In addition to the aforementioned Luigi Federzoni, first minister of the colonies of Fascist Italy and theorist of colonial policy, mention must be made of Roberto Cantalupo, undersecretary of state for the colonies from 1924 to 1926.

⁴⁹ ASDMAE, *Varie riguardanti l'economia eritrea* (collocazione provvisoria), b. 3, f. 4, Registered letter from Mancinelli to the management of the Società per le Saline Eritree (Massawa), 26 June 1923.

⁵⁰ ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 927, f. 3, Telegram no. 4464 bis, Federzoni to Government of the Eritrean Colony, 2 July 1923.

⁵¹ ASDMAE, *ASMAI, DGAP*, b. 18, Memorandum for the Prime Minister, 28 August 1923.

means of strict control of the editorial lines of the periodical press and of the ideas spread by local associations.⁵² Corroborating the idea that the regime and the Eritrean government intended to save the Chamber, albeit in a form more in keeping with Fascist ideals, the Bulletin continued to be published in the following months and the Chamber entered an intense phase of activity under Commissioner Ugo Mancinelli. The latter's work was not made easier by the social partners with whom he had to deal. In a long note to the governor in October 1923, he reported numerous difficulties in imposing the authority of the new Chamber of Commerce in matters of business practices.⁵³ The commercial circles of the colony, in fact, had reluctantly accepted a measure outlawing the negotiation of skins, one Eritrea's chief exports. Commissioner Mancinelli asked the governor directly to explain his reasons for supporting this measure and requested directives regulating commercial customs and habits. The problem that arose in mid-October 1923 was, therefore, whether Mancinelli had the authority to carry out his task without limitations: the directives issued by the government of Eritrea ordered that the compass of the Chamber's action be increasingly restricted, with the matters formerly within its competence gradually channelled into government action. The commissioner's job was strictly to manage what was left of the Chamber of Commerce and to act in harmony with the governor for oversight of the colony's economy and trade.⁵⁴

Royal Decree no. 2923 of 23 December 1923 finally officialised the suppression of the Eritrean Colony Chamber of Commerce and gave the governor of Eritrea a mandate to liquidate the institution.⁵⁵ In the following years, the situation gradually began to improve: Commissioner Mancinelli managed the treasury of the institution in liquidation, controlling its accounts and operating expenses.⁵⁶ In the

⁵² G.L. Podestà, *Il mito dell'impero*, p. 162.

⁵³ ASDMAE, *Archivio Eritrea*, b. 927, f. 3, Mancinelli to Gasparini, 15 October 1923.

⁵⁴ *Bollettino della Camera di Commercio della Colonia Eritrea*, n. 18, 31 December 1923.

⁵⁵ R.D. n. 2923, *Soppressione della Camera di Commercio della Eritrea*, 23 December 1923.

⁵⁶ ASDMAE, *Varie riguardanti l'economia eritrea* (collocazione provvisoria), b. 3, f. 4, From the director of the Società per le Saline Eritree Ferrero to Mancinelli, 24 December 1923;

period between the end of January and March 1924, the institution lost its historical name, completing its incorporation into the sphere of government. Its successor, called the Commercial Office of the Government of Eritrea, commenced operations in 1925.⁵⁷ The Commercial Office, whose functions were identical to those of the Chamber, was responsible for monitoring the economic and commercial situation of the colony. In the course of 1927, its tasks were transferred to the Eritrean Economic Office, which was to play a more ambitious role: neither a governmental office nor designed on the pattern of the Chamber of Commerce, it could be likened, rather, to the provincial councils of the Economy. The Economic Office's autonomy and streamlined organisation enabled it to have a wider field of action despite the rigid structure of the Eritrean government.⁵⁸

The short period of activity of the Chamber of Commerce, in the moment of transition between two political regimes, affords insight into the development of the colonial and economic policy of the new Fascist administration of the colony of Eritrea. Although Mussolini's regime clearly reached a turning point with its the commitment to the Ethiopian war, evidence of a radical change in the ideological setting are also to be found in the economic and commercial environment of the colony from 1923 onwards. Yet, these ideological shifts did not necessarily involve a change in the practices of Fascist colonialism. The real change of course in Italian colonial policy came later, starting in 1935: up to then, Fascist East Africa differed little from the colonial landscape of the liberal past.

ASDMAE, *Varie riguardanti l'economia eritrea* (collocazione provvisoria), b. 3, f. 4, Mancinelli to Società per le Saline Eritree, 14 January 1924.

⁵⁷ ASDMAE, *Varie riguardanti l'economia eritrea* (collocazione provvisoria), b. 3, f. 4, From the director of the Società per le Saline Eritree Ferrero to Commercial Office, 5 aprile 1924; ASDMAE, *Varie riguardanti l'economia eritrea* (collocazione provvisoria), b. 3, f. 4, Mancinelli to Società per le Saline Eritree, 11 April 1924; ASDMAE, *Varie riguardanti l'economia eritrea* (collocazione provvisoria), b. 3, f. 4, Mancinelli to Società per le Saline Eritree, 14 December 1925.

⁵⁸ *Annuario delle colonie italiane e dei paesi vicini*, Rome, 1929.

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