

# Imperial Roads and the Fascist Culture of Total Mobilization

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Infrastructures have a cultural dimension. In fact, railroads, roads, electric grids, or telegraphic cables only become *infrastructure* by way of the practices and discourses that inform them. Infrastructures are what Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway call “monsters,” “cyborgs,” or “tricksters.”<sup>1</sup> They are “techno-social-semiotic hybrids” that transcend common categorical classifications.<sup>2</sup> Thus, infrastructures are complex chimeras consisting of technology, society, and nature, of signs, institutions, and people, of knowledge and power. This chapter takes a cursory look at the close nexus between the fascist culture of total mobilization and Fascist imperial roads at the Horn of Africa.<sup>3</sup>

## Tracks—Berlin 1930

The view from his room was of the tangle of tracks of the Stadt- and Reichsbahn, children were noisy in the house and it smelled of cabbage. The room was not very bright, crammed with books, decorated with masks and strange wood-carved figures, on the desk stood a microscope, beetle collections and jars full of odd intertwined pale green substances stood on the shelves.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 Cf. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 47, and Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1 et seq.
  - 2 Andréa Belliger and David J. Krieger, “Einführung in die Akteur-Netzwerk Theorie,” in *ANTHology. Ein einführendes Handbuch zur Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie*, eds. Andréa Belliger and David J. Krieger (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2006): 13–50, 23.
  - 3 As is common within fascism studies, fascism with a lower-case “f” refers to the generic phenomenon, Fascism with a capital “F” refers to Italian Fascism.
  - 4 Ernst von Salomon, *Der Fragebogen* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1951), 292. Cf. Helmuth Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger. Die Biographie* (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2007), 320.

According to the national revolutionary Ernst von Salomon, it was in this Berlin room in the Stralauer Allee 36, and in view of the “tangle of tracks,” that the kindred spirit Ernst Jünger wrote his influential essay *Total Mobilization*. Published in 1930 in an anthology edited by Jünger and titled *Krieg und Krieger* (*War and Warrior*), the essay was a call to Weimar Germany’s right: if it wanted to win the longed-for future war, it would have to embrace modern technology and come to terms with the turbulent new world of the third estate. However, the essay was also an astute description of the spirit of modernity which had reared its ugly head in the First World War. According to Jünger, the “dawn of the age of labor [*Arbeitszeitalter*]” went hand in hand with “the growing conversion of life into energy, the increasingly fleeting content of all binding ties in deference to mobility”. And he continues:

It suffices simply to consider our daily life, with its inexorability and merciless discipline, its smoking, glowing districts, the physics and metaphysics of its commerce, its motors, airplanes, and burgeoning cities. With a pleasure-tinged horror, we sense that here, not a single atom is not in motion—that we are profoundly inscribed in this raging process.<sup>5</sup>

The war had heralded this new age and revealed its nature as a culture of “total mobilization.” Like a modern day Hecaleitus, Jünger understood war as the father of all and saw everything in movement—*πάντα χωρεῖ*.<sup>6</sup>

The culture of radicalized and incessant movement was, and is, intimately connected with tracks, roads, and telegraph cables for they were, and are, “the connective tissues and the circulatory systems of modernity” and “the built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space.”<sup>7</sup> These technological systems lie at the root of the “growing conversion of life into energy.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, it is the culture of total mobilization—specific concepts, patterns of meaning, and practices—inscribed into these technological systems which makes them into the *infrastructure* of modernity. It is no coincidence that the example which clarifies the intrinsic nexus of modern infrastructure and the culture of total mobilization also stems from the context of fascism, for Fascism

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5 Ernst Jünger, “Total Mobilization,” in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 119–139, 126 et seqq.

6 DK 22 B 53; Plato, *Crat.* 402 a.

7 Paul N. Edwards, “Infrastructure and Modernity: Scales of Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems,” in *Modernity and Technology*, eds. Thomas J. Misa et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 185–225, 185; Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 327–43, 328.

8 Jünger, “Total Mobilization,” 126.

was not only an ideology of movement, the Fascists were also restless revolutionaries.<sup>9</sup>

## Roads—Horn of Africa, 1935–1936

Tortuous paths, roads that follow the indolent curves of rivers, or that hug the irregular backs and stomachs of mountains—these are the laws of the earth. Never a straight line; always zigzags and arabesques. Velocity has finally given human life one of the attributes of divinity: the straight line. [...] We have to persecute, whip, and torture all who sin against speed.<sup>10</sup>

*Figure 1: The street from Nefasit to Dekemhare in Eritrea—as straight and “divine” as the Futurist and Fascist Filippo Marinetti praised.*



Unknown photographer, picture in: Giuseppe Pini, “Le Strade dell’Africa Orientale Italiana,” *Le Strade* 20, no. 6 (1938): 318–336, 325.

In the forefront of the invasion of Haile Selassie’s Ethiopian Empire on October 2, 1935, the Italian Fascists put in motion “a gigantic labor process” closely resem-

9 Cf. Fernando Esposito and Sven Reichardt, “Revolution and Eternity: Introductory Remarks on Fascist Temporalities,” *Journal of Modern European History* 13, no. 1 (2015): 24–43.

10 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “The New Religion—Morality of Speed,” in *Futurism: An Anthology*, eds. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press 2009): 224–229, 224 et seq.

bling the one described by Jünger.<sup>11</sup> Waging war some 4,000 kilometres from home in the Ethiopian Highlands as well as the Somalian steppe and desert was firstly an enormous logistical challenge. Desperate to avoid a further disgraceful defeat like the one suffered at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, the Italian military assembled a massive force at the Horn of Africa. On the eve of war 134,000 Italian officers and soldiers and 82,500 Askaris stood ready for battle in Eritrea and Somalia. By May 1936, the troops had grown to 330,000 Italians and 87,000 Askaris which had 10,000 machine guns, 1,100 pieces of artillery, 350 airplanes, 250 tanks, 90,000 mules and horses, and 14,000 motor vehicles at their disposal.<sup>12</sup> Men and material had to not only pass through the British controlled Suez Canal, but the ports of Massawa and Mogadishu had to be expanded and reliable transportation routes built to the deployment areas of the troops and then subsequently to the Ethiopian interior.

As Emilio De Bono, former Minister of Colonies, in 1935 both High Commissioner for Italian Africa, and Governor of Eritrea stated in the aftermath of the Italian victory:

Conditions in Eritrea were certainly not such as to facilitate the movement thither of great bodies of troops, and all that is involved by an extraordinary massing of armed forces. Even less did they permit of the logistic and strategical movement of armed forces.<sup>13</sup>

The Fascist dromocrats knew not only that, to quote Sun Tzu, “speed is the essence of war,” but also that infrastructure was the necessary condition for a “*guerra rapida e decisiva*,” that is the Italian variant of a *blitzkrieg*.<sup>14</sup> The most urgent problem they had to solve was the “Cyclopean task” of building roads suitable to the demands of the Fascist war-machine—for its military advance as well as its supply.<sup>15</sup> Thus, De Bono

11 Jünger, “Total Mobilization,” 126.

12 Giorgio Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia. Studi militari 1921–1939* (Paese: Pagus edizioni, 1991), 105.

13 Emilio De Bono, *Anno XVIII* [sic]: *The Conquest of an Empire* (London: Cresset Press, 1937), 18.

14 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 134 (XI.29). On dromocrats cf.: Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006); on the Italian *blitzkrieg* avant la lettre cf. Daniel Hedinger, *Die Achse. Berlin-Rom-Tokio 1919–1946* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2021), 286–92 and Giulia Brogini Künzi, *Italien und der Abessinienkrieg 1935/36. Kolonialkrieg oder totaler Krieg?* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), 234–238.

15 De Bono, *Anno XVIII*, 63. On this and the following cf. Richard Pankhurst, “Road-Building During the Italian Fascist Occupation of Ethiopia (1936–1941),” *Africa Quarterly* 15 (1976): 21–63; as well as Marco Antonsich, “Addis Abeba ‘Caput Viarium’. Le strade del Duce in Abissinia,” *Limes* 13, no. 3 (2006): 133–44; Aram Mattioli, “Unterwegs zu einer imperialen Raumordnung in Italienisch-Ostafrika,” in *Für den Faschismus bauen. Architektur und Städtebau im Italien Mussolinis. Kultur – Philosophie – Geschichte*, eds. Aram Mattioli and Gerald Steinacher (Zurich: Orell Füssli, 2009): 327–352.

deployed a steadily growing army of Italian workers: in the run-up to the attack, between February and October 1935, their numbers grew from 10,000 to 50,000.<sup>16</sup> Shortly before entering Addis Ababa on May 5, 1936, Marshal Pietro Badoglio was deploying 170,000 men to build roads on the northern front, while in the south General Rodolfo Graziani had to make do with 30,000.<sup>17</sup> As Giulia Brogini Künzi has shown, this massive labor force produced extraordinary results: between October 1935 and May 1936 it built 1,800 km of new roads, and mended 900 km of existing roads on the northern front alone, including 1,570 bridges.<sup>18</sup> Yet Mussolini's plans for the newly conquered *spazio vitale*/*Lebensraum* were even grander.

On May 19—ten days after the declaration of the Italian Empire—il Duce decreed that 2,850 km of roads be built connecting Massawa with the Ethiopian capital via Asmara and Dessie (*Strada della Vittoria*) and the latter to the port of Assab (*Strada imperiale*).<sup>19</sup> In June 1937, the astronomical sum of 7.73 billion lire was allotted to road construction. A few more figures may illustrate the gigantomania that underlay the Fascist infrastructure project: between December 1936 and December 1937, 596,000 tons of cement, 3,630 tons of iron, and 616 tons of dynamite were shipped to *Africa Orientale Italiana* (A.O.I.) where—as of the beginning of June 1937—63,530 Italian, 43,720 indigenous, and 10,680 Yemenite and Sudanese workers used them to materialize the network of imperial roads.<sup>20</sup> Until the Fascists were ousted from the Horn of Africa in the course of 1941, the colonies were to consume twenty percent of the state budget.<sup>21</sup> It is fascist imperial infrastructure's cultural dimension which allows us to grasp why this gigantic labor process was set in motion.<sup>22</sup>

16 De Bono, *Anno XLIII*, 67. Cf. Pankhurst, "Road-Building," 26.

17 Pankhurst, "Road-Building," 33.

18 Brogini Künzi, *Italien und der Abessinienkrieg*, 253.

19 Pankhurst, "Road-Building," 34; Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. Vol. 3, La caduta dell'impero* (Rome: Laterza, 1982), 159. Cf. Mattioli, "Unterwegs zu einer imperialen Raumordnung," 334 et seqq.

20 Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, 159, 162.

21 Giuseppe Maione, "I costi delle imprese coloniali," in *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, ed. Angelo Del Boca (Rome: Laterza, 1991): 400–20, 401.

22 On imperial infrastructure cf. Dirk van Laak, *Imperiale Infrastruktur. Deutsche Planungen für eine Erschließung Afrikas 1880 bis 1960* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004).

## Imaginaries—Rome, Anno XIV

Everyone knows that I have a kind of Roman passion for roads, in which I see one of the fundamental elements of the well-being and unity of the people.<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned, infrastructure is best conceived as a hybrid, as a composite consisting of signs and things, knowledge and power, nature and society, humans and non-humans.<sup>24</sup> It was the symbols, narratives, and imaginaries which transformed the steel, gravel, and cement into a fascist imperial infrastructure—and Rome was Fascism's most potent symbol. Rome lay at the heart of the Fascist imaginary and functioned as foundational narrative. Rome defined the Fascist style and aesthetics, it underlay the vision of the New Man and of the bellicose and orderly society which the Fascists aimed to bring forth. Consequently, the myth of Rome also informed the infrastructure which the Fascists built at the Horn of Africa. As Giuseppe Pini, the chief engineer of the roads works in eastern Africa, stated in 1939:

The first works that the Romans imposed in the conquered regions were the roads for the valorization of the lands, for the development of trade and for the welfare of the peoples: roads, which, with their routes and bridges, still testify after millennia not only to the skill and genius of the builders, but also and above all, to the humane and civilizing purpose of the conquest. After our troops entered Addis Ababa, the first order given by the Duce to H.E. Badoglio for the enhancement of the Empire bears the words: roads, roads, roads.<sup>25</sup>

The imperial roads connected not only the ports, cities and towns of *Africa Orientale Italiana*, they also linked an imaginary past with both the present and future of the empire. Rome was inscribed into the imperial roads and transformed them into symbols of the supposed benevolence of the Fascist presence in eastern Africa. Here, as in Libya and elsewhere around the Fascist Mediterranean, Rome legitimized the Fascist empire and disguised the murderous imperial undertaking as Fascism's universal civilizing mission.

23 Benito Mussolini, "Al Gran Rapporto del Fascismo," in *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini Vol. XXIV*, eds. Edoardo Susmel and Dulio Susmel (Florence: La Fenice, 1964): 132–46, 134.

24 Cf. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 100 et seqq.

25 Giuseppe Pini, "Il piano del Duce," in *L'industria in A.O.I.*, ed. Confederazione fascista degli industriali (Rome: U.S.I.L.A., 1939): 51–75, 51.

Figure 2: An illustration from the book *L'industria in A.O.I.* shows the close nexus between Rome and roads. The caption reads: "I have a kind of Roman passion for roads, in which I see one of the fundamental elements of the well-being and unity of the people."



Confederazione fascista degli industriali, ed., *L'industria in A.O.I.* (Rome: U.S.I.L.A., 1939), n.p. Courtesy of The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, XB1990.587. Photo: David Almeida.

But it was not Rome alone and the eternal, motionless order it stood for, that informed the imperial roads. It was also the concept of movement, of total mobilization itself. Movement was central to the modern understanding of territoriality that spurred Fascism's imperial conquest: space needed to be conquered and penetrated, subjugated, divided, and enclosed. But it also needed to be saturated by the state, and in the 1930s roads were the means of choice to allow for the necessary flow



of statal energies.<sup>26</sup> But the imperial roads and the war they enabled served not only to 'energize' the vast new imperial space. Rather, they also served to revitalize, Fascism itself.

Figure 3: A further illustration from the book *L'industria in A.O.I.* captures the spirit of the age of total mobilization. The caption reads: "The word that sums up and gives unmistakable character to our century is 'movement'."



Confederazione fascista degli industriali, ed., *L'industria in A.O.I.*, n.p. Courtesy of The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, XB1990.587. Photo: David Almeida.

26 Cf. Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 3 (2000): 807–831, 819 et seqq.



The war in Ethiopia was to revive the original spirit of fascism, that is, the spirit of *squadrismo*. As Arturo Marpicati, former vice-secretary of the PNF, stated in 1938:

Fascism remains a movement of action, a deed, a total commitment of our personality thrown forward. It is in vain to declare oneself a fascist, where this spirit, in which Fascism—yesterday as today—most properly consists, is lacking. Otherwise, the revolution would no longer go forward. Instead, it is on the march. [...] In movement is life.<sup>27</sup>

Fascism was *movement* and war was both its impetus and end. Violence and warfare stood not only at the beginning of the Fascist movement, they were also its lifeblood. After thirteen years in power the Fascists' *élan vital*, their destructive, revolutionary urge, had waned. The Fascist movement was in danger of coming to a standstill. The war in Abyssinia and the violence it unleashed served to put the Fascists back on the revolutionary track. Now they were on the road again and the empire served, as Alexander De Grand notes, as a "testing ground for a Fascism that sought to free itself from any constraints. What had not been done in Italy for some years or could not be done at all, now could be experimented with in Africa."<sup>28</sup>

While the Fascists had conquered the capital of the Ethiopian empire with a *blitzkrieg* in 1936, they were never able to truly 'pacify' the enormous territory—not to mention failing to 'saturate' it with the institutions and representatives of the fascist colonial state. The brutal war against guerrilla forces and the civilian population raged on for another five years.<sup>29</sup> In light of the bombardment of civilians, the use of poison gas and the death of between 350,000 to 760,000 of the ten million Ethiopians, Aram Mattioli rightly sees the Italo-Ethiopian War not only as a laboratory of violence but also as the first fascist war of annihilation—a war with an underlying genocidal tendency.<sup>30</sup> The imperial roads set the fascist war machine in motion. Yet, they not only enabled the new fascist warfare, but they were also materializations of the culture of "total mobilization."<sup>31</sup> As Jünger, with whom this piece began, stated,

27 Arturo Marpicati, *Il Partito Fascista. Origine – sviluppo – funzioni* (Milan: Mondadori, 1938), 35.

28 Alexander De Grand, "Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935–1940," *Contemporary European History* 13, no. 2 (2004): 127–47, 138.

29 Aram Mattioli, "Ein Schlüsselereignis der Weltkriegsepoche," in *Der erste faschistische Vernichtungskrieg. Die italienische Aggression gegen Äthiopien 1935–1941*, eds. Asfa-Wossen Assef and Aram Mattioli (Cologne: SH-Verlag, 2006): 9–25, 9.

30 Mattioli, "Ein Schlüsselereignis," 9. Cf. also Aram Mattioli, "Entgrenzte Kriegsgewalt. Der italienische Giftgaseinsatz in Abessinien 1935–1936," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 51 (2003): 311–37; Aram Mattioli, *Experimentierfeld der Gewalt. Der Abessinienkrieg und seine internationale Bedeutung 1935–1941* (Zürich: Orell Füssli Verlag, 2005).

31 Cf. Miguel Alonso, Alan Kramer, and Javier Rodrigo, eds., *Fascist Warfare, 1922–1945: Aggression, Occupation, Annihilation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

the latter's "technical side is not decisive. Its basis—like that of all technology—lies deeper."<sup>32</sup> The same could be said for infrastructure in general.

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32 Jünger, "Total Mobilization," 129.