

Libya, Mussolini, and the “White Race”: Fascist Colonialism and its Imprint on the British Empire

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Abstract

This chapter studies how journalists from Britain and key white dominions, especially Australia, collected knowledge on the fascist Italian empire's settler-colonial efforts in the 1930s and in which complex ways they interpreted those efforts; and shows how such information helped shape contemporary political and administrative debates about Britain's own settler-colonial efforts. In so doing, the chapter shows how people at the time saw differences and commonalities between their own colonial practices and the fascist vision of empire, what they deemed worthy of imitation and what they rejected, and how competing notions of empire were negotiated in sometimes fierce debates.

Keywords: transimperial, Settler colonialism, Journalism, Officialdom, Britain, Italy

In the fall of 1938, Mussolini took the world by surprise. At a time when other European powers were struggling to contain anti-colonial movements and the whole system of imperialism appeared to be in deep crisis, the Italian dictator launched a massive state-sponsored settlement program in his country's overseas territories. As close to 20,000 settlers landed in Libya's capital, Tripoli, the fascist regime launched a huge propaganda campaign at home, announcing that many more settlers would follow. The goal was to achieve at least half a million colonists in Libya by the 1950s and millions more in Abyssinia (today's Ethiopia) and other parts of the African continent that the regime aimed to conquer in its quest for “living space.” Indeed, the *Ventimila*—or Twenty Thousand, as they are still remembered today—were part of a much wider scheme seemingly driven by a comprehensive biopolitical vision. North Africa was presented as a huge laboratory for unprecedented experiments in racial demographics. Leading fascists voiced hopes that the southern shores of the Mediterranean would serve as a breeding ground for the “white race,” thus reversing the decline in the growth of population that had been underway in many European societies since the turn of the century.

The scope and purported underlying biopolitical objectives of the fascist scheme stirred considerable international media attention. Some foreign observers drew strong parallels to other large-scale settlement projects that were considered exemplary at the time, such as the French relocation of settlers to Algeria, the Japanese colonization of Manchuria, and the new homesteads for the Jewish people in Palestine.¹

The international ramifications of the fascists' dream of empire are the focus of this chapter. I am interested in how commentators, journalists, intellectuals, and political figures abroad perceived Italy's colonial project, and, even more important, how they gathered, discussed, and used the information in various contexts.² Most studies of the interwar European empires are comparative, seeking to determine their objective similarities and differences.³ In contrast, I adopt a transimperial, cultural approach, exploring subjective frames of reference.⁴ What concerns me are what people *at that time* believed were the differences and commonalities between their own colonial practices and the fascist vision of empire, what they deemed worthy of imitation, and what they rejected, in sometimes fierce debates. Indeed, as Miri Rubin has argued, the domain of representation and the struggle over meaning are among the most fruitful areas for the pursuit of historical understanding.⁵ Ultimately, my contribution questions the very idea of a clear demarcation that can be drawn between an imperial and a transimperial sphere. Instead, I would like to adapt an "outside in" perspective: not only do transimperial forces circulate through, across, and between "imperial spaces"; they ultimately help to establish and maintain them.⁶

* I wish to thank Jessica Urwin (ANU) for her great help in retrieving the archival materials in Canberra during the Covid lockdown in 2021 and Rebecca Lowen for her fantastic editing of the text.

¹ Michael Ortiz, *Anti-Colonialism and the Crises of Interwar Fascism* (London et al: Bloomsburg Academic, 2023), 6–7; Patrick Bernhard, "Hitler's Africa in the East: Italian Colonialism as a Model for German Planning in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Contemporary History* 51,1 (2016), 61–90.

² Similar are the methodological suggestions made by Joahannes Paulmann, "Internationaler Vergleich und interkultureller Transfer: Zwei Forschungsansätze zur europäischen Geschichte des 18. bis 20. Jahrhunderts," *Historische Zeitschrift* 267 (1998), 649–85.

³ Reo Matsuzaki, "Placing the Colonial State in the Middle: The Comparative Method and the Study of Empires," *Comparativ* 19,1 (2009), 107–19.

⁴ Similar are Marina Mogilner and Alexander Semyonov, "New imperial History and the Challenges of Empire," in Ilya Gerasimov et al. (eds.), *Empire Speaks Out: Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 15; Martin Thomas and Richard Toye, *Arguing About Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882–1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–18.

⁵ Miri Rubin, "Cultural history I: what's in a name?" last modified 2008, The Institute of Historical Research, https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/cultural_history.html (last accessed May 28, 2020).

⁶ This argument has been made by Andrew Preston and Doug Rossinow (eds.), *Outside In: The Transnational Circuitry of US History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) in regard to the

Specifically, I look at the British Empire and the associated Dominion of Australia, and to a lesser extent, the Dominions of New Zealand and Canada, to understand how people in these countries viewed the fascist efforts in North Africa and why they viewed them as they did. Although by far the biggest and most potent imperial power of its time, Britain observed other colonial regimes in what was an atmosphere of increasing international competition starting in the late nineteenth century.⁷ As Alex Middleton has noted, the very notion of British exceptionalism derived from Britain's often commonsense comparisons to its imperial rivals, whose purported inferiority British politicians and state officials as well as ordinary tourists traveling abroad confirmed with regularity.⁸ Likewise, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand shared not only an understanding of being settler societies but also the various difficulties that resulted from this status, such as building "white communities" amid multi-ethnic populations.⁹ For these societies, the solutions to such problems that other colonizing countries such as Italy had found were potentially valuable for improving their own settlement practices.

As I will argue, fascist biopolitics served as both an important model and counter model in the Anglophone debates over colonial policies during the interwar years. On the one hand, Mussolini's claim to have overcome the purported laissez-faire colonialism of the British Empire and replaced it with something new in the history of overseas domination provoked strong reactions against Italian settlement schemes. Yet fending off an idea deemed false helped at the same time to reassure people that they were on the "right" path with their own colonial policies. Thus, the fascist challenge functioned as a transimperial confirmation of what were thought to be genuinely British imperial pathways.

On the other hand, fascist biopolitics also served as a beacon to those in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada who were discontented with the state of colonial affairs in their own countries. Paradoxically, the idea of fascist colonialism had a huge impact not despite but *because* empires were believed to be in deep crisis in the interwar years. Mussolini seemed to demonstrate that it was possible to defy the global trend of decolonization. All that was needed was the determination of a political strongman and a state-driven, comprehensive scheme to stem the tide.

relationship between national and transnational history, but it can be easily extended to the sphere of empire.

⁷ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order* (London: Lane, 2014); Timothy H. Parsons, *The British Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A World History* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 79.

⁸ Alex Middleton, "European Colonial Empires and Victorian Imperial Exceptionalism," in Willibald Steinmetz (ed.) *The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2019), 164–90.

⁹ James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 2011), 180, 458–67.

In sum, Mussolini gave hope for a fundamental renewal of colonial rule and, by extension, of white supremacy.

The interest in fascist Italy overrode even the nationalist and racist resentment that existed in Anglo-Saxon countries towards Italian migrants, especially those from the south of the country. Despite these reservations, the “Roman model” possessed a magnetic appeal, not least due to the strict distinction that it made between “old” Italy and the “new” Fascism that broke with tradition.¹⁰ As Stuart Ward has argued, the preexisting idea of white supremacy in anglophone countries such as Australia was fueled by the rise of fascism in Italy in the 1920s; conversely, the settler colonialism in these countries served as an amplifier for the new ideology.¹¹

Indeed, few in Britain and beyond dismissed the Italian settlement schemes straightaway as the megalomaniac and anachronistic follies of a purportedly backward Mediterranean dictatorship of scant importance. Rather, in interwar debates about empire, Mussolini’s regime wielded what Michel Foucault has called “discursive power”: it succeeded, if only for a limited period, in shaping the international agenda for empire.¹²

It exercised this influence largely via media. For this reason, I focus here on the interplay between media, science, and politics. Much has been written about the prominent role of academic experts, particularly anthropologists, in generating knowledge in support of European imperial dominance.¹³ We know far less about the role of the media.¹⁴ But science-driven knowledge only becomes fully effective

¹⁰ Patrick Bernhard, “The Great Divide? Notions of Racism in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: New Answers to an Old Problem,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 24,1 (2019), 97–114; Patrick Bernhard, “Fascism’s Global Script: Mussolini’s Italy and the Rise and Radicalization of Nazism,” in Jonathan S. Wiesen et al. (eds.), *Global Nazism: The Third Reich in Transnational and International Perspective* (in print London: Routledge, 2025).

¹¹ Stuart Ward, “‘Regular White Man’: Reveries of Reverse Colonization,” in Daniel Geary, Camilla Schofield and Jennifer Sutton (eds.), *Global White Nationalism: From Apartheid to Trump* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 53–70.

¹² On how to use Foucault’s insights in cultural studies, see Esther Konieczny, *Gipfel, Krisen, Konferenzen: Die Entstehung diskursiver Macht in transnationalen Kommunikationsereignissen* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2014), 91.

¹³ On this topic in general, see Kerstin Brückweh et al. (eds.), *Engineering Society: The Role of the Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880–1980* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020). On the relationship between science and empire in particular, see Andrew Goss (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Science and Empire* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021); Brett M. Bennett and Joseph M. Hodge (eds.), *Science and Empire: Knowledge and Networks of Science Across the British Empire, 1800–1970* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁴ On the less than straightforward relationship between the press and the colonial apparatus in the case of the British Empire, see Chandrika Kaul, “Introductory Survey,” in Chandrika Kaul (ed.), *Media and the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1–19; Simon J. Potter, “Webs,

when it gains wider resonance. Experts exert influence within their own scholarly and scientific networks. They need a wider audience if they are to influence the political process. This is particularly true in democracies in which the role of the media is not just to control and criticize but also to mediate.¹⁵ As I will show, ideas about fascist settlement policy in North Africa that were conveyed by mainstream media aided settlement experts and politicians in the British Empire and its dominions in furthering their own ideas. For example, British parliamentarians could refer to the extensive news coverage of Italian settlers arriving in Libya in October 1938 in arguing for the importance of the event. To put it bluntly: they could declare the settlement of Libya to be important because the renowned London-based *The Times*, among other major newspapers, was reporting about it.

My argument has three parts. First, I focus on the ways people, mainly in Britain and Australia, reacted to fascists' ideas about how to understand imperial biopolitics. Mussolini's project was divisive, both among academics and journalists. And yet both noticeably increased their scholarship on, and news coverage of, *Africa Italiana*. This attention then put pressure on the state to pay closer attention to fascist settler colonialism, including systematically collecting information on the subject and making it available to agencies in charge of imperial planning, such as the British Overseas Settlement Board.

Second, I look at how the extensive news coverage and official reports were used by imperial think tanks and wielded in political debates about fascist Italy. Not only did British and Australian settlement experts discuss the possibilities of exchanging practical know-how and emulating Italian population management; the fascist template also reaffirmed the claims of "white" Britain, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, and provided a further stimulus to constrain the immigration mainly of non-Europeans in what has been dubbed the global migration crisis of the 1930s. In this way, this section contributes to an as-yet unwritten transimperial history of fascist racism.¹⁶

Third, I deal with the post-1945 afterlife of the dream of empire. I outline how the fascist template prolonged hopes for a "white" Australia and New Zealand into the late 1960s.

I conclude by assessing how my findings alter our understanding of both (fascist) Italy and Britain and its Dominions in the interwar period and after 1945.

Networks, and Systems: Globalization and the Mass Media in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Empire," *The Journal of British Studies* 46,3 (2007), 621–46.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Frank Bösch and Norbert Frei (eds.), *Medialisierung und Demokratie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006).

¹⁶ Peter Staudenmaier, "Racial Ideology between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Julius Evola and the Aryan Myth, 1933–43," *Journal of Contemporary History* 55,3 (2020), 473–91; Bernhard, "The Great Divide?," 97–114.

In moving beyond the intra-imperial frameworks of historical analysis that still dominate accounts not only of Italian colonialism¹⁷ but also of the history of empire in modern Europe more generally,¹⁸ we can better apprehend the ideological foundations of countries such as Britain or Australia. We can also better understand the way that people in the interwar period placed themselves in broader international and transimperial contexts, and thereby gain insight into the processes of forming and confirming identities.

Assessing Empire: Fascist Biopolitics in Media, Academia, and Planning Agencies

Readers of *The Times* may have been astonished by the newspaper's October 21, 1938, morning edition.¹⁹ In it was a lengthy article by the London newspaper's Rome correspondent, Canadian-born Sidney Freifeld, warmly describing the newly founded fascist empire under Mussolini. As Freifeld maintained, the fascists were about to accomplish a "remarkable achievement" in creating a new settler society in Libya, Italy's most important colony. Although somewhat mocking of the official fascist rhetoric about the endeavor's uniqueness, Freifeld, a LSE-trained economist, nonetheless appeared impressed by what Mussolini's men had attempted so far and by the huge sums that the Italian regime was willing to invest in Libya. "Farms have been built, roads made, wells drilled, water-pipes laid down, the land deep-ploughed by tractors." The fascist regime was providing everything needed for a settler's life in Italy's main colony. Freifeld brought to bear his knowledge as a former employee of the International Agricultural Institute (IAI) in Rome, one of several international think tanks used by Mussolini's regime to promote itself on an international stage.²⁰ Just a few days before the arrival of almost 20,000 Italian settlers in Tripoli, Freifeld gave a thoroughly positive picture of what he deemed to be the modern imperialism of a foreign country. In his view, Italy had not only caught up with the era's leading colonial powers but was also setting an example. Libya would soon cease to be a mere colony and become an integral part of mainland Italy. True, fascist Italy "has a long road ahead of it, and it will be a rather costly affair." But "who can doubt that the work will be worth it?," the correspondent concluded.

¹⁷ Exemplary is the work of Italian historian, Nicola Labanca; see for instance his *L'Oltremare: Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino, 2002).

¹⁸ Nadin Heé and Daniel Hedinger, "Transimperial History: Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition," *Journal of Modern European History* 16,4 (2018), 429–52.

¹⁹ "An Exodus from Italy," *The Times*, October 21, 1938, 15.

²⁰ Elisabetta Tollardo, *Fascist Italy and the League of Nations, 1922–1935* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 33.

Freifeld's article attracted considerable attention. Dozens of editors in Australia, Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand reprinted his text, albeit in an abridged form. Thus, his account of Libya reached readers in places as distant from each other as Wagga Wagga in New South Wales, Regina in Saskatchewan, and Hokitika on New Zealand's South Island. In Australia alone, the article was reissued at least 29 times.²¹ At this time, the Anglophone media landscape was a "culture of reprint," giving the most prestigious newspapers the role of opinion leaders.²² The British Empire and the Dominions effectively constituted a huge resonating space for the views from Fleet Street.

Many other newsrooms between Canberra and Vancouver ran their own stories on the fascist settlement scheme, drawing on press releases from Reuters and similar news agencies. Some papers even sent their own correspondents to Libya. The foreign correspondent was a central feature in the imperial press system that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, facilitating contrast and comparison between the rival European powers.²³ As the British consul in Tripoli reported to his superiors in London, the Italian colonists' arrival in Libya was covered by journalists, photographers, and newsreel men from around the globe, for whom Italian authorities had reserved an entire ship in the convoy that carried the settlers across the Mediterranean.²⁴ British newspapers were represented by five correspondents, second only to those of Nazi Germany and France. The reporters cabled to their editors back home entire series of articles that closely followed every step of the settlers' way. To give just one example, the Edinburgh-based *Scotsman* ran no fewer than eight pieces, some illustrated by large photos, between October and November 1938.²⁵ Often, such articles were prominently placed on the front page, reinforcing the impression that the resettlement of thousands of Italian colonists was a historical event.

²¹ The figure is based on a search in the online digital newspaper database "Trove" which is maintained by the National Library of Australia; see <https://trove.nla.gov.au>.

²² Andrew King, Alexis Easley, and John Morton (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers* (Milton Park and New York: Routledge, 2016), 11–13, 125–26.

²³ Simon J. Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System 1876–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Andrew Griffiths, "Most Extraordinary Careers: Special Correspondents and the News Narrative," in Andrew Griffiths (ed.), *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism and the Fiction of Empire, 1870–1900* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 20–54.

²⁴ Dispatch No 49(e) of the British Consul in Tripoli, A.E. Watkinson, to the FO, November 7, 1938, The National Archives/Public Record Office in Kew Gardens/Londonn (TNA/PRO), series Foreign Office (FO), 371, 22033.

²⁵ See the articles "Mass emigration" of October 18, "Libya's future" of October 27, "Libyan settlers" of October 29, "Italian colonists leave for Libya" of October 31, "Italian settlers" of November 5, "Libya colonists" of November 7, "Italy's Empire" of November 8, "Italian colonization" of November 9, 1938.

Mainstream newspapers in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand highlighted four aspects of Italian colonialism. One was the supposed uniqueness of the fascist settlement program. Unlike the *Times*, however, the other papers did not mock the fascist rhetoric but rather reiterated it uncritically. Journalists reported that Italy's colonization scheme was the "biggest tried by any nation."²⁶ No other country had ever attempted resettlement on such a scale; it constituted the "greatest organised emigration movement in modern times."²⁷

Second, the fascist empire had transitioned to this new era with amazing velocity. Indeed, "speed" was a key element in international media coverage of the Italian settlements in North Africa. A good example are the articles by Martin Moore, The *Daily Telegraph's* special correspondent. Moore informed his readers in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand that "by a single stroke of policy Italy intends to achieve in a few years what other colonial nations, with much more promising territories, have done only in generations of largely haphazard and unassisted migration."²⁸ Some English-speaking observers even drew on the fascist rhetoric in their descriptions. For instance, the academic journal *Town and Country Planning* published an article that spoke of the "fascist tempo" of the "amazing migration to Libya."²⁹ This was precisely how fascism styled itself: as a political force that was catapulting Italian society into a new era. As Fernando Esposito and Sven Reichardt have noted, fascists cultivated a veritable cult of revolution, dynamism, and speed.³⁰

Third, many writers described not just the speed of the Italian settlement project but also its thoroughness and technical competence. When placing more than 1,800 families on farms sometimes 100 miles from the nearest town, Italian administrators had demonstrated a sense of "elaborate organization." In this context, another journalist spoke of the "clockwork precision" with which it had

²⁶ "Italy's colonisation scheme biggest tried by any nation," *Tweed Daily*, Murwillumbah, NSW, January 12, 1939, 3.

²⁷ "The Great Trek: From Italy to Libya," *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, October 28, 1938, 20. Identical are "Emigrants for Libya," *Nottingham Journal*, October 28, 1938, 1; "Italy's emigration scheme," *Belfast News-Letter*, October 28, 1938, and "Bloc emigration by Italians: Thousands sailing for Libya," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, October 28, 1938, 7. See, also very similar, "The biggest organized emigration in history: 20,000 Italian colonists for Libya," *Illustrated London News*, November 5, 1938, 25.

²⁸ Martin Moore, "Italy's new colonies on African Coast," *New Zealand Herald*, January 21, 1939, 12 (supplement). Moore's article was reprinted, yet without crediting him as an author as "Italy's colonisation scheme biggest tried by any nation," *Tweed Daily*, Murwillumbah, NSW, January 12, 1939, 3. Moore's articles published in the *Daily Telegraph* served as the basis for his book, *Italy's Mass Colonization of Libya* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1940).

²⁹ "Demographic colonization," *Town and Country Planning* 8-10 (1940), 36.

³⁰ Fernando Esposito and Sven Reichardt, "Revolution and Eternity: Introductory Remarks on Fascist Temporalities," *Journal of Modern European History* 13,1 (2015), 24-43.

transplanted thousands of Italian peasants to North Africa.³¹ For the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, the organization of the whole enterprise was a "striking example of Fascist efficiency and discipline."³² Many journalistic accounts wrote of the development of North Africa by Italy. For example, the *Daily Mail*, a tabloid with one of the largest circulations in Britain, wrote approvingly that Mussolini would "develop" North Africa through the "mass movement of half a million farmers and their families."³³ "Development" was a positively charged buzzword in Britain at the time. It arose in the rhetorical arsenal of British specialist advisors, scientific researchers, and technical experts during the interwar period in response to anticolonial movements both in the British Empire and at home. The term gave a coating of productiveness and altruism to the colonial project well before it became the guiding idea of foreign aid during the Cold War.³⁴ Whether intentionally or not, the many references to the purported constructiveness of fascist colonization efforts supported the claims of an "enlightened" and thus benevolent British rule of its overseas territories.

What made fascist development policies so successful to British eyes was their firm grounding in academic expertise. Unsurprisingly, scholars highlighted this aspect. A good example is Edward John Russell, one of the most influential agriculturalists of his time. Trained at the University of London, Russell became director of Rothamsted Experimental Station, a world-leading center for research in agricultural statistics and genetics, in 1912. His interest in cooperation across borders brought him to Tripoli, Libya's capital, in March 1939 to present a paper at the 8th *International Conference of Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture*, an eminent academic gathering of more than 100 experts from across Europe and North America.³⁵ Both in his official published report and in his personal diaries, Russell showed himself impressed by what he saw during his eleven days in Tripoli, the surrounding Italian settlements, and Sidi Mesri, the Italian experimental agricultural institute that was similar to his own near London. In the *Geographical Journal*, the mouthpiece of the renowned *Royal Geographical Society*, he lauded the Italian colonization scheme for being carried out "on the strictest scientific lines."³⁶ And

³¹ "Italians in Africa," *Liverpool Daily Post*, March 26, 1940, 6.

³² "New books: North Africa," *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, January 26, 1940, 3.

³³ "Balbo to Lead Colonist Fleet," *Daily Mail*, October 11, 1938, 3. See also "Duce's Dream of Empire," *Gloucester Journal*, November 9, 1940, 13; "Italy in Africa," *Evening Post*, Wellington, December 13, 1938, 13.

³⁴ Joseph Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

³⁵ Claudio G. Segre, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 302.

³⁶ E. J. Russell, "Agricultural Colonization in the Pontine Marshes and Libya," *The Geographical Journal* 94,4 (1939), 273–89.

in his diary, he noted the “very magnificent” way that agricultural experts, technicians, and engineers had worked together to green the Libyan desert.³⁷ Russell’s views were taken up and distributed by various media outlets such as *Newcastle Sun*, the *Liverpool Daily Post*, and Perth’s *Daily News*.³⁸ Thus, in conjunction with the media, scientists played a role in popularizing Mussolini’s colonial regime. Media outlets ensured that the dissemination of expert opinions and academic expertise gave a scholarly patina to the press coverage of Italian colonialism.

Fourth, many descriptions of Italian colonialism conveyed a more or less subtle anticapitalistic tone and an appreciation of the racist biopolitical objectives of fascist rule. As journalists explained to their readers, Italian colonization efforts did not follow economic imperatives. Rather, one of its long-term ideas was to improve demographics, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Mussolini, it was argued, in what today would be called populist rhetoric, was not interested in short-term revenues for a few elite capitalists. Rather, he cared about “the people”; his colonial policies were thus “social” in nature.³⁹ It was regularly reported that Mussolini’s regime sought to redirect the considerable outflow of Italians to its own colonies in order to avoid “losing” people who were needed to build a new national society and to “people” its recently acquired imperial territories.⁴⁰ As the *Leeds Mercury* noted with relief, “the usual sad note which accompanies those who abandon their homeland to seek fortunes abroad was almost extinguished.”⁴¹ The immigrants were leaving their homeland but not greater Italy.

Reporters also broadly discussed the ways in which Mussolini was attempting to strengthen the nation racially. All settlers, according to their reports, had been carefully chosen according to strict criteria such as health, fertility, and physique.⁴² While journalists clearly stated that the fascist regime was ultimately pursuing racist objectives, they did not ponder the implications of these policies. As one editor put it, quoting Mussolini himself, the main objective of the fascist conquest was to “reclaim the land and with the land the men and with the men the race.”⁴³ The fact that such a “strengthening” of Italian stock involved the imposition of an apartheid

³⁷ Entry of March 16, 1939, Diary of Edward John Russell’s trip to Libya, March 9–20, 1939, Rothamsted Research Library Archives, papers of Edward John Russell, RUS3.

³⁸ “Italy will make success of Libya,” *The Newcastle Sun*, NSW, May 24, 1939, 8, 23; “Sheer necessity,” *Liverpool Daily Post*, May 23, 1939, 8; “Predicts Success for Libya,” *The Daily News*, Perth, May 24, 1939, 2.

³⁹ “Italy’s Farsighted Work in Libya,” *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, February 28, 1940, 4.

⁴⁰ “Mass migration: peopling Libya,” *Narrabri North Western Courier*, New South Wales, June 12, 1939, 4; “Voronoffing The Desert,” *Liverpool Echo*, April 26, 1939, 8.

⁴¹ “20,000 Italians Off to Libya,” *Leeds Mercury*, October 29, 1938, 1.

⁴² “Colonisation,” *Auckland Star*, November 29, 1938.

⁴³ “Italian colonization praised,” *The Wiluna Miner*, Western Australia, July 14, 1939, 2.

policy in the Italian colonies was mentioned by journalists but seen as positive.⁴⁴ Rather than reporting on the massive violence inherent to an apartheid system, most writers concentrated on what they called the constructive aspects of fascist biopolitics, i.e., the technical and financial measures being taken by the fascist state to settle the colonists. As journalists explained to their readers, the Italian state was financing the entire colonization enterprise because it would purportedly rebound to the collective demographic and racial good of Italy.⁴⁵

Commentators emphasized in this context that Italian authorities relied on group settlements, a rather common type of settlement in particular in the anglophone world at the time.⁴⁶ In group settlements (or collective settlements, as they were also called), migrants were placed in a single area by an organizing and sponsoring body instead of finding themselves a suitable farmstead. In the Italian case, this type of settlement had on the one hand to protect against possible attacks by purported hostile indigenous people, and on the other hand to reveal and preserve the best characteristics of the Italian race. To this end, as press reports highlighted, the Italian regime had set up a proper Settlement Agency that tightly controlled all matters concerned "with military efficiency."⁴⁷

The praise for the anti-capitalist thrust and racist objectives of the Italian colonization scheme was the starting point for sometimes harsh condemnations of Britain's supposedly outdated imperialism. Martin Moore's account, *The Fourth Shore: Italy's Mass Colonisation of Libya*, published in 1940, offers a good example.⁴⁸ Building on his previous articles for the *Daily Telegraph*, Moore in his widely noted book blamed Britain for its ultimately failed policies in Africa and Asia. Whereas Mussolini cared about Italy's future, mobilizing all his country's resources, Whitehall was stuck in old laissez-faire thinking. Unlike some of the "haphazard colonization" practices of the British Empire, the "Fascist state does not content itself with shipping the migrant to his new land, finding him a job and leaving him to 'make good' as best he may." Instead, Mussolini's regime took care of the settlers in the most comprehensive way possible, providing each family with a ready-to-work farm plot, a fully furnished farmhouse, manuals on how to plant and sow crops, and basic farming supplies. Then the government bought what the colonists

⁴⁴ "20,000 Italians," *Waikato Independent*, November 1, 1938.

⁴⁵ "Abyssinia: Italian Colonising Scheme Free Land Grants," *The Telegraph*, Brisbane, June 17, 1936, 13.

⁴⁶ C. A. Dawson, *Group Settlement: Ethnic Xommunities in Western Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1936).

⁴⁷ "Italy's colonisation scheme biggest tried by any nation," *Tweed Daily*, Murwillumbah, NSW, January 12, 1939, 3.

⁴⁸ Martin Moore, *Fourth Shore: Italy's Mass Colonization of Libya* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1940), 15.

produced, at fixed prices. Even architecture served that end. As Moore emphasized, the new rural centers, or *centri rurali*, provided all the facilities that the settlers needed. Thus, for Moore, the Italian scheme “must be of the greatest interest to all other nations which administer undeveloped quarters in the world.”⁴⁹

This hymn to alleged fascist achievements and the sharp criticism of Britain’s colonial policy are best understood against the backdrop of the Great Depression, which, in the late 1930s, still held parts of Britain, especially northern England and Wales, in a tight grip. Although the British government tried to counter the crisis with a policy of moderate deficit spending that included building roads and other public works, some observers such as Moore wanted it to do more. Whether he and other journalists like him had lost their confidence in the self-healing powers of capitalism during the economic crisis or before, they identified Mussolini’s Italy as offering a purportedly brilliant alternative to emulate.

The positive reportage went hand in hand with a considerable increase in the number of articles in the British, Australian, and New Zealand presses on fascist empires. Although a comprehensive quantitative analysis of Anglophone news coverage of Mussolini’s imperial vision and of the respective output of popular and academic works in the interwar period is beyond the scope of this chapter, data largely corroborate the impressions of contemporaries that news coverage of Italian colonialism was significant. First, the number of newspaper articles on Italian colonization more than doubled between the 1920s and the 1930s. An analysis of the *British Newspaper Archive*, a comprehensive digital collection of British and Irish newspapers and periodicals, shows that “Italian colonisation” was mentioned 744 times between 1923 and 1932, and 1,893 times in the ensuing ten years.⁵⁰

Second, the increase in news reports was so great that Italy became one of the most quoted colonial powers in the Anglophone media. Between 1930 and 1939, Italy was mentioned almost as often as Britain, Germany, and France, whose colonization efforts (past and present) had traditionally been highlighted in British and Irish broadsheets and tabloids. A search of the *British Newspaper Archive* turned up 3,789 matches for “Britain,” 1,707 for “Germany,” 1,532 for “France,” and 1,252 for “Italy.”⁵¹ Other foreign colonial powers received considerably less media attention: 563 matches were found for “Japan,” 497 for the Netherlands, 225 for Belgium, and 197 for Portugal.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁰ See <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>. The search parameters were “search all words.” The results were retrieved in April 2024; however, they are subject to change as new contents are continuously added to the *British Newspaper Archives* as digitalization continues.

⁵¹ Ibid. The search parameters were “search all words” and “exact search” for “Italian colonization,” “French colonization,” “German colonization,” etc., while the exact time frame was January 1930 to December 1939 (results being retrieved in April 2024).

In some of the Dominions, the media coverage of Italian colonization even surpassed that of all other foreign powers. A good example is the Australian media. Research in its national database for newspapers and periodicals between 1930 and 1939 shows that Italy received vastly more media coverage than any other country. It was mentioned 329 times, compared to Japan and Germany, which were mentioned 193 and 166 times, respectively. More pronounced is the difference in attention paid to the other imperial powers. France was mentioned 98 times, Belgium, 33 times, the Netherlands, 27 times, and Portugal, a mere five times. An even clearer picture emerges when we look at the coverage by the New Zealand press. In newspapers from Auckland to Nelson, Italian colonization was cited as often as all foreign settlement projects together.⁵²

Third, beginning in the 1930s, Australia's and New Zealand's news coverage of fascist Italy's settlement schemes began to rival the attention paid to the national projects of Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. Throughout the decade, Australian journalists mentioned "Italian colonisation" almost as often as they did "Australian colonisation."⁵³ The situation in New Zealand was similar.⁵⁴ In Britain and Ireland, journalists wrote significantly more articles about fascist Italy's settlement scheme than about the equivalent schemes sponsored by Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, despite the traditional understanding that a particularly deep bond existed among the Dominion countries.⁵⁵ These data underline that "the national-imperial" did not necessarily have to be the all-dominating and thus quasi-natural frame of reference in the perceptions and discussions about empire. Rather, even the interwar period, commonly thought of as isolationist and ultranationalist, was quite global and transimperial comparisons quite common.⁵⁶

The broad and overwhelmingly positive coverage of Italian colonial settlements by newspapers and academic outlets had significant repercussions, particularly

⁵² The search was conducted in the national repository for newspapers that is hosted by the National Library of New Zealand. See <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>. The search parameters were "exact match." The exact results are for "Italian colonisation" 205 hits, for "German colonisation" 71 hits, for "Japanese colonisation" 80 hits, for "French colonisation" 45 hits, for "Dutch colonisation" four hits, for "Belgian colonisation" one hit, and zero hits for "Portuguese colonisation."

⁵³ See <https://trove.nla.gov.au>. The exact search parameters were "Newspapers & Gazettes," the exact time frame was 1930–1939. There were 332 hits for "Italian colonisation" and 432 hits for "Australian colonisation."

⁵⁴ Similar are the results obtained for a search in *Papers Past*. The results are 209 hits for "Italian colonization" and 130 for "New Zealand colonization." The search was conducted in April 2024.

⁵⁵ See <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>. The results of a search for "Italian colonisation" were 1,252 hits, for "Canadian colonisation" 1,112 hits, for "New Zealand colonization" 605 hits and for "Australian colonisation" 565 hits. The search was conducted in April 2024.

⁵⁶ Marc Matera and Susan Kingsley Kent (eds.), *The Global 1930s: The International Decade* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).

in Britain and Australia. Beginning in the late 1930s, curiosity about the fascists grew noticeably. At the same time, criticism of the alleged inactivity of their own countries became more pronounced. The extent of the uneasiness is revealed in the internal communications of the British and Australian governments, which found themselves under increasing pressure to act. This is particularly true for London's Dominions Office (DO). At the time, the DO oversaw relations with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. In this capacity, it also coordinated the immigration of British people to these parts of the Commonwealth. As DO officials declared in the late fall of 1938, "we have recently seen a good many reports in the Press about the somewhat spectacular experiment which is being carried out by the Italian government in the settlement of 20,000 Italian families in Libya."⁵⁷ Further, this media coverage had encouraged numerous people to write "to us enquiring whether some similar scheme could not be carried out in the Dominions or Colonies."⁵⁸

Public pressure was considered so great that DO staff felt compelled to take further action and engage with fascist colonialism at a time when Britain was discussing the reform of its own migration schemes. Indeed, the Dominions Office turned to the Foreign Office (FO) with a request for help. The FO was asked for detailed information about the Italian settlement scheme, e.g., about the families involved, the financing, and the preliminary preparation of the farms and buildings. In addition, FO officials evaluated Italian and English publications on the settlement scheme. The British bureaucracy compiled more than 200 background papers on various settlement schemes up to 1938. It is indicative that of those, Italy was the only country outside the British Empire that was taken into consideration. In other words, it had a rather unique role.

These reports were not only distributed within the respective planning apparatuses in Britain and Australia; they were also sent up the chain of command to the interior and foreign affairs ministers in these countries.⁵⁹ In London, a summary memorandum even ended up on the desk of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Letter R.A. Wiseman, DO, to D.V. Kelly, Foreign Office, November 16, 1938, TNA/PRO, FO 371, 22033, fol. 117.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Memo No 558 of the Foreign Office, November 2, 1939, TNA/PRO, FO 371, 23391; Letter of the Acting Counsel Wakefield Harrey to the Earl of Perth, October 6, 1938, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, vol. 30, Doc 155 J4108/3/66, 329; Letter of the Earl of Perth to Viscount Halifax, October 28, 1938, *ibid.*, 327. For Australia, see the letter of R.H. Wheeler, chief migration officer at Australia House, to the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, April 27, 1940, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra seat, A461 H349/3/1.

⁶⁰ Memorandum for the Prime Minister reg. Situation in Libya, January 12, 1939, TNA/PRO, FO 371, 23390.

No evidence could be found in the National Archives at Kew to indicate that the Prime Minister received information about any other foreign settlement project.

Thus, at the end of the 1930s, the interested public and state apparatuses in Britain and Australia possessed considerable information about the Italian settlement scheme. The very existence of this information increased the pressure on policymakers in these countries to act to solve real and perceived problems relating to their own empires and colonization efforts.

Using Empire: Fascist Biopolitics as a Resource in Politics

Beginning in the mid-1930s, knowledge of fascist colonialism was integrated into international discussions related to empire, migration, and race, but in different ways, depending on the various parties to the discussions. First, fascist biopolitics, especially its inherent violence, met with massive rejection from intellectuals, anti-colonial activists of African descent in the Atlantic region, and members of the communist parties of Europe in exile, the unofficial center of which was London. To these people, Italy's actions in Libya and Abyssinia epitomized everything wrong with empire as such; fascist colonialism thus crystallized various existing anti-colonial struggles. More than that, the international protests against Italy brought together anticolonial struggles and the anti-fascist movement for the first time.⁶¹ Unlike Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy was both a fascist regime and a classical "Bluewater" empire.⁶² The international fight against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia could be said to have been a movement of movements.

At the same time, the protests against Italy's violent intervention on the African continent had the potential to shape the identity of the people involved. The protestors believed that they were taking part in an international, if not global, movement,⁶³ and as such, they connected world regions that had not previously

⁶¹ Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 7.

⁶² It is noteworthy that there is a vivid debate on the nexus between colonialism and fascism regarding Nazi Germany, but not for the much more obvious Italian case. See, for instance, Roberta Pergher and Mark Roseman, "The Holocaust—An Imperial Genocide?," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 27,1 (2013), 42–49. See also Salim Khayyata, "Oppressed Ethiopia, or The Start of The Final Fight Against Colonialism in the Period of its Downfall," Wilson Center Digital Archive ID-291023, October 27, 2022, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/salim-khayyata-oppressed-ethiopia-or-start-final-fight-against-colonialism-period-its> (last accessed January 16, 2024).

⁶³ Neelam Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire, 1930-1970* (London: Palgrave, 2018).

been thought of together.⁶⁴ Last, the fight against fascist biopolitics had serious repercussions for Britain. The Abyssinian War in particular became the “lens through which black intellectuals viewed global politics and the British Empire, particularly its racist foundations, on the eve of the Second World War,” according to Marc Matera.⁶⁵ These intellectuals were deeply disappointed that so few Britons opposed Mussolini’s assault on the East African country, and those that did, did so half-heartedly.⁶⁶

Equally momentous was the discussion about fascist biopolitics that arose when Britain commenced reforming its own imperial migration regime in the mid-1930s. In this debate, various politicians referred to the Italian settlement system, either as a model worthy of imitation, or as a threat to everything that Britain stood for.

The background to this debate was the general crisis in British settlement policy of the 1930s. Broadly speaking, the country’s migration regime sought to distribute its own population within the Empire and the Dominions to increase agricultural production overseas, expand markets for home manufacturers, and guarantee that these territories retained a predominantly British “tradition, character and spirit.”⁶⁷ Racism was at play too. The mentioned group settlements—the transfer of a large body of migrants to one place—were to ensure that people considered “white” dominated the Dominions. These settlements were integral to what has been called “white policy” in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa.⁶⁸

The migration regime soon proved dysfunctional. In Britain, falling birth rates beginning in the late nineteenth century made large-scale emigration undesirable. The Dominions, on the other hand, faced a decline in their “white” populations in the absence of a steady stream of immigration from Britain. An irrational fear that migrants from Asia would swamp the “white” denizens started to take hold in the interwar period and crept into public debates, particularly in Australia and New Zealand.

⁶⁴ Susan Dabney Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁶⁵ Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁷ *United Empire* 30 (1939), p. XXXI. See also Marjory Harper and Stephen Constantine, *Migration and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6–7.

⁶⁸ Jane Carey and Claire McLisky (eds.), *Creating White Australia* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009); James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See also from a comparative angle, T. Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002); Bruce Baum, *The Rise and Fall of the Caucasian Race: A Political History of Racial Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

In this context, an amorphous coalition of individual Tories, Liberals, and colonial administrators in Britain pinned their hopes on the fascist template. By repeatedly referring to the Italian colonization efforts in North Africa, they sought to revive group settlements that had racial objectives.⁶⁹ Indeed, they supported their demands for more state planning, a central settlement agency, more careful settler selection, and above all, generous financial aid by citing the allegedly outstanding achievements of the fascists, often referring directly to the academic publications and the news coverage in Britain and beyond.⁷⁰

Statements made by members of this coalition in and outside Westminster revealed genuine conviction in the exemplary nature of fascist biopolitics as well as strategic considerations tinged with racist reservations about Italians. An excellent example was Tory hardliner, Henry Page-Croft, who threw all his political weight behind group settlements.⁷¹ Although Croft strongly opposed German rearmament after Hitler's rise to power, he seemed to have no problem with the idea of emulating fascist Italy. He devised a \$50 million plan to fully fund state-sponsored mass migration within the British Empire, from Britain to Western Canada. In December 1938—shortly after the transfer of the first Italian colonists to Tripoli—in a parliamentary session on reforming the British migration regime, Croft drew a comparison between his plans for British Columbia and the Libyan settlements.⁷² As he explained, he sought to prevent the Dominions from becoming “non-British in blood.”⁷³

⁶⁹ On the more general discussion on group settlements, see Kent Fedorowich, *Unfit for Heroes: Reconstruction and Soldier Settlement in the Empire between the Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 11.

⁷⁰ For instance, in 1933, John Nation and Frederick Llewellyn-Jones, two politicians from the Tory and the National Liberal Party, respectively, during the deliberations of the House of Commons on the “Home and Empire Settlement Bill” that was to reform the existing colonization schemes, highlighted the purported uniqueness of the Italian experience. See House of Commons, Second Reading of the “Home And Empire Settlement Bill,” February 24, 1933, Hansard vol. 274, columns 2090 and 2094, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1933-02-24/debates/c5169484-3b05-4f85-97aa-1ab835876bfb/HomeAndEmpireSettlementBill> (last accessed August 24, 2020).

⁷¹ On Croft, see Larry L. Witherell, *Rebel on the Right: Henry Page Croft and the Crisis of British Conservatism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997).

⁷² “Canada: Sir Henry Page-Croft's scheme for land settlement in British Columbia,” TNA/PRO, DO 35, 680 and 681. <https://www.electriccanadian.com/lifestyle/CanadaandBritishimmigration.pdf>. On Croft's support of the Italian Empire, see also M. Pugh, *Liberal Internationalism: The Interwar Movement for Peace in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK 2012), 112–13. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/b41d3ccc-of5c-4366-b88e-10787104ddef>.

⁷³ “London Studying \$ 50 Million Plan for British Emigration to B.C.,” *Vancouver Sun*, November 14, 1938, 12.

Croft's views were echoed by like-minded activists and politicians across the Empire and the Dominions. In May 1939, Australia's Foreign Minister, Henry Gullett, a fervent advocate of "White Australia" and restricting immigration from Asia, spoke in parliament of Mussolini's "genius, his patriotism, and his irresistible stimulus and almost superhuman capacity."⁷⁴ Sympathetic Anglophone politicians embraced the self-styled depiction of high-ranking fascists as brilliant masterminds, the essence of their leader cult, for strategic purposes. Although Gullett clearly nourished genuine admiration for Mussolini and saw in fascist imperial biopolitics a promising template, as a cabinet member of the reigning United Australia Party government, he also supported the British appeasement policy towards the Axis powers.⁷⁵

Anglophone media coverage of Mussolini's empire played an important role in these parliamentary debates. Media coverage not only provided lawmakers information on the details of Italian settler colonialism; it also in itself gave them grist for their political argument. This was particularly true of the parliamentary deliberations of the Legislative Council of Kenya, the local colonial parliament in which the European colonists had the upper hand over indigenous representatives. To the Council, Ewart Scott Grogan, a British-born explorer and leading figure in the Kenyan settler community, advocated the fascist model. During the 1937 parliamentary deliberations over Kenya's new settlement scheme, regarded as "essential to the further development of the country," Grogan focused on neighboring Abyssinia, referring to the extensive Anglophone media coverage to make his point.⁷⁶ As so many news articles had made clear, he argued, the Fascists' settlement policies were state of the art; Kenya would have to do much more to keep pace.

However, the continuous references to the Italian model also provoked massive criticism from those who, in Britain, Australia, and beyond, opposed group settlements. Here, too, the media coverage itself was made an issue. None other than Malcolm MacDonald, the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, took offense at the domestic coverage of fascist colonialism. "Our newspapers are full of these topics," he asserted in January 1937,⁷⁷ such that international affairs had

⁷⁴ On the popularity of Italian Fascism in general, see Roslyn Pesman Cooper, "'We Want a Mussolini': Views of Fascist Italy in Australia," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 39,3 (1993), 348–66.

⁷⁵ Eric Montgomery Andrews, *Isolationism and Appeasement in Australia: Reactions to the European Crises, 1935-1939* (Australian National University Press, 1970), 171.

⁷⁶ Deliberations of the motion of Major Cavendish-Bentinck for a settlement scheme, August 9, 1937, *Legislative Council Debates, Official Report*, Second Series, vol 2: 23rd Juli-13th August 1937 (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1937), column 286.

⁷⁷ Speech of Malcolm MacDonald, second reading of the Empire Settlement Bill in the House of Commons, January 27, 1937, The Hansard, volume 319, online under <https://hansard.parliament>.

started to outweigh the domestic agenda. While "every man-in-the-street was an authority on the Italian-Abyssinian dispute," the important issue of migration and settlement within the British Empire itself was being neglected, he lamented.

These critics wished to maintain imperialism but reform it, and they did not believe that Italy's approach to colonization, with its strong focus on group settlements, was the right approach to reform. Instead, they proposed to open the strict migration regime to "white" people from other parts of Europe deemed worthy of assimilation. The latter were to be settled individually, not as a group, as group settlements were considered ineffective, and above all, too expensive. Colonial administrators calculated that the settlement of one family, as in Libya, would cost the British taxpayer over £2,000.⁷⁸

Problems of financing were not at the heart of the political debate in Britain over colonial settlements. Rather, opponents of group settlements insisted on a fundamental conflict between British-style liberal democracies and totalitarian dictatorships and their underlying ideas about human nature. Such an argument required rewriting British history as Britain and the Dominions had long experience with community settlements. However, such settlements were now declared to be completely foreign to Anglophone countries. As the Italian example amply demonstrated, group settlements, their opponents argued, were an expression of autocratic rule, comprehensive social control, and military order. Italians had gone to Libya and Abyssinia not entirely of their own accord, but as a "regimented body."⁷⁹ Britain, however, was a "nation of individualists." Community settlements would never thrive, as "some people would pull in one direction and others would pull in other directions." The notion of a strict dichotomy between individualistic and collectivist tendencies in British and Italian cultures was supported by scholars, providing an aura of truth to the argument.⁸⁰ Thus, the rejection of fascist biopolitics served as a means to affirm the centrality of supposed British values like libertarianism and nonconformity to the "true" national soul.⁸¹ Mussolini's biopolitics became the antithesis of all that Britishness supposedly stood for.

uk/Commons/1937-01-25/debates/8e6be2b7-4bc8-40a2-90e8-8925db3287c5/EmpireSettlementBill (last accessed April 12, 2024).

⁷⁸ Hugo Edward Harper, "Settlements of immigrants: Lessons of experiments," in Hugo Edward Harper (ed.), *Empire Problems* (London: F. Muller Limited, 1939), 203. £2,000 is just under £164,000 in today's currency.

⁷⁹ *United Empire* 30 (1939), XXII.

⁸⁰ Bernard Augustus Keen, *The Agricultural Development of the Middle East* (London: HMSO, 1946), 33.

⁸¹ Chris Rojek, *Brit-Myth: Who Do the British Think They Are?* (London: Cromwell Press, 2008).

Fascist Biopolitics: Its Postwar Afterlife

For years it was believed that the opponents of group settlements and their rhetoric of individualism and freedom had triumphed. As one observer wrote in 1939, Henry Page Croft “and other great patriots” had campaigned for years in support of mass migration without tangible results, implying that these conservative supporters of British imperialism were victims of a supposedly egotistical modernity.⁸² However, when looking at the *longer-term* actions of politicians and planning agencies, a different picture emerges.

Although the outbreak of World War II put migration schemes on hold, the idea of group settlements reemerged after the war. In Britain and Australia, planners continued to put forward the idea that settlers should be grouped together. After the Second World War, just as in 1918, many war veterans and civilian victims of displacement and expulsion needed somewhere to live. Several settlement programs were re-launched and lasted until the 1960s, such as those conducted under the 1945 War Services Land Settlement Agreement in Britain. These programs had been inspired by fascist biopolitics.

Accordingly, the underlying idea of ensuring white supremacy, in particular in Australia, persisted. Gwenda Tavan's book on this subject, *Long, Slow Death of White Australia*, is aptly titled.⁸³ The Australian government did not officially abandon its “white policies” until the early 1970s. In Australia, the fascist settlements in Libya again served as a basis for regional development in places such as Northern Australia. The bombing of Darwin and other northern towns in 1942 had fueled fears of a pending Japanese invasion of the region; at the same time, Australia's vast lands were still considered largely undeveloped, despite the many development attempts that had been made since colonial times.⁸⁴ In this situation, planners in the postwar period turned again to group settlements, seeing them as a viable tool both to defend the nation from foreign threats and develop the territory economically; they thereby made use of the experience gleaned by their Italian colleagues in North Africa. Indeed, this experience became the basis of a long memorandum entitled “The Colonisation of Libya by the ‘Demographic Scheme’ 1938 onwards,” that was drafted in 1946 by the Northern Australia Development

⁸² Clarence Charles Hatry, *Light Out of Darkness* (London: Rich and Cowan, 1939), 231. On the accusation of egotism, see also Krystyna Clara von Henneberg, *The Construction of Fascist Libya: Modern Colonial Architecture and Urban Planning in Italian North Africa, 1922–1943* (Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley Press, 1996), 380 and 399.

⁸³ Gwenda Tavan, *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia* (Carlton North: Scribe, 2005).

⁸⁴ For this and the following, if not otherwise indicated, see Russell McGregor, “Developing the North, Defending the Nation? The Northern Australia Development Committee, 1945–1949,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 59,1 (2013), 33–46.

Committee, the regional planning agency in charge of that region.⁸⁵ Although the plans were discontinued, they were abandoned due to internal squabbles and not because Italian fascism had been discredited.

In another part of the world, however, the Italian model was put into practice: in Palestine. This is less surprising than it may sound to present day ears. The former territory of the Ottoman Empire, since 1923 officially under a British Mandate, was considered a genuinely colonial space not only by the British themselves, but also by the Americans and the League of Nations. In various official publications, Palestine was mentioned in the same breath as India, Algeria, and, precisely, Italian-Africa.⁸⁶ As high-ranking Labour politicians declared in November 1938 during a special session of the British parliament on Palestine's future, Jewish people were highly welcome to settle in the territory, as they had "proved to be first-class colonisers, to have the real, good, old, Empire-building kind of qualities, to be really first-class Colonial pioneers."⁸⁷ In other words, Labour supported Zionism and its objective of establishing a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine (a promise that the British state had made in 1917 in the Balfour Declaration), yet at the same time it considered the settlers also useful tools of British empire building.

Yet it was Tory members who, during the same session, went a step further and tied Palestine to colonial Libya. They suggested borrowing the strict policies of spatial and racial segregation that the fascist regime conducted in North Africa, thus recommending a de facto partition of the Mandate territory between Arabs and Jews.⁸⁸ As Walter Smiles, a longstanding conservative MP, argued, adopting the Italian settlement schemes would be a way of keeping his country's promise given in the Balfour Declaration and ending the Arab resistance against the Jewish presence in the Mandate once and for all.

Smiles' suggestions must indeed be understood against the backdrop of the Arab Revolt that had started two years prior, in 1936.⁸⁹ The popular uprising, which the British authorities referred to as a "colonial rebellion," had its roots in the increasingly desperate economic and social situation of the vast majority of local

⁸⁵ Memorandum of the Northern Australia Development Committee, entitled "The colonization of Libya by the 'Demographic Scheme'", July 1946, NAA, A659 1946-1-3342.

⁸⁶ Louise Bergaw and Annie M. Hannay, *Bibliography on Land Utilization, 1918-36* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1938), 1184; M. Beerensstein, "Jewish Colonisation in Palestine," *International Labour Review* XXX,5 (1934), 623-25.

⁸⁷ Joseph Gorny, *The British Labour Movement and Zionism, 1917-1948* (reprint London: Frank Cass, 2013), 85.

⁸⁸ British House of Parliament Commons Sitting on November 24, 1938, in Hansard, vol 341 cc 1987-2107, here: 2057, online under: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1938/nov/24/palestine>

⁸⁹ Matthew Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine: The British Army, the* (2019),

Arabs. Many took to the streets over their frustration with the high taxes on agrarian products following World War I, the ensuing loss of their smallholdings, and the growing presence of Jewish settlers who had migrated from Europe not at least due to antisemitic persecutions in Nazi Germany and elsewhere. Between 1931 and 1936, their number more than doubled from 175,000 to 370,000. In April 1936, various acts of violence between Arab and Jewish militants escalated into an armed Palestinian insurrection that targeted both British and American petroleum installations and Jewish settlers, with hundreds being killed. Although the uprising was also directed against the British occupation of the country, the Mandate power addressed it as an ethnic conflict.⁹⁰ The Peel Commission set up after the outbreak of hostilities by the British government thus recommended the division of the country along ethnic lines.⁹¹ However, only a year later, in 1938, another government commission concluded that this plan was unfeasible and should be dropped.

In this difficult situation, Smiles and other Tories in opposition used the Italian model to revive the Peel Commission's recommendations and put pressure on the Labour government under Arthur Neville Chamberlain. It is noteworthy that they took a foreign case to bolster their claim in the mentioned parliamentary session in November 1938. Similar partition plans had been discussed within the British Empire at the time; thus, they could have easily referred to them.⁹² Instead, Smiles and others opted for a particularly radical model of ethnic segregation. It is therefore possible that the aim was also to deliberately intimidate Palestinians. After all, fascist rule over Libya was very much hated in the Arab world, as the British press had made clear on various occasions.⁹³

Being mingled with Mussolini's colonial regime met with vehement rejection from Jewish organizations, though. The Jewish Agency in charge of the settlements rebutted the insinuations made that Jews arriving in Palestine were akin to European colonialists and thus guilty of imperial exploitation and oppression. Publications such as the *Jewish Frontier*, the mouthpiece of the Labor Zionist movement, took pain to emphasize that for Jews, settling in Palestine simply meant returning to lands previously held by their ancestors.⁹⁴ In addition, the Jewish

⁹⁰ Oren Kessler, *Palestine 1936: The Great Revolt and the Roots of the Middle East Conflict* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).

⁹¹ Penny Sinanoglou, *Partitioning Palestine: British Policymaking at the End of Empire* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁹² Arie Dubnov and Laura Robson, "Drawing the Line, Writing Beyond It: Toward a Transnational History of Partitions," in Arie Dubnov and Laura Robson (eds.), *Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 1–30.

⁹³ See, for instance, "The Wandering," *Sunday Express*, London, October 30, 1938; "Moslem attack on Italy: Libya Plan Exterminating the Arabs," *Evening News*, London, January 2, 1939, 1.

⁹⁴ *Jewish Frontier* 6 (1939), 19.

planning offices in charge of the settlements had bought the land from the locals at a high price instead of confiscating it by force, as had been the case with the European colonial powers and especially fascist Italy. Above all, so it was argued, the Jewish settlement project was not driven by racism. Rather, Jewish settlers were motivated by a sincere desire to establish relations of "social equality" with the local Arabs.⁹⁵

Things were more complicated, though. No matter how hard the Jewish leadership tried to distance the settlement project in Palestine from race and imperialism, it remained "haunted by them ideologically because its project has always been defined by them in practice."⁹⁶ Indeed, shortly after the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Jewish agencies in charge of the new national settlement program oriented themselves to colonial models, and in particular the fascist *pianificazione* for Libya. As Smadar Sharon has shown on the basis of newly unearthed archival materials, Ra'anana Weitz, the founding father of rural planning in Israel, had come in close contact with the Italian colonization efforts during his doctoral studies in agronomy at the University of Florence in the 1930s.⁹⁷ His academic teacher was Arrigo Serpieri, one of the most influential Italian experts in land settlement projects. Serpieri helped to design new towns in Italy at the same time that his knowledge was applied to colonial Libya.⁹⁸

In the postwar period, Weitz was appointed deputy head of the Jewish planning agency of the new state of Israel. In the Lakhish region, a territory in the northern Negev in south-central Israel, he conceived a flagship project of 22 agricultural settlements and two rural centers between 1954 and 1956. The project followed the same pattern as in fascist Italy and its colonies: the new villages built were organized in clusters of settlements around the rural centers, the famous *centri rurali* that people like Moore had highlighted in their accounts of fascist Libya as particularly supportive. Indeed, in his publications after 1945, Weitz expressly referred to the projects of the Italians and occasionally returned to Rome and Florence to reconnect with his former colleagues.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Nimrod Ben Zeev, "Tracing the Historical Relevance of Race in Palestine and Israel, *MRP: Middle East Research and Information Project* 299 (2021), n.p., available online under <https://merip.org/2021/08/tracing-the-historical-relevance-of-race-in-palestine-and-israel/> (last accessed March 26, 2025).

⁹⁷ Smadar Sharon, "'Not Settlers but Settled': Immigration, Planning and Settlement Patterns in the Lakhish Region in the 1950s" (PhD thesis: Tel Aviv University, 2013), 68–88; see also Fatma Abreek-Zubiedat, *A Territory in Conflict: Eras of Development and Urban Architecture in Gaza* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2025), 63–64.

⁹⁸ Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire*, 110.

⁹⁹ Ra'anana Weitz, *From Peasant to Farmer: A Revolutionary Strategy for Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 234 and 285.

Even more important was that the Lakhish settlements also had racialized objectives that linked them, if only tangentially, to the Italian experience. The scheme aimed to resettle poor Mizrahi migrants, that is, descendants of Jewish communities mainly from North Africa and the Middle East. These Jews were often orientalized by Ashkenazi Jews arriving from Europe.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the idea was that the Lakhish settlements would help transform these “orientals” into the Zionist ideal of the modern, productive, masculine “New Jew.” After centuries of being stigmatized in Europe as “foreign,” Ashkenazi Jews in Israel imagined the emerging Israeli society as European and white. Projects such as the Lakhish settlements were thus tools of racialized social engineering aimed at creating a more cohesive society of Western imprint, as Israeli scholars have recently argued.¹⁰¹

At the same time, however, Mizrahi migrants were sent to Lakhish in order to establish Jewish sovereignty over former Palestinian land.¹⁰² Just like in Libya, they were to form a bulwark of Israel against Arabs. One must know that the Lakhish region marked a borderland towards Egypt and the Gaza strip and thus constituted the new frontier of the Israeli society. It was probably also because of this parallel that planners chose the Italian model; in Libya, the Italian settlements had been imagined at home as “oases of Italianness” in an otherwise hostile territory.¹⁰³

What emerges here is a circuit of reference and learning of vast dimensions. The imperial biopolitics of Italian fascism inspired political rhetoric across the British Empire and the Dominions and helped to justify policies aimed at racial exclusionism and white supremacy. Even more importantly, these ideas continued to travel the globe long after the end of fascism.

Conclusion: The Long Transimperial Flirtation with Fascism

This chapter challenges conventional understanding of Britain, the Dominions, and Mussolini's Italy and their imperial ties in two ways. First, British interest in fascist biopolitics was deeper than previously assumed. Support for the colonial expansion of Italy in the 1930s can hardly be limited to a few Italophile British Conservatives and the British Union of Fascists, as some scholars have maintained

¹⁰⁰ Aziza Khazzoom, “The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel,” *American Sociological Review* 68,4 (2003), 481–510.

¹⁰¹ Matan Flum, “Israel's Planning Historiography: Interrogating Spatio-Temporal Discourse and ‘Whiteness,’” *Planning Perspectives* 40,2 (2025), 407–19, in particular 413.

¹⁰² Smadar Sharon, “The Dialectic between Modernization and Orientalization: Ethnicity and Work Relations in the 1950s Lakhish Region Project,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40,4 ((2017), 732–50.

¹⁰³ Federico Cresti, *Oasi di italianità: La Libia della colonizzazione agraria tra fascismo, guerra indipendenza, 1935-1956* (Turin: Società editrice internazionale, 1996).

until recently.¹⁰⁴ The great interest in, if not enthusiasm, for fascism's purportedly constructive, modern, and scientific approach to empire, in particular on the part of the media, and its regeneration of the nation demonstrates that Britain and the Dominions did not in fact overwhelmingly reject Mussolini's dream of empire.¹⁰⁵

Second, this chapter challenges the notion that Mussolini's Anglophone supporters had only a very brief "flirtation with fascism," to use John P. Diggins' suggestive phrase.¹⁰⁶ Conventional wisdom holds that, whereas in the 1920s the general attitude towards fascist Italy in the Anglophone world had been one of benevolence, the brutal invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 opened the eyes of many in Britain and beyond to the true nature of Mussolini's rule. No doubt, the fascists' brutal actions in the Horn of Africa provoked public outrage in, for instance, the British media. However, a different picture emerges when the view of Italian colonialism *as a whole* by the Anglophone press in Britain, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand is considered. Although colonial violence was condemned, at the same time, the Italian development efforts were extolled by the mainstream media as late as the 1940s, well after the character of the fascist regime was clear. In this sense, fascist biopolitics, epitomized by the transport of the *Ventimila* to Libya in 1938, acquired a meaning for Britain and the Dominions that has yet to be fully acknowledged.

Three factors enabled the extended transimperial circulation of ideas. First was the rhetoric of crisis after 1918 developments in relation to the global economic downswing, often dubbed the Great Depression, and to the anti-colonial upsurge that severely challenged European imperial rule after the First World War. These crises were real but they were deliberately magnified and dramatized by experts, journalists, and politicians to generate attention and motivate action.¹⁰⁷ The crisis rhetoric of the time followed a broader pattern that a more self-reflective

¹⁰⁴ Amalia Ribi Forclaz, *Humanitarian Imperialism: The Politics of Anti-Slavery Activism, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 162.

¹⁰⁵ A similar argument has been made by Bernhard Dietz, *Neo-Tories: The Revolt of British Conservatives against Democracy and Political Modernity, 1929-1939* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

¹⁰⁶ John P. Diggins, "Flirtation with Fascism: American Pragmatic Liberals and Mussolini's Italy," *The American Historical Review* 71,2 (1966), 487-506.

¹⁰⁷ This strategy has been systematically analyzed by various academic fields, among others education sciences and comparative social policies. See, for instance, Sanneke Kuipers, "Paths of the Past or the Road Ahead? Path Dependency and Policy Change in Two Continental European Welfare States," *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* 11,2 (2009), 163-80; Johannes Kiess et al, "Path dependency and convergence of three worlds of welfare policy during the Great Recession: UK, Germany and Sweden," *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy* 33,1 (2017). 1-17; Hyejin Kim, *How Global Capital is Remaking International Education: The Emergence of Transnational Education Corporations* (Singapore: Springer, 2019).

historiography has identified as characterizing the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁸ The construction of crises served as a political instrument to de-legitimize the status quo and to induce drastic reform, yet at the same time, the reform's proponents also claimed to have tangible solutions ready to hand. One such remedy, presented by media representatives, scholars, and conservative lawmakers from London to Canberra was fascist Italy's attempts at building a new "white" empire run by a political strongman.

Second was the rise of mass print media in the late nineteenth century, which facilitated the discussion of empire across empires.¹⁰⁹ Not only did the telegraph shrink great geographical distances and made the global dissemination of news possible; information about distant (mostly colonized) countries also brought a new kind of journalist—the foreign correspondent—into existence. In fact, this media innovation is inextricably linked to the history of European expansionism; British, French, and German foreign correspondents initially reported from their own country's "imperial frontiers."¹¹⁰ At the same time, this innovation institutionalized the exchange of information about empires. Foreign correspondents were supposed to inform their readers about their country's colonial rivals. Transimperial comparisons led in some cases to comprehensive reports. For example, British editors from London to Glasgow spared no effort to let the readers of their broadsheets participate in the fate of the Italians who settled in Libya in October 1938. Conversely, Mussolini (himself a former journalist) used existing media channels to present his empire to the outside world. In short, foreign correspondents became the eyes and ears of a world still dominated by empires.

Third were the exchanges among journalists, scholars, and lawmakers that reinforced the transimperial nexus. In fact, media, academia, and politics were not self-contained systems; they were interconnected. The extent of their permeability can be seen in the intersection of their personnel. Sidney Freifeld exemplifies these overlaps. A native of Canada, he began his career as an academic who, after training at the LSE, worked at an international think tank in Rome before reporting for the London newspaper *The Times* as well as the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *Toronto Star*. During World War II, Freifeld worked as a news

¹⁰⁸ Rüdiger Graf and Konrad H. Jarausch, "Crisis" in *Contemporary History and Historiography*, version: 1.0, Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte, March 27, 2017, http://docupedia.de/zg/graf_jarausch_crisis_v1_en_2017 (last accessed April 5, 2024).

¹⁰⁹ Leslie James and Emma Hunter, "Communications and Media," in Andrew Denning and Heidi J.S. Tworek (eds.), *The Interwar World* (Milton Park and New York: Routledge, 2023), 351–68.

¹¹⁰ C.A. Vaughan, "Reporting From Imperial Frontiers: The Making Of Foreign Correspondents A Century Apart," *AsiaPacificMediaEducator* 7 (1999), 37–52. See also John Maxwell Hamilton, *Journalism's Roving Eye: A History of American Foreign Reporting* (LSU Press, 2009); Potter, *News*; Griffiths, "Most Extraordinary Careers."

analyst for the Canadian government in New York and wrote a notable media analysis of the interaction between Nazi propaganda and the American press.¹¹¹ After the war, he served as Canadian ambassador to several countries and the UN. Thus, Freifeld moved among positions in academia, the media, and government as well as in Italy, Canada, Britain, and the United States. He was not unique in this regard. Contemporaries of Freifeld in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand began their careers as politicians before becoming journalists or lobbyists. For example, Australian Hal Colebatch moved between the worlds of journalism and politics. After meeting Mussolini in Rome, he became a mouthpiece for fascist Italy in Australia, trying especially to influence Australia's settlement policies.¹¹²

The work of these go-betweens in their wider media and political contexts has attracted the interest from historians of science.¹¹³ This chapter has contributed to the study of the transimperial circulation of knowledge within and across imperial formations, while previous work has focused to a large degree on the well-established British and French cases. We have also clearly shown that the often-overlooked fascist imperialism was of international, if not global, relevance to these very same imperial formations as well as to their reformulations in the twentieth century.

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¹¹¹ Norman Domeier, *Weltöffentlichkeit und Diktatur: Die amerikanischen Auslandskorrespondenten im "Dritten Reich"* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), 603.

¹¹² Hal Colebatch, *Steadfast Knight: A Life of Sir Hal Colebatch* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2004), 114. See also Nick Crowson, *Facing Fascism: The Conservative Party and the European Dictators 1935-1940* (London: Routledge, 2002), 19-21.

¹¹³ Matheus Alves Duarte da Silva, Thomas A. S. Haddad and Kapil Raj, "Science and Empire: Past and Present Questions," in idem (eds.), *Beyond Science and Empire: Circulation of Knowledge in an Age of Global Empires, 1750-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 1-18.

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