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The Persistence of War Economy: The Consequences of the Italian Ethiopian Conflict on Italian East Africa 1934-1941

Matteo Nardozi
Sapienza University of Rome

Abstract

The study of the complex relationship between Italy and the colonial possessions is exemplary for understanding many of the central questions in the history of economic development in Europe and the African continent in the 20th century. War was a persistent factor in the colonial history of Italy, especially in the thirties. Through the Italian-Ethiopian conflict and the conquest of new territories, tens of thousands of Italians were exhorted to pursue the dream of the empire, populating East Africa and making it a destination for economic exploitation. This work aims to contribute to fuelling the nourishing debate on the war economy, sanctions and the consequences of the latter both on the sanctioned countries and on the states that applied the punitive economic measures.

1. Introduction

The Italian colonial phenomenon has been widely investigated in its many aspects between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century (Rochat, 1973; Labanca, 2007; Del Boca, 2008). At the end of the twentieth century, there was also an increasing interest in aspects concerning the economic and financial history of colonialism in Africa (Taddia, 1986; Zaccaria, 2016; Jerven *et al.*, 2021; Pallaver, 2021, 2022), allowing for a greater detailed analysis of the issue, previously investigated only in specific analyses by Anglo-Saxon and African scholars (Jerven, 2013; Austin, Broad-

berry, 2014; Akyeampong *et al.*, 2014; Michalopoulos, Papaioannou, 2018). However, there are numerous unknowns about the Italian domination and many archival sources neglected during previous studies, so much so that, even today, in-depth investigations are necessary to clarify, also from a quantitative point of view, the maturation and the main characteristics of the various phases of the Italian economic presence in East Africa (Bertazzini, 2019, 2020).

The study of the complex relationship between Italy and the colonial possessions is exemplary for understanding many of the central questions in the history of economic development in Europe and the African continent in the 20th century,[1] particularly in relation to the functioning of the economy during war periods (Killingray, Rathbone, 1986; Cowen, Westcott, 1986; Lonsdale, 1986; Gerwarth, Manela, 2014; Schmitt, Shriwise 2023),[2] to the issue of food supply (Nardozi, 2022b), to the management of populations fleeing fighting (Ballinger, 2020).

War was a persistent factor in the colonial history of Italy, especially in the thirties (Bandini, 1971; Del Boca, 1976, 1979, 1982).[3] Through the Italian-Ethiopian conflict and the conquest of new territories, tens of thousands of Italians were exhorted to pursue the imperial dream, populating East Africa and making it a destination for economic exploitation (Taddia, 1985; Goglia, Grassi, 1981; Calchi Novati, 2011; Ertola, 2017; Bellucci, 2014).

This work aims to contribute to fuelling the nourishing debate on the war economy, on sanctions and the consequences of the latter both on the sanctioned countries and on the states that applied the punitive economic measures. This aim will be achieved through the analysis of an exemplary case, in which the effects of the war on the economy appear evident, i.e. in the relationship between Italy and

[1] Regarding the relationship between colonialism and development in Africa, see the contributions of Bertocchi, Canova (2002), Bolt, Bezemer (2009), Bruhn, Gallego (2012) and Michalopoulos, Papaioannou (2016).
[2] Regarding the war economy, see: Della Torre (2001); Maione (1979, 1991).
[3] On the relationship between economic management in an autarkic regime and war, see: Farese (2008, 2009); Gagliardi (2005).

the East African empire, with particular interest in Eritrea and Ethiopia. To do this, use was made of the extensive literature on the themes of war economy, economic sanctions and the Italian economic presence in East Africa, comparing this rich bibliography with the sources of the Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, the Historical Archive of the Bank of Italy and the Library and Archive of the United Nations.

Eritrea, the first colony obtained by the Kingdom of Italy at the end of the nineteenth century, remained for many years an unproductive possession, which required the indispensable support from the motherland (Killion, 1996; Ben-Ghiat, Fuller, 2005; Podestà, 2021; Pallaver, Podestà, 2021). The economy of the overseas territories, for the entire period in which they were under Italian administration, was supported "artificially" by the State, through the regular shipment of goods essential for the survival of the European community and the use of high public spending from the mid-1930s onwards (Federico, 1998; Labanca, 2002).[4]

The original plans for the exploitation of Eritrea led to defining this territory as a commercial colony, in which the Italian presence should have been concentrated in the ports of Assab and Massawa (Alamanni, 1891; Miran, 2003; Zaccaria, 2007). However, the subsequent decision to proceed inland and the movements of the other colonial powers in the area, led to changes to the initial plans (Labanca, 2002, p. 277). These developments stimulated the Italian ruling class to explore the possibility of experimenting with agrarian colonization in the first-born colony, allowing the migration of Italian peasants to East Africa and thus achieving the double objective of "enhancing" Eritrea and contributing to the reduction of the excess population in the Kingdom (Podestà, 1996; Bellucci, Zaccaria, 2014).[5] The program, however, did not produce the desired results

[4] We must therefore note the difference between the case of Italian colonialism and the British and French ones: in the latter the governments never went so far as to encourage the achievement of the Italian spending level, wanting, rather, to support the development of a self-sufficient economy in their colonies (Gardner, 2012; Huillery, 2014).

[5] Regarding the process that led to the development of an entrepreneurial class in the

due to some confusion regarding the interpretation of the concept of colonial agriculture and the military drift of Italian early colonialism. The final data on the movement in Eritrean territory therefore accounts for a few thousand Italians, with a low percentage of farmers. On the other hand, the Director of the Bank of Italy branch in Asmara pointed out several times that agriculture in Eritrea was destined to be much less relevant in economic terms compared to trade and industry, due to the lack of perennial water, irregular rains, locusts which every year destroyed part of the crops, and the lack of available manpower.[6] At the same time, as stated by the High Commissioner for East Africa Emilio De Bono, the first-born colony was not suitable to welcome "permanent metropolitan immigration; also, because the arable lands, especially on the plateau," were used by the African population.[7]

Until 1935 the plans for the "valorisation" of Eritrea remained unchanged, having maintained its role as a colony supplying colonial militias and representing the commercial centre for the transit of goods towards Ethiopia and the Red Sea ports.[8] The economic constraints imposed by the recovery of state budget during the first post-war period, the great depression and the difficulties encountered by the national economy in the first part of the 1930s made

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East African colonies, it started with the direct interventions of the Italian State, such as internal and international migration policy, agrarian colonization measures and the foundation of cities, see: Misiani and Sabatini, 2020.

[6] Archivio Storico della Banca d'Italia (hereafter ASBI), Banca d'Italia, Affari Coloniali, pratt., n. 30, f. 1, p. 538, Relazione annuale, 31 dicembre 1919.

[7] Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (hereafter ASDMAE), Archivio Storico del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (hereafter ASMAI), Archivio Segreto di Gabinetto (hereafter ASG), b. 3, De Bono a Mussolini, 22 gennaio 1935.

[8] United Nations Library & Archives Geneva, League of Nations External Fonds, Princeton Office, Registered Files of the Princeton Office, C1784/169/4-1, Middle East Economic and Statistical Bulletin, no. 10, February 1944, p. 22. As in the case of other European colonialisms, the economic, material and human contribution of the subjugated populations was of central importance. This is demonstrated by the case of the Eritrean Ascari, widely used in the war contexts in which Italy was involved (Volterra, 2005). Furthermore, numerous studies by Anglo-Saxon, French and African scholars have underlined the importance of the African contribution in European wars. See, in particular: Killingray (1986); Sekgoma (1986); Ejiogu and Umego (2022); Arukwe (2022).

economic valorisation unachievable (Castronovo, 1995; Petri, 2002; Nützenadel, 1997, 2001, 2022; Podestà, 2004; Frankema *et al.*, 2016). This led to an insufficient contribution from the State to the necessary infrastructural development of the overseas territories, which had no support in economic initiatives (Gagliardi, 2016; Tseggai, 1986; Podestà, 2013).

As soon as Eritrea was occupied, it was believed that it could be possible to implement a policy with the neighbouring Ethiopian empire that would allow Italy, in a short time, to turn the colony into the sole, or at least the main, outlet for Abyssinia; the Italian project, however, also involved part of Sudan, at that time under Egyptian control.[9] With these premises, according to the programs of the Italian ruling class, the protectorate and exploitation of Ethiopia had to come as a natural result. None of all these projects came to fruition, as Italy often suffered humiliating defeats, which led to Eritrea being abandoned to itself. The situation was tolerated by liberal governments and by the fascist regime itself, which, unlike England and France, did not carry out significant works intended to channel trade towards traffic ports until the mid-1930s.

The lands occupied by Italy were the least favoured among European colonial possessions: economically poor and lacking significant natural resources, Italian governments were never able to exploit their inherent potential (Hobsbawm, 1987; Reinhard, 2002; Hodgart, 1977; Fieldhouse, 1980). Ethiopia was conquered towards the end of the Italian colonial period and subjected, also by virtue of a tenacious resistance movement to the invader, to an exploitation that was never completed (Pankhurst, 1971a, 1971b; Sbacchi, 1991; Schaefer, 1996; Bahru Zewde, 2001; Larebo, 1994). In Libya, oil deposits were never discovered (Strangio, 2010). Eritrea, on the other hand, was "enhanced" in ways directly dependent on the historical period that Italy was facing and based on the needs of the moment (Negash, 1987; Mesghenna, 1988). In the case of Italian colonialism,

[9] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 1, Vita o morte della Colonia Eritrea, 11 giugno 1931.

it is not possible to speak of a specific model comparable to those adopted by other European powers. In the possessions of the latter, the institutions and economic and rational exploitation models that were employed were inspired by the observation of local conditions (Labanca, 2002, p. 272; Cain, Hopkins, 2013; Porter, 2020).

2. Italy, Ethiopia and the sanctions of the League of Nations

The period between 1932 and the end of 1934 marked Mussolini's definitive decision to engage Italy in the war to conquer Ethiopia (Podestà, 2004, p. 237; Del Boca, 1979, pp. 169-178). The growing tensions during the previous decade (at least from 1925 onwards) led to a decision that intended to contribute to extinguishing a "historical problem" of Italy.[10]

Fears for the political and military strengthening of Ethiopia, which would have hindered Italy's colonial plans and would have constituted a probable factor of destabilization of the Eritrean colony, led Italy to envisage a rapid annihilation of the Abyssinian army, otherwise the regime would not have succeeded in building an empire (Calchi Novati, 2011, p. 101). On the other hand, the threat to peace in Europe brought by Germany was an opportunity, since Great Britain and France could and should have looked to Italy and strengthened ties with it for the stabilization of the Old World (Podestà, 2004, p. 237); at the same time, the deterioration of the situation on the European continent, due to rearmament and the hostile intentions of the Reich, ensured that Italy had "little time [...] available to liquidate the Ethiopian question."[11]

The reasons for the choice made by the Duce have been investigated in numerous studies and in as many it was concluded that the decision could have been influenced by the economic situation

[10] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 3, Direttive e piano d'azione per risolvere la questione italo-abissina, 30 dicembre 1934.
[11] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 3, Mussolini a De Bono, 3 maggio 1935.

(Catalano, 1969) or by the need to regain popular consensus reduced by the economic recession (Rochat, 1971). However, between 1932-33 signs of recovery were being perceived, highlighted by a growing production and the increase in profits of numerous companies (Podestà, 2004, p. 238, Toniolo, 1981, p. 173; Toniolo, 1980). The reasons for the escalation, therefore, must be sought elsewhere: the other European colonial powers, during the period between the two world wars, engaged in the "valorisation" of the colonies for the purposes of exploitation, while fascist Italy was the protagonist of an impatient imperial race, which wasn't limited only to the regime's desire to "wash away the shame of Adua" (Labanca, 2002, p. 129; Calchi Novati, 2011). Foreign policy motivations are the most effective ones to explain a decision that matured over the course of years of rapprochement and clashes between Italy and Ethiopia: Mussolini's impression was that this was the right moment to act; a belief that was strengthened by talks with the French authorities, which seemed to leave Italy freedom of action regarding Ethiopia (Delarue, 1991, p. 318).[12]

Following the increase in expenses, particularly from the military sector, relating to the preparation and initiation of the war against Ethiopia the currency situation[13] deteriorated severely. The continuous disbursement of currencies for ordinary and extraordinary expenses made by the State marked a constant increase in 1935 and in the following years (Gagliardi, 2006, pp. 89-90; Podestà, 2004, pp. 237-260).[14] The Ministry for Exchanges and Currencies, through

[12] On the talks with the representatives of the French Government see: De Felice, 1974, p. 530; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1990, p. 257.

[13] Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter ACS), Archivi di Enti Pubblici, Privati e Società, Istituto Nazionale per i Cambi con l'Estero (hereafter INCE), Archivio Generale, b. 7, f. 63, Verbale della 56a seduta del Consiglio di Amministrazione dell'Istituto, 4 ottobre 1937. See Turtur (2024).

[14] The debts of the Italian State, calculated by the National Institute for Foreign Exchange (Istituto Nazionale per i Cambi con l'Estero), rose to 573 million lire in June 1937: the maturity of a part of this debt expired in June of the same year and the State had only about 100 million in its coffers. The cash problem of the Italian state would have worsened further if solutions had not been found to remedy it. Exports reached

its Director, Felice Guarneri, tried to hinder the ongoing trend, urging Mussolini to address the situation through rigorous measures to contain expenses and imports, as well as a review of the entire military program: the first weeks of the war were marked by a letter from Mussolini (prepared by Guarneri) being sent to the three military ministries where the Duce invited them to interrupt or eliminate all those expenses that were not essential, postponing them to better times (Guarneri, 1953; Zani, 1988). The result of these warnings remained on paper, as at that point it was impossible to stop military preparation, also considering that the Italian army reported serious gaps in its equipment.

The war against Ethiopia also had counterproductive effects on Italy's relations with the international community and the foreign markets. Since July 1935, Italian banks had begun to receive communications from the British and American financial circles, in which all the concerns for the imminent war conflict and for the Italian currency situation itself was expressed. These letters informed that, in the event of a conflict with Ethiopia, the American financial institutions would revoke the credit lines made available to Italian banks; the London banks, however, did not limit themselves to notices, rather they reduced the acceptance credits granted to Italian institutions since July 1935: the reduction brought the figure from 274 million liras, as of June, the 8th to around 158 million at the end of July. The National Institute for Foreign Exchange (Istituto Nazionale per i Cambi con l'Estero) and the Superintendent were forced to intervene more than once during the summer of 1935, to

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an average of around 650 million liras per month, but could not be further increased, also considering that the benefit of the alignment of the lira was mostly discounted. Imports in the first five months of 1937, however, had risen to around 5,405,000,000 with a monthly average of around 1,081,000,000 liras. The increase in imports was largely determined by the needs of the industry which, following the restrictions placed on imports during the sanctions period, completely consumed the stocks, for military and East African needs, which represented considerable sums and which showed no signs of decreasing (ACS, Archivi di Enti Pubblici, Privati e Società, INCE, Archivio Generale, b. 6, f. 58, Verbale della 55ª seduta del Consiglio di Amministrazione dell'Istituto, 28 giugno 1937).

support Banca Commerciale Italiana, Credito Italiano and Banco di Roma, providing the currency necessary to contain the withdrawal of deposits that foreign branches had begun to suffer (Gagliardi, 2006, p. 90; Di Quirico, 2000, pp. 202-204; Di Quirico, 2001). The so-called "siege" of the countries belonging to the League of Nations against the Italian economy and the banks, perpetrated above all through the closure of foreign financial markets, therefore began in the months preceding the invasion of Ethiopia.

In mid-October 1935 the League of Nations, in application of article 16 of the League's founding pact, decided on the application of economic sanctions as a response to Italy's aggression against Ethiopia. These events represented the start of a critical phase for the development of Italian East Africa:[15] the international sanctions, which came into force on the 18th of November 1935, forced Italy into economic isolation. Through these measures, in fact, the export and re-export to Italy of war material, loans of any type to natural or legal persons resident on the Italian territory and the importation of goods produced in Italy were prohibited.[16] The aim of the sanctions was to prevent the supply of products essential to maintaining the war effort; however, they were tainted by little effectiveness as oil and other essential raw materials were not included in the list of prohibited goods (Ristuccia, 2000).

The further measures were intended to deprive Italy of the means of payment to purchase from countries that were not willing to participate in the embargo in a rigorous manner or because they were not part of the League of Nations (Gagliardi, 2006, p. 91;

[15] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Aloisi-Ministero degli Esteri a Ministero Colonie Roma, 24 febbraio 1936; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Lessona a Ministero Colonie, 18 novembre 1936; ACS, SPD, b. 31, f. 13B, Appunto sulla riunione del Gran Consiglio del Fascismo tenuta all'antivigilia dell'applicazione delle cosiddette "sanzioni" contro l'Italia, s. d. [16 novembre 1935]; *Le sanzioni non troveranno l'Italia impreparata*, in "Il Quotidiano eritreo", 15 ottobre 1935; *Le decisioni di Ginevra in merito alle sanzioni ed i commenti della stampa estera*, in "Il Quotidiano eritreo", 16 ottobre 1935.

[16] On the relations between Italy and the international financial world from the end of the Great War to the foundation of the empire, see De Cecco (1993).

Gagliardi, 2014; Toniolo, 1979, pp. 281-282; Bank of Italy, 1938).[17] The embargo, in fact, excluded Brazil, the United States, Germany and Japan since they did not belong to the League of Nations, while Austria, Hungary and Albania, as members of the League, should have participated, but refused to recognize the Italian violation of the pact and did not join the sanctions.[18] As far as the United States were concerned, the only applied measure was a limitation on the export of raw materials; Germany, however, decided to completely repudiate the embargo, keeping the commercial treaties in force and increasing trade with Italy (Tattara, 1991; Raspin, 1986; Mantelli, 1996; Gualtieri, 2005). Italy, therefore, did not lack international support, which came from several Central and Eastern European countries, but, rather, the means to pay suppliers opposed to the sanctions.[19]

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[17] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 3, Mussolini a De Bono, 20 ottobre 1935.

[18] Germany had close ties of friendship and interests, not only economic, which also involved the Italian East Africa from 1925. The agreement stipulated with the German Government in May 1938 made a significant exchange possible between the two allies regarding the territories of the empire, allowing the Italian East Africa to import a total of 18,025,000 liras of products from Germany and to export to it for a total of 2,270,000 Reichsmark and increasing, at the same time, the figures agreed in the previous agreement of December 1936. This economic collaboration, like that with Hungary, supported the empire both following the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations and in the aftermath of the decision to take the autarchic path also in East Africa (ACS, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (hereafter MAI), Direzione generale Affari Politici (hereafter DGAP), Archivio Segreto, b. 5, f. 6, sf. 1.1, All. 2, Trattato relativo all'estensione ai Possedimenti e Colonie italiane del Trattato di commercio e di navigazione tra l'Italia e la Germania del 31 ottobre 1925, 10 dicembre 1936; ACS, Ministero per gli Scambi e le Valute (1922-1945), Direzione Generale Valute (1934-1945), Divisione Prima 1934-1939, b. 1, f. 2, Accordo relativo all'estensione ai Possedimenti e Colonie italiane dell'Accordo per il regolamento dei pagamenti fra l'Italia e la Germania (Accordo di compensazione) del 26 settembre 1934, 10 dicembre 1936; ACS, Ministero per gli Scambi e le Valute (1922-1945), Direzione Generale Valute (1934-1945), Divisione Prima 1934-1939, b. 1, f. 2, Accordo per il regolamento degli interscambi tra i Possedimenti e le Colonie italiane e la Germania, 10 dicembre 1936; ACS, MAI, DGAP, Archivio Segreto, b. 4, f. 6, sf. 1.1, Appunto sulle trattative del comitato italo-germanico, Roma, 20 maggio 1938).

[19] *I paesi confinanti con l'Italia non aderiscono alle sanzioni come vorrebbe l'Inghilterra*, "Il Quotidiano eritreo", 15 ottobre 1935; *La Germania si libera definitivamente dalla Società delle Nazioni*, "Il Quotidiano eritreo", 15 ottobre 1935; *L'America non interromperà il commercio con l'Italia*, "Il Quotidiano eritreo", 17 ottobre 1935.

3. Italy's reaction: the "countersanctions" and the effects on the relationship with the East African colonies

The Italian measures to oppose the embargo of the League of Nations, i.e. the "countersanctions", were implemented, at the behest of Mussolini, starting from November 18th, 1935 with the aim of reducing as much as possible the consumption considered as unnecessary and of exploiting the extraordinary reserves. In an attempt to obtain the greatest amount of hard currency, the Government promoted exports, limiting or blocking the exit of goods considered as essential for the war effort: therefore, the origin of exports was hidden thanks to the connivance of Austria and Hungary; private clearing system operations were widely encouraged; premiums were introduced for the transfer of goods to "free currency" countries, i.e. without the need to resort to the clearing system; "currency accounts" increased (Bientinesi, 1999-2000, pp. 266-270). The planning of the response to the League of Nations, however, envisaged a particular application in the management of imports: the Government established that importers who had decided to purchase goods from the sanctioning countries would be obliged to pay the amount into a special blocked and interest-free account at the National Institute for Foreign Exchange or at one of the agent banks; at the same time, it was decided to terminate all the clearing agreements stipulated with the countries adhering to the embargo and to renew or renegotiate the agreements already in force with Germany, Hungary and Switzerland in the light of recent developments (Gagliardi, 2006, p. 91; Bientinesi, 1999-2000, pp. 281-286).[20]

[20] Regarding Italian-Hungarian relations, see: ACS, MAI, DGAP, Archivio Segreto, b. 8, f. 6, sf. 4.1, Accord concernant les échanges commerciaux entre les Possessions et les Colonies italiennes et la Hongrie, Roma 1937; ACS, MAI, DGAP, Archivio Segreto, b. 8, f. 6, sf. 4.4, Traité rélatif a l'extension aux Possessions et Colonies italiennes du Traité du commerce et de navigation entre l'Italie et la Hongrie du 4 juillet 1928, Roma 1937; ACS, MAI, DGAP, Archivio Segreto, b. 4, f. 6, sf. 4.3, Trattato fra l'Italia e l'Ungheria per estendere ai possedimenti ed alle colonie il trattato di commercio e di navigazione del 4 luglio 1928, Roma, 9 marzo 1937. Regarding the new Italian-Swiss agreement, stipulated on 3 December 1935 and abrogated on 1 November 1950, see: ACS, Ministero

The effects of the sanctions and "countersanctions" were the main cause of the sharp reduction in free currency trade seen from November 1935, which in turn led to a strengthening of Italian German clearing.[21] Furthermore, the Italian countermeasures led to the start of a serious debate on the possibility of reducing imports through substitution with domestically produced surrogates. The studies that were promoted led to the implementation of autarkic policy both in the Kingdom and in the Empire, making the latter an integral part of the Italian project for economic self-sufficiency, even if autarky was a project already started in the mid-1920s, with the fascist economic program of July 1925 and with the revaluation of the lira in 1927 (Belluzzo, 1940; Podestà, 2004, p. 239; De Begnac, 1990).

Mussolini also ordered the Colonies and Possessions to create a hermetic closure of the market to raw materials coming from the countries that joined the embargo. During the conflict, the Italian state had to resort to substantial purchases abroad to supply and equip the army operating in East Africa, which caused a massive exodus of gold currency.[22] In particular, Mussolini ordered people to give up goods that were not strictly indispensable such as cotton, wool, soaps, perfumes, typewriters and cigarettes.[23] With regard to these products, and many others, the Head of Government called the attention of the Governor of Eritrea Guzzoni, of the Governor of Somalia Santini and of the person who in a few days would be officially appointed Vice King of Ethiopia, Rodolfo Graziani, through the Minister of Italian Africa Alessandro Lessona, "on the absolute necessity that similar imports" be "banned so as not to take work away from

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per gli Scambi e le Valute (1922-1945), Direzione Generale Valute (1934-1945), Divisione prima 1934-1939, b. 2, f. 8, Accordo di compensazione con la Svizzera ed il Principato del Liechtenstein, 14 dicembre 1935.

[21] Regarding relations between Italy and Germany during the sanctions period, see also Funke (1972).

[22] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 3, Mussolini to Lessona, 15 novembre 1935.

[23] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Lessona to Guzzoni, 6 giugno 1936; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Lessona to Santini, 6 giugno 1936; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Lessona to Graziani, 6 giugno 1936; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Graziani to Sottosegretario Colonie, 7 giugno 1936.

national production and to reduce the outlay to a minimum currency."[24] Mussolini, therefore, urged that in the future the repetition of "a line of conduct incompatible with the needs of the Country to save on the maximum gold reserves" should be avoided.[25]

The colonies would have had to provide for most of their needs with their own production but also make up for the deficient production of the Kingdom of Italy.[26] It was necessary, therefore, for the local governments of the Empire to organize local production: production, which was not yet possible on a permanent basis, should have been developed even on an uneconomic basis.

The measures imposed by the Duce, concerning the ban on the access of foreign goods to the East African colonies, especially those which could have been supplied by the national industry, were therefore applied, under penalty of not being granted foreign currency. The idea was that the huge stocks set aside by Italy would have allowed it to face the sanctions of the League of Nations without worries; by the way, by July the measures of the international body would have been abolished, decreeing their definitive failure.[27]

Rodolfo Graziani therefore issued severe gubernatorial provisions to prohibit any purchase of foreign goods by civil and military offices, reserving the right of making personal decisions in the event of exceptional requests documented by reasons of mandatory necessity.[28] As far as free trade was concerned, he proposed a difference in treatment between national and foreign goods, granting the former a complete customs exemption and, instead, maintaining for the others the ten percent ad valorem duty already imposed by the outgoing government. The measure, although not conclusive, had

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[24] *Ibid*.
[25] *Ibid*.
[26] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 3, Comunicazione ai Governi di Asmara e Mogadiscio, 15 novembre 1935.
[27] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Guzzoni to Ministero delle Colonie, 16 giugno 1936; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Mussolini to Badoglio, 13 aprile 1936; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Mussolini to Badoglio, 18 aprile 1936; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Mussolini to Graziani, 6 luglio 1936.
[28] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 17, Graziani to Ministero delle Colonie, 10 giugno 1936.

been ordered by Graziani in close correlation with the other measures already adopted and rigorously applied since May 29th, 1936, aimed at preventing any export of valuables and currencies from the viceroyalty, which for many people made the purchase of foreign goods practically impossible. Graziani believed that it was appropriate to issue further and more rigid regulations on the matter, but he nevertheless expressed his doubts about the opportunity and practicality of issuing a formal provision that constituted a totalitarian ban regarding the importation of foreign goods: in fact, the economic relations between the motherland and the new territories were still in the initial phase and did not, therefore, have the possibility of replacing foreign trade.

4. The "normalization" phase in the empire and the control of imports (1937-1939)

The conclusion of the war operations in East Africa in 1936 coincided with the start of the programs that would lead towards the normalization phase, i.e. the era of empire building: in fact, from the months preceding the conflict onwards the Italian colonies in East Africa had been characterized by commercial and industrial initiatives determined entirely and solely by the supreme political-military interest, but developed in a convulsive and sometimes chaotic manner (Podestà, 2009; Barrera, 2003; Gagliardi, 2012).[29] Therefore, during 1937, the Government was busy designing the development program for the territories of the empire and carrying out the activities according to the indications already underlined by Lessona: once the war operations were over, all the "trappings of war" should disappear (Bertazzini, 2022; Shiferaw, 2019).[30]

[29] ASBI, Banca d'Italia, Affari Coloniali, pratt., n. 33, f. 2, p. 137, Anno 1937 = XV E.F. Brevi cenni sull'andamento del commercio e della industria nell'A.O.I. con particolare riferimento alla piazza di Massaua, 1937.
[30] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 150, Lessona a Governatore Generale dell'AOI, 1 aprile 1937.

The empire, for its life and its strengthening, had to resort to importation, drawing as much as possible from the Kingdom even though, for certain genres it necessarily had to submit to international production.[31] The Government, therefore, became concerned about the immense quantity of goods that were sent to the empire and, especially, of those items whose preparation required raw materials coming from abroad, with serious damage to the Italian economy. Furthermore, it noted the enormous annual expenditure of foreign currency to which state coffers were subject for the payment of the tax for the Suez Canal passage canal.

On 28 June 1937, Guarneri warned that state expenditure needed to be reduced both in Italy and its colonies. In the empire the outlay of foreign exchange had become so high that no benefit resulted from the exports of goods from East Africa. In fact, the increase in prices due to the purchase by Italy inhibited the interest of international buyers: the most interesting example is that of Ethiopian hides previously exported to international markets, but which after the Ethiopian war were redirected to the Kingdom of Italy. Instead, highly priced goods had only one outlet market: Germany, which, however, did not provide currency as the purchase of foodstuffs was regulated through clearing.

Therefore, the Government deemed it necessary to encourage the empire's productive activities to achieve autarchy, particularly in the production of food. In fact, on top of the above considerations, on August 1st, 1937 a decree was issued with immediate effect which prevented the free introduction into the empire of goods coming from the Kingdom.[32] The measure, however, far from having the desired effects, resulted in an immediate increase in the prices of all kinds of goods and in the removal of them from the markets: "the

[31] ASBI, Banca d'Italia, Affari Coloniali, pratt., n. 33, f. 2, p. 138, Anno 1937 = XV E.F. Brevi cenni sull'andamento del commercio e della industria nell'A.O.I. con particolare riferimento alla piazza di Massaua, 1937.

[32] *I problemi economici dell'Impero esaminati in una riunione presieduta dal Maresciallo Graziani*, in "Corriere Padano", 24 settembre 1937 in ASDMAE, ASMAI, Direzione Generale Affari Economici (hereafter: DGAEF), b. N, f. 18.

unfortunate experiment taught that the development of production is not achieved with the issuing of a simple decree, but rather with study, preparation, organization, work, and, above all, with the contribution of the activities of private initiative, which unfortunately is constantly hindered."[33] In this period, trade turned towards the few products that remained free from limitations: flour and pasta, the only ones which, probably with the help of a wise policy among the local populations, could have been produced locally. On October 1st, of the same year of enactment the legislative provision was finally repealed, "not without disturbing the economic life of the empire for a period of several months;"[34] the quota remained, however, only for certain products: beer, cement, lime, tyres, vehicles and their parts, which, during 1938, were imported into Eritrea for a total value of around 65 million liras.[35]

5. The post-war "normalization" crisis

The crisis that was preparing to explode in the first half of 1937 manifested itself in all its gravity in the second half of the same year, compromising the development of the empire for the entire final part of the Thirties. The imperial market was going through a period of deflation and crisis which manifested itself through a strong restriction on sales and a great shortage of currency; scarcity and restrictions derived from the impressive increase in advances on goods made by the Banks, which in mid-December 1937 reached the figure of 40 million liras with 5 million only in the city of Asmara in the month of January of the following year.[36] To make things worse, an ever-increasing number of protests was recorded.

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[33] ASBI, Banca d'Italia, Affari Coloniali, pratt., n. 33, f. 2, p. 141, Anno 1937 = XV E.F. Brevi cenni sull'andamento del commercio e della industria nell'A.O.I. con particolare riferimento alla piazza di Massaua, 1937.
[34] *Ibid*.
[35] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 279, L'Eritrea nel 1938 (XVI-XVII). Relazione sul mio primo anno di Governo (Daodiace), s. d. [1938].
[36] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 9, 14 dicembre 1937; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 22, 20 luglio 1938-XVI.

This state of depression was considered as the consequence of multiple factors, linked and concomitant, which can be indicated as follows:

1. significant delay in payments by state bodies due to lack of funds and consequent reduction in work;[37]
2. huge stocks accumulated on the market, which flowed in disorderly during and following the quota on imports from the Kingdom in anticipation of price increases;
3. sudden sell-off of stocks accumulated in warehouses due to the unexpected abolition of the provision, accompanied by the uncertainty and variability of the relevant provisions;
4. significant restriction in the consumption of the Italian population due to the repatriation measures of soldiers and workers and the decreased purchasing capacity of the remaining workers, caused by the suspension of the payment of wages in the majority of companies;
5. decreased purchasing capacity caused by the unrest that occurred in Goggiam and in the areas close to Eritrea, by the collapse in leather prices following the ban on the export of leather to Italy, and by the significant increase in cotton prices following the uncertainties regarding the assignment or otherwise of the cotton reinstatement;
6. tight economic programs by local governments or suspension of many constructions;
7. trucking crisis;
8. restriction of credit by busy and poorly supported banks;
9. stagnation of agricultural work, hindered by a resumption of hostilities by the Ethiopian patriots;
10. the precarious situation of many companies that had moved to Italian East Africa with little capital and poor preparation;
11. the decline in the world market;
12. exchange rate fluctuations.[38]

[37] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 9, 14 dicembre 1937.
[38] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 15, 30 marzo 1938; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 17, 12 maggio 1938.

The situation was considered as a "necessary phase towards the fall of that artificial apparatus that arose in the war and post-war period", which in the post-war period no longer had any reason to exist.[39] The general economic depression of the empire, in essence, seemed to be a logical and inevitable consequence of the events that unfolded at a rapid pace from the outbreak of the conflict with Ethiopia onwards, artificially and hastily producing a mass market from nothing.

Only in July 1938, that is, many months after the appearance of the first signs of the crisis, did the Government seem to realize the need to accelerate the elimination of unhealthy companies and "war trappings", thus supporting all initiatives truly useful to the imperial economy.[40] Collections, however, remained difficult, orders were missing or were suddenly cancelled, with serious damage to prices, due to decreased consumption and the strong stocks that continued to keep the warehouses full.[41] Added to this were unstable prices, trucking that was still at a standstill and banks and private individuals who continued to restrict credit. One of the most obvious symptoms of the economic crisis of the imperial market was the distrust that national companies showed towards Italian East Africa traders. The market stasis, caused by the large number of failed collections, was due to the fact that several Italian exporters, with the excuse that the market was rising, doubled or even tripled the quantities of goods requested by customers in Italian East Africa, who therefore found themselves unable to collect them.[42]

Ethiopian trade was going through a particularly critical period. For price reasons, typical export products did not find their natural outlet on the international market, while the Italian market remained

[39] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 20, 22 giugno 1938.
[40] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 21, 6 luglio 1938; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 24, 8 settembre 1938.
[41] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 10, 4 gennaio 1938; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 19, 8 giugno 1938.
[42] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 11, 19 gennaio 1938.

closed to them due to currency needs.[43] On the other hand, imported articles flowed onto the market at a pace that too often did not correspond to natural causes. This produced sudden and excessive rarefactions, or exaggerated congestion. An indication of this abnormality were price fluctuations that were often of exaggerated magnitude and alarming instability. The causes of this situation were multiple and complex: they could not be considered separately since they interfered with each other and all together contributed to forming the unfavourable complex that was complained about. Firstly, the purchasing capacity of the African population had undergone profound alterations due to the political-economic changes that had taken place in the country. The African population, accustomed to commensurate the price of its goods with their exchange value, found that in exchange of coffee, skins, or wax of its own production it could no longer obtain the same quantities of products necessary for its needs as it did in the past, and this regardless of the relative values expressed in money. This depended on the fact that while the product had to tend to adapt to the international market, the imported goods were mainly sourced from the Italian market, i.e. a closed market, removed from the influences of trade. From this came the need to restrict consumption and the tendency to abandon traditional activities to look for more profitable jobs.

Between November 1938 and the following December, there was no end in sight to the economic depression, so much so that the reasons for the stasis were attributed to a "collective psychosis of restrictions, caused by uncertainties about tomorrow and bitter experiences."[44] There was therefore a tendency to thin out the work, immobilizing as little as possible and cancelling orders, without making new commitments, waiting to understand how events would develop. Colonial life in the empire was still based almost exclusively on consumer companies and was supported by transport: therefore, it was complained that no impetus was given to produc-

[43] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 16, 18 aprile 1938.
[44] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 29, 24 novembre 1938.

tion companies that could have arisen through private initiative, since the system in force in the colony opposed "security and technical constraints to private initiative". Furthermore, the sale of fuel, which in the empire represented the thermometer for measuring the colonial movement, remained severely limited.[45]

6. The decline of the empire and the contribution of Italian labour to the Allied war effort

Tom J. Killion defines "war boom" as the period of time from 1934 to 1945, identifying two main moments: a first phase, from 1934 to 1940, and a second one from 1941 to 1945, with a particular ferment in the three-year period 1942-1944, when the fascist regime first, and the British occupation administration later, directed the forces towards substantial war spending and the maximum possible effort of the local community, albeit with decidedly conflicting political and strategic objectives (Killion, 1996, p. 100-104).[46]

The reasons that led to the war solution are numerous and debated and have partly been highlighted in the previous pages. In this analysis we will consider the effects above all: in 1935, the extent of the consequences of the sanctions, the recovery of the sectors of the war economy and the reversal of the price dynamics, led to an 8% drop in real wages (Brizzi, 2024, pp. 118-119). In fact, inflation and the 40-hour working week interacted to depress workers' purchasing power. Furthermore, the sanctions and counter-sanctions, like the conflict itself, were considered by the English Government only as the interruption of an "orderly progress [...] suddenly and violently interrupted by the decision of one man" to push Italy into a "dangerous foreign adventure", which should have distracted the attention of the Italian population from the internal problems of the

[45] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 38, Relazione commerciale n. 30, 7 dicembre 1938.
[46] This periodization seems to find confirmation in the position of Ethiopian scholars, including Hailemariam (1991), who maintains that the Second World War began on 3 October 1935.

country (Palla, 1991, pp. 427-428). Mussolini skilfully used propaganda to disguise Italian actions in Ethiopia and launch the country into his personal "crusade for civilization and against sanctions" (Delarue, 1991, p. 335). Churchill, defining the actions of the Duce as "pure rhetoric and propaganda", recognized that the sanctions could have never achieved their aim since they were only "restrictions, made without enthusiasm, which the invader willingly tolerated since they actually stimulated the warrior spirit of the Italians". Ultimately, the sanctions did not present themselves as measures intended to paralyze Italy as the "will to rigorously apply them" was lacking.

The period between 1934 and the start of the Second World War appears, therefore, as the product of events that are caused by a failure of the entire international community (Bruce Strang, 2008, 2013; Bonn, 1937). The League of Nations had already proven to be a weak institution during previous international crises, for instance when it failed to take a severe decision during the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 (Doxey, 1996). International cooperation, even in the mid-1930s, followed the path indicated by the League of Nations, but the latter was the victim of the ambiguous policy of France and Great Britain, which oscillated between the need to preserve the international institution, as a body capable of enforcing peace and imposing punitive actions, and maintaining friendly relations with Italy, which, instead, represented a barrier to German expansionist policies in the Balkans and Austria (Ristuccia, 2000; Baer, 1973). The defeat of the League of Nations regarding the management of fascist Italy during the attack on Ethiopia led to the end of the institution itself and pushed Italy closer to Germany with which, as it has been noted, more intense diplomatic and economic relations developed.

The economic policy to be implemented in the empire after the conquest of Ethiopia was inspired by a concept similar to that experimented for a long time in the vast possessions of England, namely Ethiopia should constitute a reservoir of raw materials necessary for the motherland and a safe market for the absorption of Italian manufactured goods. In the two-year period 1938-1939, how-

ever, the economic policy, based on the results of an almost four-year experience and a more in-depth evaluation of the possibilities of exploitation of the occupied territories, was oriented towards an autarchic criterion, thinking of the East African possessions as an economically independent organism.[47] The need to follow this direction was mainly suggested by the political situation, since European events had revealed the plausible danger of a possible isolation of the imperial territories in the event of an armed conflict; isolation which was thought to be remedied by achieving local self-sufficiency.[48]

However, it would have been practically impossible to supply the empire with the products sent from the Kingdom during the war operations. Therefore, the Government attempted to encourage an increase in agricultural production and obtain a more intense exploitation of local products and raw materials; furthermore, a limitation of imports was ordered, in particular of foodstuffs from the Italian peninsula.[49] At the same time, attempts were made to increase exports abroad, regulating this branch of trade and granting bonuses to exporters, with the double aim of maintaining and increasing relations with those traditional foreign markets already customers of Ethiopia and obtaining as much foreign currency as possible, necessary for the purchase of special raw materials essential for the needs of the empire.

The crisis in the trucking sector, caused by the confiscation of vehicles by the armed forces and by fuel shortages, led to a decrease in consumer goods on the markets and a worsening of the cost of living.[50] The Government's initiatives, which ranged from the con-

[47] ASBI, Banca d'Italia, Affari Coloniali, pratt., n. 29, f. 2, p. 80, Relazione annuale 1938/1939 della Filiale di Addis Abeba, s. d. [gennaio 1940].
[48] ASBI, Banca d'Italia, Affari Coloniali, pratt., n. 29, f. 2, p. 150, Relazione per l'esercizio finanziario dell'anno 1939, s. d. [1940].
[49] ASBI, Banca d'Italia, Affari Coloniali, pratt., n. 26, f. 5, pp. 9-11, Notizie di carattere economico, giugno 1939.
[50] ASDMAE, ASMAI, Varie riguardanti l'economia eritrea (collocazione provvisoria), b. 2, f. 12, Relazione "Autotrasporti e ausiliarie del traffico", s. d. [1941].

struction of the new city of Addis Ababa, to the creation of a widespread road network and, therefore, to all related activities, were weakened by the lack of fuel: petrol, naphtha and oil, which supported the road transport sector and represented the very life of the Empire.[51] The search for alternative fuels was stimulated both by the explicit directives of the Duce and by the need to make up for the restrictions caused by the rapid transition to an autarkic regime following the sanctions: the regime hoped that the implemented programs could have contributed significantly to the liberation from foreign fuels that arrived in abundance in the empire.[52] The directive, which had a particularly urgent nature, was to make the widest possible use of locally produced substitute fuels, exploiting, in particular, the strong availability of vegetable fuels existing in the empire, and "even more so of wood and charcoal gas generators": therefore, the Government welcomed the proposals that came from companies and inventors and scientists who engaged in this field of experimentation.[53]

After months marked by the outbreak of the conflict, by Italy's entry into war in June 1940 and by the closure of the trade routes, towards the end of 1941 Eritrea managed to reach a certain state of adjustment, managing to overcome the inevitable state of emergency that immediately follows the military occupation of a territory (Lord Rennel of Rodd, 1948; Trevaskis, 1960; Guazzini, 2007; Ertola, 2013). The military operations in North Africa had a notable role in this re-

[51] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 152, Relazione sul problema generale dei carburanti di sostituzione coloniali, s. d. [1940]; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 152, Conclusioni del Comitato tecnico dei carburanti nell'A.I., 24 febbraio 1940. On the history of the automotive and mechanical sector in the Italian colonies of East Africa, see the contribution by Zaccaria and Bellucci (2012).
[52] ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 102, Nota sull'attività della Società Romana Trasporti e la Società Nazionale d'Etiopia riguardo alle sperimentazioni sull'alimentazione a gasogeno, 15 luglio 1938.
[53] ASDMAE, ASMAI, DGAEF, b. O/2, Relazione alla Commissione Suprema di difesa sull'organizzazione delle terre italiane d'oltremare, 14 ottobre 1937; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 50, Relazione settimanale n. 197, 23 novembre 1939; ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, b. 102, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana a Gabinetto di S.E. il Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, 28 giugno 1939.

covery of Eritrea since, for the entire period in which they took place, the former Italian colony served as a base for a large supply of troops, vehicles and materials.[54] Eritrea's contribution to the war effort of the British troops in 1942 was of considerable importance for the ideal strategic position of the former Italian colony and for the participation of the population, which, through the work of entrepreneurs, managed to make up for the shortage of basic necessities and articles through the production of surrogates and substitutes suitable for the replacement of products that could not be found and could not be imported into East Africa (Del Boca, 1984; Nardozi, 2022).[55]

However, the loss of Eritrea's centrality within the strategies of the Allies meant that the moral and material conditions of the Italian population of Eritrea changed and then reversed and plummeted: the Anglo-American landing in Italy therefore marked a disastrous date for the economic and moral conditions of the Italians of Eritrea. At the end of 1943, in fact, following the closure of the North African campaign, "the strategic position of Eritrea, and consequently its economic function within the more complex framework of British production and interests, began to lose its importance", waning over time causing a new paralysis of the economic life of the Eritrean territory and ending completely towards the end of the conflict.[56]

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[54] ASDMAE, ASMAI, Africa IV, b. 82, Relazione a S. Eccellenza il Capo Missione sul terzo viaggio di rimpatrio compiuta con la "Duilio", Taranto, 31 agosto 1943, p. 80.
[55] ASDMAE, ASMAI, Africa IV, b. 42, f. 12, Relazione sul IV viaggio p.fo "Toscana" redatta dal Consigliere di Governo Giuseppe Barbato, s. d. [novembre-dicembre 1946].
[56] ASDMAE, ASMAI, Africa IV, b. 82, Relazione a S. Eccellenza il Capo Missione sul terzo viaggio di rimpatrio compiuta con la "Duilio", Taranto, 31 agosto 1943, p. 79; ASDMAE, ASMAI, Africa III, b. 14, Relazione dell'Ufficiale Pai, 22 maggio-settembre 1943; ACS, MAI, DGAP, Affari Generali, b. 2, f. 1, sf. 1, Condizioni di vita in Eritrea, 23 gennaio 1946; ACS, MAI, DGAP, Affari Generali, b. 2, f. 1, sf. 1, Moreno a Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 30 gennaio 1947; ACS, MAI, DGAP, Affari Generali, b. 2, f. 1, sf. 1, Relazione sull'Eritrea, s. d. [gennaio 1947].

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