

From a “Glorious Reparation” to a “Wretched Adventure”: The Second Italo-Ethiopian War in Italian History Textbooks (1936-2020)

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ABSTRACT

Conducted against the backdrop of international debates on colonial and racist crimes, this study examines representations of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War in Italian secondary school history textbooks from the fascist period to the present. In a systematic analysis, the article explores how textbooks, as key “memory-makers,” depict the motivations, context, course, and consequences of a colonial war frequently subject to amnesia in Italy. We explore the distortions, omissions, and demystification textbooks have promoted over time, measuring them against historiographical advancements. Overall, we observe growing recognition of arbitrary Italian aggression and the illegal use of chemical weapons, but fluctuations in the assessment of European responsibilities and Mussolini’s involvement in the Second World War and the Holocaust. Silencing, minimization of responsibility, and a strong Italo- and Eurocentric tendency persist in the textbooks, whose lacunae and inaccuracies appear to feed into the enduring myth of the “good Italian.”

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Introduction

The year 2021 marked the eighty-fifth anniversary of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935-1936, an act of aggression against Negus Haile Selassie’s sovereign Ethiopian Empire by Mussolini’s fascist Italy. The League of Nations (LON), of which Ethiopia was a member, condemned the attack and imposed economic sanctions to little effect. The war notoriously involved Italy’s widespread use of aggressive chemicals prohibited by the 1925 Geneva Protocol, as well as the bombing of Red Cross hospitals and ambulances and the summary execution of prisoners. During the territory’s ensuing five-year occupation, further widespread abuses followed, including the massacres of Addis Ababa and Debrà Libanos in 1937 and of Caia Zeret in 1939, the theft of religious artistic heritage, and experiments with racial laws. Some scholars consider this colonial war, or this war of

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annexation,¹ to constitute the turning point of fascism and indeed the prelude to the Second World War. Its historical significance in the domestic and international spheres alike stands in inverse proportion to the collective amnesia which meets it in Italy, whose national colonial memory the prominent Italian historian Labanca characterizes as impaired by practices of “silencing,” “self-absolution,” and “downsiz[ed]” responsibility.² This situation stems in part from a “decolonization without decolonization,”³ set in motion by the 1947 Treaty of Paris and its provisions for the forfeiture to other powers of Italian colonial possessions. Compounding it is the lack of an “Italian Nuremberg” for crimes committed during the Ethiopian War and indeed for Second World War atrocities, which latter eventually came to overshadow the imperialist war in Ethiopia and its effects.⁴

Against this backdrop, this article systematically examines the conflict’s depiction in secondary school history textbooks issued in Italy between 1936 and 2020. Recognizing school textbooks as both mirrors and makers of the collective imaginaries pervading a country’s historical culture, we seek traces of shifts in the historiography of colonialism and its public memory at various points in time. In uncovering both continuities and discontinuities in textbook accounts across time, the analysis will argue for a less than linear evolution of Italian textbooks, exposing a cacophony and ambiguity of authorial and discursive voices as a consequence partly of the delayed impact of historiography on textbook production, partly of the intricacies and sensitivities marking public memory. This argument contributes to international scholarship around textbook narratives and imperialist pasts, adding to the incipient but growing field of postcolonial studies in Italy, and draws attention to the occasionally marginalized Italian case in comparative scholarship on colonialism. Joining existing studies on textbook representations of Italian⁵ and, more broadly, of European colonialism and colonial wars,⁶ and their memory,⁷ our analysis ultimately aims, in the context of emergent activism for historical justice, to contribute to existing postcolonial critiques around the legacy of colonialism.⁸

¹ The contemporary view of colonialism entailed the legitimate assumption of power over a supposed *terra nullius*; thus, “as a sovereign state, Ethiopia was not a candidate for colonialism. It was a victim of Fascist expansionist policy.” Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy’s National Shame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). This notwithstanding, it is reasonable to assert that colonial, or imperial, logics drove the invasion, and that the illegal annexation of Ethiopia fell within broader-scale colonial actions pursued by Italy with the aim of proclaiming an Italian Empire.

² Nicola Labanca, *La Guerra d’Etiopia 1935–1941* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), 232.

³ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 220–2.

⁵ Luigi Cajani, “The Image of Italian Colonialism in Italian History Textbooks for Secondary Schools,” *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society* 5, no. 1 (2013): 72–89; Luigi Cajani, “Colonialism and Decolonisation in History Textbooks for Italian Upper Secondary School,” in *The Colonial Past in History Textbooks: Historical and Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse and Joaquim Pires Valentim (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing), 95–113; Grazia De Michele, “La Storia dell’Africa e del Colonialismo Italiano nei Manuali di Storia in Uso nelle Scuole Superiori,” *I Sentieri della Ricerca* 3 (2006): 131–68; Nicola Labanca, ed., *La Libia nei Manuali Scolastici Italiani (1911–2001)* (Rome: Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 2003); Giuliano Leoni and Andrea Tappi, “Pagine Perse. Il Colonialismo nei Manuali di Storia dal Dopoguerra a Oggi,” *Zapruder* 23 (2010): 154–67.

⁶ Susanne Grindel, “Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts of History Textbooks,” in *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, ed. Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger, and Maria Grever (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 259–73; Sara Mechkarini, “The Representation of the Algerian War in French High School History Textbooks,” *History Compass* (2021) e12696; Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse and Joaquim Pires Valentim, eds., *The Colonial Past in History Textbooks: Historical and Social Psychological Perspectives* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2018).

⁷ See, *inter alia*, Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, eds., *Italian Colonialism. Legacy and Memory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005); Antonio Morone, *La Fine del Colonialismo Italiano. Politica, Società e Memorie* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2019).

⁸ Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, eds., *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Marco Siddi, “Silencing History: Forgetting Italy’s Past During the Refugee Crisis in Europe,” *International Politics* 57, no. 6 (2020): 1030–46.

The Research in Context: The Contentious Phases of Italian Historiography and Public Memory on Colonialism

The analysis, in attempting to gauge the extent to which textbook discourses have reflected the thinking of the day, examines textbook production in the overarching contexts of domestic and international developments in politics, culture, and historiography. One significant exercise in retracing domestic continuities and shifts is Labanca's four-phase periodization of Italian colonialism-related historiography. The first of these phases, lasting from the immediate postwar period until the 1960s, encompasses Italy's postwar transition from fascism to democracy, the final decade of Italian colonialism (1950–60), and, more broadly, a mounting wave of decolonization in Africa and the concomitant rise of thirdworldism. This phase's defining product was an official, forty-volume apologetic work, published between 1955 and 1981, which pursued, in the words of Del Boca, "the sole purpose of highlighting [Italian colonialism]'s merits and also its diversity or exceptionality compared to contemporary colonialisms;"⁹ Morone considered its ultimate aim as building a "lasting monument to [... Italy's] notable work of civilization."¹⁰ In this endeavour, the state, in Palma's words, "became the guardian and promoter of a 'public memory' ... built on denial, censorship, amnesia and, above all, refusal to acknowledge the Other's memory."¹¹ In view of this publication, and of the sealing of colonial archives until the 1980s,¹² Labanca described this phase as marked by "silencing;" continuity of fascists and colonialists within key societal institutions and academia added further obstacles to research and the possibility of critical confrontation with the country's colonial past.¹³ Significantly, a number of studies have rejected the "total silence hypothesis" as "fallacy,"¹⁴ uncovering accounts of Italian colonialism well before 1960 in popular culture.¹⁵ The recent work of Cadamuro, analyzing articles published in the news magazine *Epoca* between 1950 and 1960, pinpoints a shift "from an indistinct nostalgia to a sense of pride in the efforts of Italian soldiers overseas" and an accompanying, persistent "complete rejection of the feeling of shame [at colonial atrocities]."¹⁶

A new historiographical phase, variously regarded as originating between the mid 1960s and the early 1970s, lasted until the mid 1980s; during this period, historiographical developments in Italy lagged significantly behind scholarship produced elsewhere in Europe. Labanca attributes the watershed marking the transition out of the previous "silencing" phase to the publication in 1965 of Del Boca's *La Guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941*.¹⁷ This work inspired considerable historical critique and gave rise to emergent public debate, neither of which, admittedly, were able to dislodge the persistent discursive image of the

⁹ Angelo Del Boca, "Le Conseguenze per l'Italia del Mancato Dibattito sul Colonialismo," *Studi Piacentini* 5 (1989): 117.

¹⁰ Antonio M. Morone, "I Custodi della Memoria. Il Comitato per la Documentazione dell'Opera dell'Italia in Africa," *Zapruder* 23 (2010): 29.

¹¹ Silvana Palma, "Colonial Archives, Memory and Political Culture in Italy," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 2, no. 49 (2018): 37.

¹² Morone, "I Custodi della Memoria," 35.

¹³ Palma, "Colonial Archives," 36.

¹⁴ Daniela Baratieri, *Memories and Silences Haunted by Fascism: Italian Colonialism 1930–1960* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 26.

¹⁵ Gabriele Proglgio, "The Fascist Empire Strikes Back: Reconsidering the Memory of Colonialism After 1945," in *Images of Colonialism and Decolonisation in the Italian Media*, ed. P. Bertella Farnetti and C. Dau Novelli (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 240.

¹⁶ Elena Cadamuro, "The Denial of Shame: Representations and Annual Commemorations of the Ethiopian War in the News Magazine *Epoca* (1950–60)," *Modern Italy* 27 (2022): 418–9.

¹⁷ Angelo Del Boca, *La Guerra d'Abissinia 1935–1941* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1965).

“good Italian” and its contrast to the moral turpitude of the “bad German.”¹⁸ Del Boca himself places the caesura between the first and second phases in 1973, with the publication of Rochat’s *Il Colonialismo Italiano*, which, Del Boca observed, sought “to highlight the tremendous cost in human lives of colonial exploits without concealing the very serious responsibility of the Italian political leadership for the horrors of the colonial night.”¹⁹

Labanca again identifies Del Boca and some of his publications, including *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*,²⁰ as heralding a third, “dialectical” phase, commencing in the mid 1980s and continuing until the turn of the millennium. This stage coincided with increasing academic efforts to recover sources on the period’s events²¹ and with a proliferation of research, in which Del Boca again featured; his *Le Guerre Coloniali del Fascismo* (1991) condemned the “nearly complete removal ... from our country’s memory and culture” of colonialism and the associated “arbitrary acts, abuses of power, crimes and genocides.”²² The broadcasting of documentaries including *L’Impero, Un’Avventura Africana* (1985) and *Fascist Legacy* (1989) was another significant milestone in this period. The intense public controversy over the use of gas during the Italo-Ethiopian war emerging in this phase resulted, in 1996, in the first official acknowledgement of this atrocity.²³

Labanca considers the fourth and current “postcolonial” phase to have revealed the need for “a reconstruction of the colonial past inspired by the deeper deconstruction of the culture and thought [underlying] colonial rule.”²⁴ As much of a “latecomer ... [to] European colonial imperialism”²⁵ as Italy had been, so similarly – as Ponzanesi notes – has it shown itself tardy “in acknowledging its colonial past and postcolonial predicament.”²⁶ The consistent presence of a “colonial unconscious”²⁷ possibly manifesting in and contributing to public and political disapproval of increasing immigration during the 1980s and 1990s, has stood in the way of Italy’s self-recognition as a multicultural society and of its reckoning with colonialism. Triulzi observes the emergence in this fourth phase of a “fast-growing [postcolonial- and decolonization-related] literature,”²⁸ alongside the failure of this more critical historiography to lay to rest the “legend of Italian colonialism as different, more tolerant, and more humane than other colonialisms.” The result, in his view, is a memory of Italian colonialism that appears “paradoxically ‘distant’ and yet ‘more troubled today’” than ever before,²⁹ marked by a similarly

¹⁸ Labanca, *La Guerra d’Etiopia*.

¹⁹ Angelo Del Boca, “Il Colonialismo Italiano tra Miti, Rimozioni, Negazioni e Inadempienza,” in *Fascismo e Antifascismo: Rimozioni, Revisioni, Negazioni*, ed. Enzo Collotti (Roma: Laterza, 2000), 325–53.

²⁰ Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. Dall’Unità alla Marcia su Roma* (Bari: Laterza, 1976); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. La Conquista dell’Impero* (Bari: Laterza, 1979); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. La Caduta dell’Impero* (Bari: Laterza, 1982); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. Nostalgia delle Colonie* (Bari: Laterza, 1984).

²¹ Palma, “Colonial Archives,” 23.

²² Angelo Del Boca, “I Crimini del Colonialismo Fascista,” in Del Boca, *Le Guerre Coloniali del Fascismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1991), 251–2. See also, Angelo Del Boca, “Il Mancato Dibattito sul Colonialismo,” in *L’Africa nella Coscienza degli Italiani. Miti, Memorie, Errori, Sconfitte*, ed. Angelo Del Boca (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1992), 114. The 1990s further saw the emergence of an intersectional approach to colonialism focusing on race and gender.

²³ Angelo Del Boca, *I Gas di Mussolini. Il Fascismo e la Guerra d’Etiopia* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1996).

²⁴ Labanca, *La Guerra d’Etiopia*, 241–2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁶ Sandra Ponzanesi, “The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies: European Perspectives,” in *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. C. Lombardi-Diop and C. Romeo (Palgrave, 2011), 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁸ Alessandro Triulzi, “Displacing the Colonial Event: Hybrid Memories of Postcolonial Italy,” *Interventions* 3 (2006): 431–2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

ambivalent “oscillat[ion] ... between an all-out desire to forget and the nostalgic recollection of a past which is selectively remembered.”³⁰ One symbol of this dilemmatic collective relationship with the colonial past might be Italy’s repatriation in 2005 of the looted Obelisk of Axum, Ethiopia’s principal religious and political site. Decades elapsed, punctuated by various attempts at preventing the repatriation, between Italy’s undertaking to return the stele and its actual homecoming; when it arrived, it came not as stolen property returned to the rightful owners, but as a “gift” made by Italy’s people to Ethiopia.³¹

Methodology

The article proceeds from a view of history textbooks as key societal “memory-makers” that emerge from, reflect, and co-generate their historical and political contexts.³² The analysis samples fifty-eight history textbooks published between 1936 and 2020 and popular with teachers during these periods,³³ written for a variety of secondary schools³⁴ by well-known authors, principally academic historians. Our choice to analyze secondary school textbooks stemmed from our reasonable expectation that they may adhere more closely to scientific standards and consider their topics more critically than textbooks for younger learners. Our interest in this context is not to ascertain the impact of these media on the collective Italian psyche; a key element of the study’s concern, however, is the power of textbooks in a country where they remain central to school-based education despite the rise of innovative methods and teacher autonomy; millions of Italians have used these textbooks across the decades.

The variety of textbooks within the sample relates to changes in their political regulation. Centralized state control of textbooks ceased in 1947, giving way to a liberalized textbook market and teachers’ free choice. An emphatic expansion of the publishing industry in this area over recent decades has brought about the current multiplicity of textbooks and increased fragmentation, with less clear market leadership for specific publications compared to previous decades. History textbooks often find themselves in the crossfire of political clashes, accused variously of representing “the hegemony of the left” and “right-wing revisionism.”³⁵ Their authors in republican Italy are, for the most part, broadly left-wing, their positions ranging from socialist to communist, alongside a small number of authors aligned with Italy’s Liberal Party. Right-wing intellectuals and politicians have repeatedly complained about this state of affairs, although no right-wing historian has ever written a textbook, possibly due to assumptions around the

³⁰ Ibid., 430, 432.

³¹ Ibid., 438-9.

³² See, inter alia, Piergiorgio Genovesi, *Il Manuale di Storia in Italia. Dal Fascismo alla Repubblica* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2009); Giuliano Procacci, *Carte d'Identità. Revisionismi, Nazionalismi e Fondamentalismi nei Manuali di Storia* (Roma: Carocci, 2005).

³³ Publishers do not issue information on which textbooks teachers and schools choose to use. Among the newest books, our sample includes some of those that a recent study selected for analysis on the basis of lists issued by the Italian Publishers’ Association that permit the identification of the most frequently used textbooks in each academic year. Ariela Desio, “La Decolonizzazione nei Manuali di Storia Italiani per le Scuole Secondarie di Secondo Grado: 1990-2020,” in *Dimensioni e Problemi della Ricerca Storica—Orizzonti della Didattica della Storia*, ed. Luigi Cajani and Elisabetta Corsi (Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice, 2021), 159-82.

³⁴ i.e. lower secondary schools, lyciums and teacher training institutes, or professional/technical educational institutes.

³⁵ Genovesi, *Il Manuale*, 31. Among the key targets of past right-wing accusations of bias are the textbooks, included in our sample, by Camera/Fabietti, Giardina/Sabbatucci/Vidotto, and Ortoleva/Revelli. Ibid., 27-8.

lack of success such a work would have with teachers. With some exceptions, this article will refrain from specifying the political orientation of the textbook authors cited, to avoid the risk of fallacious assumptions.³⁶ Rather than being on the work of specific authors – again, with isolated exceptions – and their political attitudes, our analytical emphasis is on tendencies emerging across the sample as a whole, how they change over time, and how they perpetuate or modify themselves discursively. It is further imperative to acknowledge that the content of a textbook depends not only on its authors, but also on publishing houses, which, in the modern market, are required to keep page counts and therefore costs and prices as low as possible.³⁷

The analysis proceeds chronologically, identifying four key stages that cover the time-span between fascism and the present day. We consider these stages in the light of Labanca's periodization and of a set of specific themes relating to the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, including its motivations and aims, the course and execution of the military campaign, and the war's international context and consequences. Focal aspects of the analysis are strategies of representation, notably of causality, agency, and alterity, and practices of silencing, voicing, mystification, and demystification. Representations of "Italianness," inherently connected to these issues and practices, will likewise form a central theme. We ensure maximum fidelity to the primary sources examined by providing extensive quotations that demonstrate the language, arguments, interpretations, and nuances used. While neither exhaustive nor definitive, the study identifies indicators of potential interactions among textbooks and collective memory, revealing a progressive, yet non-linear movement towards critical evaluation of this key colonial conflict. Arguing for a trajectory of change interlaced with persistent continuities of colonial and ethno- and Euro-centric thinking, this research provides a potential exemplar for the analysis and assessment of analogous patterns in representations of violent pasts aimed at young learners.

Textbook Representations of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War: Propagandistic Narratives in the Fascist Era (1936-1945)

Under Mussolini's fascism, educational practices, including textbooks, were highly militaristic, promoting "blind obedience, discipline, hard work, devotion, nationalism, respect for hierarchy," and legitimation of the regime.³⁸ History teaching served as a strategic domain for the formation of a "new," highly ideologized, Italian citizenry. At primary school level, a single, state-published textbook, profoundly steeped in fascist rhetoric, was in use from 1929 onwards; secondary school textbooks required state approval prior to publication, resulting in homogeneous narratives issuing from authors' and publishing houses' zealous adherence to fascist pedagogical and propaganda expectations.³⁹

³⁶ For example, it was a textbook written from a markedly left-wing position that first, and with great clarity, named the responsibility of the Italian communists in Trieste in the foibe massacres. While— as the analysis will detail— a textbook by a leftist/Marxist historian (Saitta) was the first to denounce the use of gas in Ethiopia, later authors who were members of Italy's Communist Party omitted this fact.

³⁷ Genovesi, *Il Manuale*, 29.

³⁸ Sylvia Tamara Hakopian, *Children's Utopia / Fascist Utopia: Ideology and Reception of Textbooks under Italian Fascism* (Cornell University, 2017), p. x. See also, among others, J. Charnitzky, *Fascismo e Scuola. La Politica Scolastica del Regime (1922-1943)* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1996).

³⁹ Monica Galfré, *Il Regime degli Editori. Libri, Scuola e Fascismo* (Roma/Bari: Laterza, 2005).

Motivations for the War

Produced in this context, our fascist-era sample contains apologetic, celebratory textbook narratives of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, evoking key topoi from fascist rhetoric and its caricatured representations.⁴⁰ Our analysis of textbooks such as those by Manaresi (1936, 1940), Steiner (1936), Rodolico (1938), and Silva (1941)⁴¹ allowed us to identify six fundamental themes at the centre of the textbooks' justificatory motivations for the conflict. The first and second of these relate to the "[e]xpansion needs of an ever-increasing population,"⁴² as a projection of Mussolini's expansionist desires onto the Italian people. The third theme engages the Italian claim to adequate colonial compensation from the "richest nations"⁴³ – first and foremost from hostile Great Britain – for its lavish contribution during the First World War. Silva, comparing European colonial possessions, speaks of "a situation of colonial inferiority that Italy could not indefinitely endure."⁴⁴ The fourth theme concerns the supposed civilizing mission, framed teleologically, of a nation destined to revive and perpetuate the legacy of Rome. Fascist textbooks thus contrast the "savage" Ethiopian, resident of a "slaving, slave-raiding country closed ... to every peaceful penetration"⁴⁵ and a "chaotic, barbaric kingdom in perpetual conflict,"⁴⁶ with the Italian civilizer leading a humanitarian enterprise in which "the workers advanced behind the soldiers, building roads, hospitals and schools."⁴⁷ Thus, the violation of sovereignty discursively becomes a liberation of the benighted. The fifth theme concerns the "essential necessity" of resolving "once and for all" the supposed danger posed by a "heavily armed" Ethiopia to the Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia.⁴⁸ Silva contrasts in this context the threatening character of an expansionist Negus with a virtuous, peaceful Italy evincing "trust and benevolence."⁴⁹ The sixth theme evokes the necessity of Italian revenge on Ethiopia for, in Manaresi's words, "the blood of the fallen of Adua"⁵⁰ in the First Italo-Ethiopian War of 1895-1896; Silva defines the conquest of Ethiopian lands as a "glorious reparation" for this defeat.⁵¹

⁴⁰ Similar arguments found echo in *il Libro Unico di Stato*, the compulsory primary school textbook of the fascist regime. The textbook exalted Mussolini as having "conquered the world, breaking the siege of fifty-two nations, and won in Africa, in seven months, the war against a slaving empire." Piero Bargellini, *Il Libro della IV Classe Elementare: Letture* (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1938), 170. It further celebrated Italian heroism and ingenuity in the conquest of an "Empire, entrusted to the marvellous talents of the Italian race ... the Empire of justice, ... of genius, of work, ... of civilization." *Ibid.*, 173-4. For a more detailed analysis of the *Libro Unico*, see P. Genovesi, *Una Storia del Manuale. La Storia nel Libro Unico di Stato (1929-1945)* (Parma: Ricerche Pedagogiche, 2005).

⁴¹ L. Steiner, *Nozioni di Storia e Geografia per le Scuole Secondarie di Avviamento Professionale (in conformità dei programmi 7 maggio 1936-XIV)*, 2 (Torino: Paravia, 1936); Alfonso Manaresi, *Storia Contemporanea per i Licei Classici, Scientifici e gli Istituti Magistrali* (Milano: Trevisini, 1936); Alfonso Manaresi, *Storia Contemporanea per i Licei Classici, Scientifici e gli Istituti Magistrali* (Milano: Trevisini, 1940); Niccolò Rodolico, *Sommario Storico ad Uso dei Licei e degli Istituti Magistrali con Letture di Documenti Contemporanei*, 3, 4th ed. (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1938); Pietro Silva, *Corso di Storia ad Uso dei Licei e degli Istituti Magistrali*, 3, 5th ed. (Milano-Messina: Principato, 1941).

⁴² Silva, *Corso di Storia*, 421.

⁴³ Steiner, *Nozioni di Storia*, 95.

⁴⁴ Silva, *Corso di Storia*, 422.

⁴⁵ Steiner, *Nozioni di Storia*, 102.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁷ Silva, *Corso di Storia*, 428.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 422; see also Steiner, *Nozioni di Storia*, 96.

⁴⁹ Silva, *Corso di Storia*, 422.

⁵⁰ Manaresi, *Storia Contemporanea*, 363.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

The War's Course and Wider Context

In line with this colonial/nationalist pathos, fascist-era textbooks present detailed, descriptive, enthusiastic accounts of the military campaign's speed, "momentum," and "genius."⁵² To aggrandize the Italian achievement, the authors depict the Ethiopian Other as an enemy "strong" and abundant in arms.⁵³ Silva rhetorically enlists Ethiopia's "impervious and wild" terrain, figured as barbaric like its inhabitants, as an additional adversary.⁵⁴ Manaresi's textbook, exceptionally, references foreign journalists' reports on Italian war crimes, yet dismisses them as "fiercely distort[ed]" accounts from journalists "bustl[ing] about ... telling fantastic stories of Italian bombings on Red Cross hospitals" while "hiding from their gullible readers" the enemy's use of internationally prohibited, British-manufactured "dum-dum" bullets and "horrendou[s] mutilat[i]ons" of Italian prisoners.⁵⁵ This depiction operationalizes the racist trope of perfidy that dominated much newspaper coverage of Ethiopia's conquest, including accounts of the Ethiopians supposedly misusing the insignia of the Red Cross; the resistance fighters appear, in this account, as flouting the laws of war in contrast to the upright, law abiding fascists.⁵⁶

Textbooks of this phase consider the diplomatic issues around the conflict at length. In various instances, they ascribe strategic significance to Britain's opposition to Mussolini's expansionist projects, in line with the view of the historian De Felice that Britain's actions led the Italian people to "maximum consent" to the fascist regime which promised to conquer their "place in the sun."⁵⁷ Authors of this phase call the international sanctions imposed a "hateful"⁵⁸ and "monstrous economic siege aimed at suffocating Italy,"⁵⁹ engaging in a typically fascist pathos-suffused victim complex. One lyrical description (Silva, 1941) invokes the "immediate, irrepressible ... impetus of the entire Italian people, who lined up behind the Duce and the Government and alongside the armed forces, ready to face all events and all sacrifices"⁶⁰ and the unprecedented "international strengthening" of their status with the Italian Empire's subsequent establishment.⁶¹

Continuities Punctuated with Isolated Ruptures in the Early Post-Fascist Phase (1946-1960s)

After the Second World War, difficulties in coming to terms with the fascist regime intertwined with the "persistence of the 'colonial dream'" across the political spectrum.⁶² The *defascistizzazione* of history textbooks initially entailed the deletion of direct references to Mussolini and fascism and of bluntly militaristic content; it eventually led to the essentially avoidant removal, until the 1960s, of post-World War One history

⁵² Ibid.; Silva, *Corso di Storia*, 429.

⁵³ Silva, *Corso di Storia*, 427; Steiner, *Nozioni di Storia*, 98.

⁵⁴ Silva, *Corso di Storia*, 427.

⁵⁵ Manaresi, *Storia Contemporanea*, 363.

⁵⁶ Cadamuro, "The Denial," 111.

⁵⁷ The notion of "maximum consent" was the subject of critique in other historians' analyses on account of the regime's totalitarianism. Paul R. Corner, *Italia Fascista. Politica e Opinione Popolare sotto la Dittatura* (Roma: Carocci, 2015).

⁵⁸ Steiner, *Nozioni di Storia*, 103.

⁵⁹ Silva, *Corso di Storia*, 426.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 424-5.

⁶¹ Ibid., 434.

⁶² Cadamuro, "The Denial," 419.

from the curriculum.⁶³ Several scholars have pointed to the ineffectual character of *defascistizzazione*, manifest in limited and surface textbook revisions; fascist rhetoric may have been abandoned, but its replacement was a strongly Italo-centric, nostalgic celebration of patriotism and of the Italian people's heroism, marginalizing or erasing the Other. Textbook content deleted in *defascistizzazione* included references to Ethiopia and the fascist re-establishment of Empire; one example is Silva's textbook, in which the section on the war, through the removal of ideological language and assertions, had shrunk from seventeen pages in the fascist-era edition to three in the postwar version.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, references to the "necessity of Italian colonies" persisted alongside the widespread theme of benevolent Italian colonialism,⁶⁵ echoed in media rhetoric "permeated by a sense of loss"⁶⁶ of the colonial past and by the celebration of the "resumed ... work of civilisation" in Somaliland under Italian trusteeship (1950-1960).⁶⁷

Those narratives of the Ethiopian war that remained in textbooks evidenced and reflected a broader situation of asynchronicity between political change and discourse. Baratieri observes in this context that "stories on Italian colonialism [that] were canonised during the Fascist regime ... remained in place until the mid-sixties,"⁶⁸ absent any counter-narratives, with instances of 1950s journalism setting up the war "as a testimony of the Italian people's [military and civil] virtues" and "civilising mission."⁶⁹ The incipient postcolonialism emerging internationally as political colonialism met its end failed to enter into Italian textbook discourses. These instead reproduced the apparent collective amnesia manifested in the absence of public debate on these aspects of the past during this period, in the context of Italy's particular decolonization experience, the overshadowing memory of the Second World War, and a lack of legal reckoning for abuses.

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Discursive continuity, despite distinct changes in tone, appears in the notably long-lived textbook by Manaresi, first printed in the late 1920s and used virtually unaltered in secondary schools until the early 1960s. Its 1951 edition describes the Italian aggression as Mussolini's "energetic action" in the face of "derisory" colonial compensation and as a response to the needs of an "exuberant" – in the sense of "bountifully growing" – Italian population.⁷⁰ Comparably, Rodolico persists, in the early 1960s, with presenting demographic and humanitarian justifications for the conflict.⁷¹ Similarly conservative orientations appear in Valori's account, in 1953, of the unmotivated international opposition to the "well-founded legal and political reasons" – which he does not specify – for Mussolini's conviction that it would be "useful and opportune to annexe Ethiopia," whose

⁶³ De Bernardi, "Il Canone della Storia Contemporanea nei Manuali Scolastici dall'Unità alla Repubblica," in *La Storia Contemporanea tra Scuola e Università. Manuali, Programmi, Docenti*, ed. G. Bosco and C. Mantovani (Rubbettino: Soveria Mannelli, 2004), 13.

⁶⁴ Silva, *Corso di Storia* (1954).

⁶⁵ Genovesi, *Il Manuale*, 114-5, 152.

⁶⁶ Baratieri, *Memories*, 139.

⁶⁷ Cadamuro, "The Denial," 419.

⁶⁸ Baratieri, *Memories*, 26.

⁶⁹ Cadamuro, "The Denial," 421.

⁷⁰ Alfonso Manaresi, *Corso di Storia per gli Istituti Tecnici Superiori (Dal Congresso di Vienna alla Seconda Guerra Mondiale)*, 2 (Milano: Trevisini, 1951), 282.

⁷¹ Niccolò Rodolico, *Sommario Storico ad Uso dei Licei e degli Istituti Magistrali con Letture di Documenti Contemporanei*, 3, 11th ed. (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1963), 338-9.

admission to the LON table he denounces in line with fascist discourse.⁷² The colonial trope of the civilizing mission makes an appearance in references to Ethiopians' "primitive mentality" and their "semi-barbaric empire."⁷³

Alongside some authors' continued adherence to fascist rhetoric, we note an apparent tendency for others, in referring to what Mussolini allegedly "believed," to evade the passing of critical judgement on the dictator's choices. The book by Morghen, for instance, speaks in 1953, and again in 1963, of Mussolini's belief that "the conquest of Ethiopia ... [would provide] a remedy for the economic situation [in Italy] and ... the occasion for a resounding affirmation of prestige."⁷⁴ The 1954 edition of Silva's book replaces the detailed justifications for the war in the 1941 version with a reference to the ambitious purpose of "Mussolini [who] believed that the time had come to achieve great material success and prestige with the conquest of Ethiopia."⁷⁵ The strategy evidently at work here is what Genovesi has termed, in relation to the official exclusion of contemporary history from school curricula, a "suspension of judgment" in view of the proximity of the fascist past, with "expedients ... used to maintain a marked objectifying distance."⁷⁶ The epigraphic list of the war's causes suggested by Belvederi in 1965 may appear as another ostensibly distancing expedient which does not allow even the most attentive reader to discern the pretexts dictated by fascist propaganda from the motivations proposed by historiography.⁷⁷ In this context, the account by the Marxist historian Saitta (1956) of the Ethiopian war as an "aggression ... under the pretext of some border incidents" and an anachronistic "out-of-season fruit" is exceptional,⁷⁸ as is the later reference by Camera and Fabietti (1967), authors of a publication with similar popularity to Saitta's, to Italy's "aggression against a sovereign state with full rights."⁷⁹

Textbooks of the 1950s and 1960s provide much more concise, albeit still partially favourable, accounts of the conflict's course. Some narratives engage fascist discourses in extolling the "brilliant victories" of the Italian troops and their commanders De Bono, Graziani, and Badoglio (Valori, 1953),⁸⁰ or take an uncertain course between crediting these generals by name with a "war ... skilfully conducted" (Manaresi, 1952)⁸¹ and omitting the names (Manaresi, 1951).⁸² Saitta, contrastingly, makes the first, and strikingly, early condemnation of Italy's use of gas in the conflict. Dispelling the fascist-era legend of Ethiopia as a well-equipped foe, he tells students of "ill-armed Abyssinians, killed by the thousands with asphyxiating gas."⁸³ It is worth noting that colonial discourse persists

⁷² Aldo Valori, *Corso di Storia per i Licei*, 3. *Storia Contemporanea* (Torino: Sei, 1953), 496.

⁷³ Giovanni Battista Picotti and Giuseppe Rossi Sabatini, *Lineamenti di Storia*, 3 (La Scuola, 1959/1966), 231, 306/ 244, 329.

⁷⁴ Raffaello Morghen, *Civiltà Europea. Corso di Storia per le Scuole Medie Superiori. Età Contemporanea*, 2nd ed. (Palermo: Palumbo, 1953), 353; Raffaello Morghen, *Civiltà Europea. Corso di Storia per le Scuole Medie Superiori. Età Contemporanea*, 9th ed. (Palermo: Palumbo, 1963), 367.

⁷⁵ Pietro Silva, *Corso di Storia ad Uso dei Licei Classici e Scientifici*, 3, 12th ed. (Milano-Messina: Principato, 1954), 539.

⁷⁶ Genovesi, *Il Manuale*, 139.

⁷⁷ Raffaele Belvederi, *Storia. V Evo Contemporaneo. Per gli Istituti Tecnici* (Casale Monferrato: Marietti, 1965), 295-6.

⁷⁸ Armando Saitta, *Il Cammino Umano. Corso di Storia ad Uso dei Licei*, 3 (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1956), 912.

⁷⁹ Augusto Camera and Renato Fabietti, *Elementi di Storia*, 3 (Zanichelli, 1967), 437.

⁸⁰ Valori, *Corso di Storia*, 497.

⁸¹ Alfonso Manaresi, *Storia Contemporanea. Dal Congresso di Vienna alla Proclamazione della Repubblica Italiana. Per i Licei Classici e Scientifici e gli Istituti Magistrali* (Milano: Trevisini, 1952), 417.

⁸² Manaresi, *Corso di Storia* (1951), 283

⁸³ Saitta, *Il Cammino Umano* (1956), 913.

in descriptions of the “heroic resistance” offered by “massacred” Italian troops during the First Italo-Ethiopian War; the fact that their author here is Saitta is indicative of the tenacity of such perspectives even among authors otherwise prepared to critique Italy’s actions.⁸⁴ A striking throwback to notions of the “savage” colonized occurs in relation to Italians massacred, in the first war, by indigenous “hordes” (Morghen 1951/1974), a language revised across the years by other authors: in one textbook, the “hordes” of the 1950s become “bands” in 1963 and “forces” in 1979.⁸⁵

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Assessments of the conflict’s international implications develop a degree of incipient divergence at this stage. Manaresi and Valori are once again aligned in their views; the former, echoed by the latter,⁸⁶ depicts Britain as determined to hinder Italian colonial aspirations and as “tenacious” in its defence of a “slaver” government,⁸⁷ suggesting Britain was strategically interested in an Italian “collapse.”⁸⁸ Another position, taken by several authors, regards other powers not as hindering but as effectively helping Italy. The reference by Morghen and Silva to tacit British and French approval of the Italian aggression⁸⁹ and Saitta’s critique of the international diplomatic game as “a great drama, which Mussolini managed to skilfully exploit” particularly in view of pressing issues around the preservation of peace in Europe, are among the manifestations of this approach.⁹⁰

Textbook authors’ divergent views and emphases regarding the war’s international context during this period echo scholarly and political debates on the origins of fascist racism and, relatedly, antisemitism, as notoriously manifested in the racial laws of 1938, which Italian historiography persistently disregarded until the mid 1980s.⁹¹ While colonial racism and fascist antisemitism are distinct phenomena, their treatment in the educational memory of Italian culpability for atrocities is intimately linked. Some scholars have considered Italian antisemitism to be “passively inherited” from, or simply a reflection of, Italy’s political rapprochement with Nazi Germany to which the Ethiopian war contributed; others have critiqued this interpretation as self-exculpatory, perceiving the roots of antisemitism to lie in the fascist ideology promoted by Mussolini from the 1920s onward or in tendencies stemming from the nineteenth century.⁹² Several studies have contended that Italian racism has deep historical roots and that antisemitism is a long-standing feature of Italian history.⁹³

⁸⁴ Ibid., 675, 687.

⁸⁵ Morghen, *Civiltà Europea*, 3 (1951), 228/ (1974), 237; Ernesto Bignami, *L’Esame di Storia per la Maturità Classica, Scientifica e Magistrale* (Ed. Bignami, 1957 (p. 138)/1963 (p. 138)/1979 (p. 111), in Leone and Tappi, “Pagine,” 157.

⁸⁶ Valori, *Corso di Storia*, 496-8.

⁸⁷ Alfonso Manaresi, *Corso di Storia per gli Istituti Tecnici Superiori* (Milano: Trevisini, 1948), 292; Manaresi, *Corso di Storia* (1951), 282.

⁸⁸ Manaresi, *Storia Contemporanea*, 417.

⁸⁹ Morghen, *Civiltà Europea* (1953), 353; *Civiltà Europea* (1963), 367; Silva, *Corso di Storia* (1954), 539.

⁹⁰ Saitta, *Il Cammino Umano* (1956), 913; Armando Saitta, *Il Cammino Umano. Corso di Storia ad Uso dei Licei*, 3, 3rd ed. (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1965), 549.

⁹¹ Mario Toscano, “Il Dibattito Storiografico sulla Politica Razziale del Fascismo,” in *Leggi Razziali Passato/Presente* (2015), 9-41.

⁹² See, among others, Michele Sarfatti, *Gli Ebrei nell’Italia Fascista. Vicende, Identità, Persecuzione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007).

⁹³ Ilaria Pavan, “Fascismo, Antisemitismo, Razzismo. Un Dibattito Aperto,” in *A Settant’Anni dalle Leggi Razziali*, ed. Daniele Menozzi and Andrea Mariuzzo (Roma: Carocci, 2010), 31-52.

Our sample provides evidence of three principal strands of interpretation around the relationship between Mussolini and Hitler and the consequent Italian responsibility in the outbreak of the Second World War, and around the subject of racism and antisemitism, in accounts of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War and its consequences in textbooks of this period. The first strand seeks to deflect responsibility from the *Bel Paese* by suggesting the Ethiopian war had cast Italy into “enslavement” to Germany⁹⁴ and that Germany’s non-participation in the LON-mandated sanctions left Mussolini, even “in the antisemitic campaign ... forced to side with Hitler” (as in Manaresi, 1949).⁹⁵ The language of compulsion here implies, unevidenced, an Italian discontent with the antisemitism of Nazism. The second strand retains this impulse to minimize Italian responsibility in the Second World War, offloading it either onto Hitler’s foreign policy or onto British and French ineptitude in their response to the Ethiopian question, but affords Mussolini a less passive role, without refraining entirely from justifying his actions. The account in Valori bears traces of both these approaches, denouncing the Anglo-French “demeanour ... [which] induced Italy to throw itself completely on the side of Germany” and depicting Italy as having “found itself led, against its own interests, to follow the warlike policy of the Germans.”⁹⁶ A linguistic shift commences here, alongside a less emphatic discursive one; “forced” in Manaresi becomes the less drastic “induced” or “led” in Valori, but retains an exculpatory tone. The myth of Italy’s secondary, or subordinate, responsibility for its complicity in Nazism occurs frequently in the sample, as in Belvederi’s positing of Nazism as essentially different from and dominant over fascism.⁹⁷ Tellingly in terms of the continuation of colonialist assumptions, Valori regrets that the German seduction robbed Italy of the opportunity for “a long period of peace to capitalize on ... the considerable resources of the newly conquered Ethiopian Empire.”⁹⁸

The third strand, tracing a line of transition into the phase of incipient critique we detail below, depicts Mussolini as a protagonist on a par with Hitler. Its highlighting of their shared ideology is evident in Saitta’s contention in 1956 that “[t]he alignment of fascist Italy with National Socialist Germany was in the very logic of things” and that “it was the Ethiopian campaign that hastened” it, and in observations on the manifestation of fascist policy’s bellicose, racist character in the Ethiopian war and the laws against *mestizaje* enacted in the colony in 1937.⁹⁹

Incipient Critique and Continued Deflection of Responsibility (1970s-1980s)

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From the 1970s onwards, in line with the contemporary incipient emergence of historiographical critique addressing the Italian colonial “enterprise,” it becomes incrementally more difficult to identify justifications for the Italian aggression among textbooks. A

⁹⁴ Manaresi, *Corso di Storia* (1949), 417-9.

⁹⁵ Manaresi, *Corso di Storia* (1948): 294; Manaresi, *Corso di Storia* (1951), 284.

⁹⁶ Valori, *Corso di Storia*, 498.

⁹⁷ Belvederi, *Storia*, 296.

⁹⁸ Valori, *Corso di Storia*, 498.

⁹⁹ Saitta, *Il Cammino Umano* (1956), 912-3.

notable rupture from earlier exculpating or equivocating argumentations appears in the 1970 textbook by Quazza, citing Mussolini's indefensible actions as serving the purpose of "restor[ing] his prestige as the 'master' of fascist imperialism"¹⁰⁰ by "proclaim[ing] ... the reappearance of the Empire ... " at a time when "the era of colonialism was waning."¹⁰¹ Among textbooks dating from the 1970s onwards, we find only one instance (Dupré, in 1984) of Ethiopia's labelling as a state "naturally destined to merge" with its neighbours Somalia and Eritrea, representing a colonial perspective on the availability of African lands to European disposal; even this argument joined others of the time in proposing the affirmation of prestige – or, in Dupré's terms, the "glow of success"¹⁰² – as a possible principal motivation for the Italian aggression.¹⁰³ The colonial myth of the civilizing mission breaks through the beginning critique where Dupré asserts that, during "the Ethiopian interlude" (or, in the original Italian, "parenthesis"), "many good and concrete things were undoubtedly done ... wide and beautiful roads were built."

Contrastingly, the emergence via gradual advances in Italian historiography, commencing in the 1960s, of the methods used by Italy in the war finds little explicit reflection in 1970s and early 1980s textbooks, notwithstanding the increasing occurrence of generally vague and imprecise allusions hereto.¹⁰⁴ Saitta's textbooks (1956, 1965, 1971, 1982) remain among the only works in our sample denouncing Italy's use of gas against poorly-armed Ethiopians until the end of the 1980s, with the notable exception of the work by Cardini and Cherubini published in 1977.¹⁰⁵ The expanding recognitions of the conflict's unequal nature remain generally low on detail in this phase, as exemplified in popular texts by left-wing authors such as Villari, who makes no reference to the violent nature of the campaign in his cursory report of how "Mussolini could prepare and carry out the conquest of Ethiopia in the space of seven months,"¹⁰⁶ and Spini, who refers only to a "mighty deployment of [Italian] forces."¹⁰⁷ It is admittedly the case that the use of terms such as "overwhelmed" and "crushed" in the context of Ethiopia's defeat points to the conflict's brutality. Relatedly, emergent critique of atrocities in this period of the sample often remains imprecise, or parenthetical, as in the 1982 first edition of a major textbook, by Ortoleva and Revelli, which briefly notes "inhumane methods" authorized by Mussolini, but places in brackets the explanation that this refers to the use of asphyxiating gas against combatants and non-combatants.¹⁰⁸ Similar qualifications, albeit without detail, are visible in references to a "bloody and

¹⁰⁰ Guido Quazza, *Corso di Storia per i Licei e gli Istituti Magistrali*, 3, 4th ed. (Torino: Petrini, 1970), 312.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Eugenio Dupré, *Italia ed Europa. Corso di Storia per i Licei e l'Istituto Magistrale con Appendice di Letture Critiche*, 3. *Età Contemporanea*. Nuova ed. completamente rifatta (Messina: G. D'Anna, 1984), 356.

¹⁰³ Dupré, *Italia ed Europa*, 354.

¹⁰⁴ Saitta, *Il Cammino Umano* (1956), 913; Saitta, *Il Cammino Umano* (1965); Armando Saitta, *Produzione e Traffici nella Storia della Civiltà, per il Triennio degli Istituti Tecnici*, 3 (Firenze: Sansoni, 1971); Armando Saitta, *Il Cammino Umano. Corso di Storia per le Scuole Medie Superiori*, 3 (Bologna: Calderini, 1982).

¹⁰⁵ Franco Cardini and Giovanni Cherubini, *Storia: 3 Contemporanea, per le Scuole Medie Superiori* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1977), 347-9.

¹⁰⁶ Rosario Villari, *Storia Contemporanea. Per le Scuole Medie Superiori* (Bari: Laterza, 1970), 670; Rosario Villari, *Storia Contemporanea* (Bari: Laterza, 1984), 534.

¹⁰⁷ Giorgio Spini, *Corso di Storia Civile ed Economica*, 2. *Dal Congresso di Vienna ad Oggi*, 9th ed. (Roma: Cremonese, 1982), 310; Giorgio Spini, *Dalla Preistoria ad Oggi. Corso di Storia per gli Istituti Tecnici di Ogni Tipo*, 5. *Dal Risorgimento Italiano ai Nostri Giorni*, 7th ed. (Roma: Cremonese, 1985), 310; Dupré, *Italia ed Europa*, 355.

¹⁰⁸ Peppino Ortoleva and Marco Revelli, *Storia dell'Età Contemporanea*, series directed by Alberto De Bernardi, Scipione Guarracino and Roberto Maragliano (Milano: Mondadori, 1982), 488-9.

cruel” conquest,¹⁰⁹ “atrocious [actions], bordering on genocide,”¹¹⁰ and “cruel reprisals” against Ethiopian guerrillas.¹¹¹ The assertion (Dupré, 1984) that Badoglio and Graziani, long known for their crimes, had “distinguished themselves” in the war¹¹² carries a potential ambiguity, between colonial and critical discourse, analogous to the reference cited above to the “glow of [Italian] success” in the same textbook.

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Concomitantly, textbooks of this period intertwine a diffusion of Italian responsibility with the gradual emergence of a more critical perspective, in line with the shift identified by Labanca and others. The former tendency cites the alleged complicity of contemporary democratic powers in the aggression, in continuity from its emergence in the 1950s and 1960s; the allusion by Villari (1970) to Mussolini’s position “without any substantial opposition from the Western powers and, in fact, with indirect diplomatic support from France” is exemplary in this regard.¹¹³ Returning to the three strands of interpretation around the fascist-Nazi relationship, we can distinguish elements of the first and second tendencies — which attribute to fascism a more or less passive submission to Nazism — in one account (by Salvo and Rotolo, 1979) of how, “[i]n a short time, the fascist regime subordinated itself to the hegemony of Germany and to the orientations of Nazism,”¹¹⁴ with “even the most far-fetched falsifications of racism” finally penetrating “Italian ‘culture.’”¹¹⁵ In 1982, reprized largely unaltered in the later edition of 1993, other authors (Ortoleva and Revelli) similarly speak of the “progressive submission [of an internationally isolated Italy] to the strategy of Hitler’s Germany”¹¹⁶ and the “import[ing] into Italy [of] the most sordid and tragic aspects of the Nazi regime.”¹¹⁷ In this narrative, the Ethiopian war effectively serves as a stumbling block placing Italy “at the mercy of extreme Nazi policy” and making it a “subordinate [combatant]... alongside Nazi Germany” in WWII.¹¹⁸ The tale here is one of a fall from grace into the un-Italianness of “import[ed]” Nazism. Other authors (such as Bendiscioli and Gallia, 1972) resist this interpretation, reflecting the third strand we have identified above – an acknowledgement of the active congruence of fascist with Nazi ideology and policy – by pinpointing the war in Ethiopia as a moment at which Italian “convergence and solidarity” with the “German-Nazi ideology and politics intensified.”¹¹⁹

¹⁰⁹ Francesco Traniello, *Storia Contemporanea per Licei e Istituti Magistrali* (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1984), 407.

¹¹⁰ M. Legnani, Roberto Parenti, and Augusto Vegezzi, *Tempo Storico* (Zanichelli, 1978), 273-4.

¹¹¹ Giorgio Spini, *Documenti e Profilo Storico, per le Scuole Medie Superiori, 3, Età Contemporanea*, 3rd ed. (Roma: Cremonese, 1976), 236. We find no mention of atrocities in textbooks by for instance Gaeta and Villani (1974), Salvadori (1978/85), and Villari (1984), and no mention of the repression during the occupation despite acknowledgement of the use of poison gas in the war in for instance Cherubini (1977) and Bontempelli and Bruni (1983).

¹¹² Dupré, *Italia ed Europa*, 355.

¹¹³ Villari, *Storia Contemporanea* (1970), 670. See also Franco Salvo and Filippo Rotolo, *La Città dell’Uomo. Manuale di Storia ad Uso dei Licei e dell’Istituto Magistrale, 3. 1815–1970* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1974), 674.

¹¹⁴ Franco Salvo, Filippo Rotolo, and Mario Benvenuti, *Dalla Società Feudale al Mondo d’Oggi. Corso di Storia per il Secondo Ciclo della Scuola Media Superiore* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1979), 712.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Ortoleva and Revelli, *Storia dell’Età Contemporanea* (1982), 488.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 542-3.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 489.

¹¹⁹ Mario Bendiscioli and Adriano Gallia, *Stati Popoli Culture, 3. Storia Contemporanea (1815–1970)* (Milano: Mursia, 1972), 502.

Catching Up with Historiography, Struggling with Its Conclusions (Late 1980s-Present Day)

In Labanca's terms, from the mid 1980s onward, the "dialectical" engagement with Italy's colonial past runs into the "postcolonial." Significantly, this shift coincides with curriculum reforms which, commencing in the mid 1990s, created much increased space in schools for the study of contemporary history. Textbooks began at this time to markedly expand the range of sources on which they drew and the modes of their presentation and communication, although teachers frequently continued earlier practices of adhering largely to the main narrative text.

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Embedded within this context, textbooks published from the end of the 1980s onwards take an increasingly critical tone, seeking to dissect and unravel the pretexts for Mussolini's anachronistic colonial war and to provide an overall analysis of the conflict's underlying reasons on a historiographical evidence base. In line with divergent scholarly opinions, the authors give varying weight to specific motives, while openly critiquing as "hot air" the motivations advanced by fascism.¹²⁰

More substantial divergences appear in the textbooks' accounts of how the war unfolded and proceeded. We note isolated throwbacks to the phase of silencing, specifically in books from the mid 1980s (Passarello et al., 1986; Gaeta and Villani, 1987)¹²¹ that omit any information on the conflict's course. One exception is the reference in the 1986 work to "a short military campaign [that] allowed the Duce to consider himself on a par with the great Roman commanders," readable either as implicitly critical or as verging on the celebratory.¹²² As the 1980s drew to a close, textbooks generally made greater acknowledgement of the use of chemical weapons¹²³ and other atrocities in what one author called "one of the first 'total' wars of our time."¹²⁴ Likewise, they began to include the topic of local resistance; one textbook, by Desideri (1989), references work by Del Boca on its crushing while also, rather exceptionally, giving voice to the Other by presenting the Negus' speech to the LON as a source.¹²⁵ From the 1990s onwards, textbook authors tend more regularly to acknowledge and focus on the "terrorist" use of asphyxiating gas and the "ferocious repression" employed to conduct the war.¹²⁶ An exception occurs at the outset of this period, in the 1990 edition of an enduringly popular work by Brancati which literally re-confines this war crime to a text box that fails to explain the key term of "mustard gas" or its effects;¹²⁷ it does, by and large, remain an exception. The changes apparent in the 1993 edition of the book by Ortoleva and Revelli, referenced in the previous section in relation to an

¹²⁰ Franco Gaeta and Pasquale Villani, *Corso di Storia per le Scuole Medie e Superiori*, 3 (Milano: Principato, 1987), 427.

¹²¹ Ibid.; Giuseppe Passarello et al., *Il Tempo della Memoria: Età Contemporanea. Antologia di Cultura Generale. Per gli Istituti Professionali* (Torino: Sei, 1986).

¹²² Passarello et al., *Il Tempo della Memoria*, 644.

¹²³ Andrea Giardina, Giovanni Sabbatucci, and Vittorio Vidotto, *Manuale di Storia*, 3. *L'Età Contemporanea* (Bari: Laterza, 1988/1993/2000).

¹²⁴ Corrado Vivanti, *Età Contemporanea. Storia per i Licei* (Casale Monferrato: Marietti Scuola, 1988), 558.

¹²⁵ Antonio Desideri, *Storia e Storiografia*, 3. *Dalla Prima Guerra Mondiale alle Soglie del Duemila* (Messina: G. D'Anna, 1989), 656-60.

¹²⁶ Emilio Zanette, *La Storia e le Idee. Dalla Prima Guerra Mondiale a Oggi* (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), 86; Vittoria Calvani, *Il Gusto della Storia. L'Età del "Disordine" Mondiale* (Milano: Mondadori, 2004), 112.

¹²⁷ Brancati, *Popoli e Civiltà*, 679.

“othering” of Nazism to Italian fascism, might perhaps serve to exemplify this shift. This edition discards the previous parentheses in its reference to the “inhumane” use of asphyxiant gas¹²⁸ and visually juxtaposes fascist propaganda “exalting the valour and heroism of Italian troops” with a half-page photograph of two lifeless Ethiopian civilians lying on Addis Ababa’s streets under the watch of Italian soldiers.¹²⁹ The image stems from the massacre of Addis Ababa, inflicted under Italian occupation in 1937; this event finds particular emphasis in Cattaneo et al. (2009), which stands out for its mention of the more recently uncovered massacre of Debre Birhan (1939).¹³⁰

Overall, the use of stark condemnatory adjectives becomes more apparent, with descriptions of “savage bombing according to ‘total war’ techniques of a terrorist nature”¹³¹ and, using bold type for emphasis, of the “massive use of aviation for bombing and machine-gunning” and the deployment of “terrible poison gas (mustard gas)” by which the Negus’ “last troops were mown down.”¹³² The laying bare of war crimes appears to go hand in hand with a more accurate account of the disparity between the Italian and Ethiopian forces. The statistical details given in Ortoleva and Revelli (1993) of Italy’s “undoubtedly disproportionate” military deployment against “weak” opponents who suffered “very heavy losses” are a case in point.¹³³ Combining this theme with that of the Ethiopians’ agency and resolve, several authors characterize its forces as poorly armed but “determined” and resilient,¹³⁴ and speak of “a guerrilla that the Italians were never able to crush.”¹³⁵

This evolution is not revolution; instances of striking vagueness remain in a number of textbooks issued around or after the year 2000. The “abundance of men and means” on the Italian side, specifically the “means,” remains unspecified in Palazzo and Bergese (2004);¹³⁶ allusions to the “merciless” nature¹³⁷ and “extreme harshness”¹³⁸ of the war, as articulated in Detti et al. (1998) and Brancati and Pagliarani (2007) respectively, supply no concrete textual detail, notwithstanding the image of corpses in an Addis Ababa street during the Italian occupation that appears in the latter with a cursory caption on “fascist ... atrocities and massacres.” The photographs of a burning village in 1936 and of shootings of Ethiopians in 1937 are, in the words of Camera and Fabietti in its 1987 and 1999 editions, “atrocious episodes of the Italian invasion;” the use of the word “episodes” may imply that such abuses were not systemic.¹³⁹ Imprecision becomes inaccuracy when one relatively recent textbook of this period (Paolucci and Signorini,

¹²⁸ Ortoleva and Revelli, *Storia dell'Età Contemporanea* (1993), 540.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 542-3.

¹³⁰ Massimo Cattaneo, Claudio Canonici, and Albertina Vittoria, *Manuale di Storia, 3. Il Novecento e il Nuovo Millennio* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2009).

¹³¹ Gianni Gentile, Luigi Ronga, and Aldo Salassa, *Corso di Storia, 3* (1990), 629.

¹³² Giovanni De Luna and Marco Meriggi, *Il Segno della Storia, 3. Il Novecento e il Mondo Contemporaneo* (Milano-Torino: Pearson, 2012), 268.

¹³³ Ortoleva and Revelli, *Storia dell'Età Contemporanea* (1993), 540; the term “disproportionate” likewise occurs in Desideri and Themelly (1997).

¹³⁴ Valerio Castronovo, *Nel Segno dei Tempi. MilleDuemila. Corso di Storia per il Secondo Biennio e il Quinto Anno, 3. Il Novecento e il Duemila* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 2015), 245.

¹³⁵ Zanette, *La Storia e le Idee*, 82.

¹³⁶ Mario Palazzo and Margherita Bergese, *Sistema Storia. Dal Novecento ai Giorni Nostri* (Brescia: La Scuola, 2004), 141.

¹³⁷ Tommaso Detti et al., *La Società Moderna e Contemporanea, 5. Guerre, Totalitarismi, Democrazie* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 197.

¹³⁸ Antonio Brancati and Trebi Pagliarani, *Il Nuovo Dialogo con la Storia. Corso di Storia per il Triennio, 3. Il Novecento* (Milano: La Nuova Italia, 2007), 262.

¹³⁹ Augusto Camera and Renato Fabietti, *Elementi di Storia, 3. L'Età Contemporanea*, 2nd ed. (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1980); *Elementi di Storia, 3. L'Età Contemporanea*, 3rd ed. (1987); *Elementi di Storia, 3. XX Secolo*, 4th ed. (1994), 1223. Similarly, no mention of atrocities appears in Raoul Manselli, *L'Europa e il Mondo. Corso di Storia per le Scuole Medie Superiori*

2015) speaks of Italy's declaration of war on Ethiopia when in fact there was none, and the Negus' expulsion from Addis Ababa when he in fact left voluntarily to denounce Italy's crimes to the LON.¹⁴⁰ This textbook informs students that "the military campaign ... cost the Italians more than 4000 dead," recording elsewhere that "Ethiopian losses, between soldiers and civilians, amounted to more than 250,000 people, as a result of the indiscriminate use of toxic gas and aerial bombardment of villages by the Italians." The acknowledgement of civilian alongside military deaths does not remove the troubling implications of the wording used. "Dea[ths]" for the Italians acknowledges the ending of human life, while "losses" for the Ethiopians engages a persistent colonial perspective that objectifies or dehumanizes the colonized population; it contrasts starkly with lasting accounts of Italy's defeat in the First Ethiopian War, according to which, as noted earlier, the Italian soldiers were "exterminated," "massacred," "annihilated," or "slaughter[ed]."

In these discursive terms, violence committed by the Other appears as atrocity, that committed by the ingroup as depersonalized subtraction. Alongside the use, observed in the analysis thus far, of terms such as "episode" and "parenthesis" for the Ethiopian war and incidents taking place during it – rhetorically separating out these events from the teleology of Italian history – and the notion of Nazism as "imported," such language co-constructs an image of the "good Italian" whose continuity appears only partially broken by the belated rise of postcolonial critique. Indeed, the myth of the civilizing mission likewise persists in characterizations of Ethiopia at the time as an "archaic semi-feudal empire,"¹⁴¹ "enclosed in a state of tribal life."¹⁴²

Italy, Nazism, and the Second World War

Textbooks of the 1970s onwards had begun to present a more systematic indictment of French and British complicity in relation to the Ethiopian war; this judgement becomes unanimous in the sample from the 1980s and 1990s. Particular criticism of France includes the suggestion that it gave Italy's war of aggression "free rein"¹⁴³ and another considering it "proven" that an influence by the French government had, in 1931, emboldened Mussolini, giving him the "first suggestions" of acquiescence.¹⁴⁴ Alongside these assertions, another work in the 1990s sample reckons Italy's actions "understandable" given the "success of the enterprise" and in light of the "hypocrisy" shown by "England and France still ha[ving] immense colonial empires and show[ing] no intention of withdrawing from them."¹⁴⁵ A partial redistribution of Italian culpability appears here in this tendency to assign to international powers the responsibility for saving Italy from itself. After the turn of the millennium, the sample begins showing reduced emphasis on the role of European powers;¹⁴⁶ its most recent work, in 2020, restricts itself to noting how "the initiative

(Palermo: Palumbo, 1985) and Gabriele De Rosa, *Il Novecento. Corso di Storia per le Scuole Superiori* (Milano: Minerva, 1997), among others.

¹⁴⁰ Silvio Paolucci and Giuseppina Signorini, *La Storia in Tasca. Dall'Inizio del Novecento a Oggi* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2012), 91.

¹⁴¹ Desideri and Themelly, *Storia e Storiografia*, 3 (1989/1997), 670.

¹⁴² Gianluca della Valentina, Luciana Bramati, and Gabriella Cremaschi, *Storia del Mondo Contemporaneo*, 3 (Minerva Italica, 1993), 256.

¹⁴³ Zanette, *La Storia e le Idee*, 81.

¹⁴⁴ Brancati, *Popoli e Civiltà*, 677.

¹⁴⁵ Roberto Vivarelli, *Profilo di Storia*, 3 (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1996), 615-6.

¹⁴⁶ Paolucci and Signorini, *La Storia in Tasca*, 91; Calvani, *Il Gusto della Storia*, 112.

[Italy's aggression] provoked the reaction of France and, above all, Great Britain."¹⁴⁷ Given the rise of postcolonial research, the transnational "Hands Off Ethiopia" campaign, "widely acknowledged as a turning point for antiracist and anticolonial political organizing in the African continent and diaspora,"¹⁴⁸ is notable by its near-absence from the sample; only one book (Ortoleva and Revelli, 1993) refers vaguely to "widespread protest movements worldwide."¹⁴⁹ These silences indicate that the books are not up to the task of engaging what Perugini and Gordon call "the intimate connection between race, sovereignty and international law," observing that "sovereignty has historically been inflected by race ... laying bare the law's colonial imprint."¹⁵⁰

Parallely, the tendency to "outsource" blame for the Nazi-fascist alliance endures into these generations of textbooks, which on occasion locate culpability with the Ethiopian war itself; when a popular textbook of 2004 refers to Mussolini ending up "in Hitler's arms" following the "wretched adventure" of that conflict,¹⁵¹ it invokes – the epithet "wretched" notwithstanding – a colonial cliché of intrepid exploration.¹⁵² Another work reprizes the idea of an essentially passive Italy "pushed ... towards Germany" by its "isolation ... sanctioned by the League of Nations."¹⁵³ As late as 2020, authors were describing Mussolini's choices as conditioned and circumscribed by Hitler's politics and ideology, with the effect of "promoting *the extension of anti-African racism to antisemitism*."¹⁵⁴ While we acknowledge the necessity of taking into consideration the highly complex and contentious relationship between the racism stimulated by the Ethiopian war and fascist antisemitism,¹⁵⁵ we note here the re-emergence of a suggestion, appearing in earlier works, of antisemitism as effectively an unfortunate by-product of the situation in which Italy found itself, thus an implicit exoneration of Italian fascism from the charge of inherent antisemitism.

The sample does also encompass more historiographically progressive approaches that identify Mussolini as seeking to "enlarg[e] the area of Italian influence by playing on the rivalry between [the] Germans and [the] Franco-English" (as in Giardina et al., 1988)¹⁵⁶ or that set out excerpts from the work of Del Boca et al. on *Il Regime Fascista*, published a year earlier, that uncovered Mussolini's pioneering of racial laws (as in Zanette, 1996).¹⁵⁷ A number of post-millennial textbooks likewise demonstrate more consistent willingness to characterize the rapprochement between fascism and Nazism as the

¹⁴⁷ Aurelio Lepre et al., *Noi nel Tempo. Dal Novecento a Oggi*, 3, 2nd ed. (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2020), 309.

¹⁴⁸ Arlena Buelli, "The Hands Off Ethiopia Campaign, Racial Solidarities and Intercolonial Antifascism in South Asia (1935–36)," *Journal of Global History* 18, no. 1 (2023): 47. See, for instance, S.K.B. Asante, *Pan-African Protest, West Africa and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934–1941* (London: Longman, 1977); Fikru Gebrekidan, "In Defense of Ethiopia: A Comparative Assessment of Caribbean and African American Anti-Fascist Protests, 1935–1941," *Northeast African Studies* 2, no. 1 (1995): 145–73; Joseph Fronczak, "Local People's Global Politics: A Transnational History of the Hands Off Ethiopia Movement of 1935," *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 2 (2015): 245–74.

¹⁴⁹ Ortoleva and Revelli, *Storia dell'Età Contemporanea* (1993), 541.

¹⁵⁰ Nicola Perugini and Neve Gordon, "Between Sovereignty and Race: The Bombardment of Hospitals in the Italo-Ethiopian War and the Colonial Imprint of International Law," *State Crime Journal* 8, no. 1 (2019): 120, 108.

¹⁵¹ Calvani, *Il Gusto della Storia*, 112.

¹⁵² Cadamuro, "The Denial," 419.

¹⁵³ Passarello et al., *Il Tempo della Memoria*, 643.

¹⁵⁴ Lepre et al., *Noi nel Tempo*, 310.

¹⁵⁵ See, for instance, Sarfatti, *Gli Ebrei nell'Italia Fascista*, 121–2; Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, "D'une Persécution à l'Autre: Racisme Colonial et Antisémitisme dans l'Italie Fasciste," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 5, no. 3 (2008): 116–37.

¹⁵⁶ Giardina et al., *Manuale di Storia*, 622.

¹⁵⁷ Zanette, *La Storia e le Idee*, 82.

result of a “strong ideological consonance” and “proximity.”¹⁵⁸ An unambiguous refutation of any notion that fascism was not antisemitic in and of itself appears in the statement by Paolucci and Signorini (2012) that the links between Germany and Italy “reinforced an anti-Jewish tendency already present in the fascist movement;”¹⁵⁹ likewise disproving the myth of Nazi ideology as the exclusive influence on Mussolini’s racial laws of 1938, this textbook’s focal section entitled “Jews and Abyssinians suffer the racial laws” demonstrates the close intertwinement between the laws’ assertion of supposed Italian racial superiority to the Jews and fascism’s citation of the supposed “problem of racial mixing” in Ethiopia. A substantial text box in Cataldi et al. (2009) serves, analogously, to set out the distinctly fascist character of Italian war crimes in both colonial conflicts and the Second World War, drawing on historical films and documentaries, notably *Fascist Legacy* (1989), to explicitly debunk the myth of “the good Italian.”¹⁶⁰

Conclusion: A Less Than Linear Confrontation with a Criminal Past

The analysis set out in this article reveals history textbooks as mediators of a discourse which, as previous work has observed with regard to other memory-makers in Italy,¹⁶¹ “reflect[s] the complex and contradictory articulations of the ... memories of Italy’s colonial past.” The discourses evident in these works point to unfinished business around the memory of the Ethiopian war, and may sustain a tendency towards “selective forgetting” and “aphasia,” i.e. “the inability to comprehend and articulate a critical discourse” on this chapter of history.¹⁶² Over the chronological course of our history textbook sample, we observed a gradual, albeit still partial, revision of the treatment given to the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Proceeding from the starting point of a fascist-period symbiosis between propagandistic agenda and textbook content, we observe the gradual dissolution of silencing and minimizing tendencies. The books nevertheless remain marked by lacunae, inaccuracies, and the persistence of colonial discourses. Not all textbooks evolve in the same way simultaneously; in various instances, attempts at progression coexist alongside throwbacks to earlier discourses within one and the same textbook.

The four phases of historiographical engagement with the conflict proposed by Labanca and marked by the publication of relevant works by Del Boca partially reflect our findings. It is the final, ongoing, “postcolonial” phase that casts a stronger light on the current discrepancy between historiographical progress and textbook narratives on this imperialist war. Our findings with regard to continuities of historiographically outmoded perspectives echo, in part, those of Gioia’s analysis of representations of Italian history in the period 1940–45 in selected school textbooks published since the mid 1990s. Gioia observed a widespread tendency for “brand new editions” of textbooks to offer a perfunctory and frequently error-ridden treatment of sensitive events in this period, failing to engage students’ emotions and showing significant discrepancies

¹⁵⁸ Castronovo, *Nel Segno dei Tempi*, 246; De Luna and Meriggi, *Il Segno della Storia*, 268.

¹⁵⁹ Paolucci and Signorini, *La Storia in Tasca*, 91-3.

¹⁶⁰ Pietro Cataldi et al, *Di Fronte alla Storia: Eventi, Persone, Luoghi fra Passato e Presente*, 3. *Il Novecento e Oltre (dal 1914 a Oggi)* (Palermo: Palumbo, 2009), 148–9.

¹⁶¹ Beatrice Falucci, “A Repository of Colonial Intervisuality and Memory: The Colonial Museum in Rome,” *Revue d’Histoire Culturelle* 6 (2023), <https://journals.openedition.org/rhc/5651>.

¹⁶² Gianmarco Mancosu, “Amnesia, Aphasia and Amnesty: The Articulations of Italian Colonial Memory in Postwar Films (1946-1960),” *Modern Italy* 26, no. 4 (2021): 1–22.

with historiographical research, and suggesting that any revisions may have been cosmetic and editorial in nature.¹⁶³ This tendency does not represent the entirety of our sample – the belated advent of postcolonialism has not passed Italian school textbooks by completely – yet its emergence in our study provides supporting evidence, drawn from the vital arena of education, for the unfinished character of Italy's confrontation with its troubled colonial and fascist past and for the long path that lies ahead to the “decolonization” of its collective memory.

Our systematic thematic analysis of the reasons for the conflict, the war's course and consequences, and its broader, international context, including the role of European powers and fascist Italy's relationship with Nazi Germany in the context of Italy's aggression against Ethiopia, has enabled us to delineate the trajectories of these general tendencies, which we detailed within an overarching chronological frame. Remnants of fascist propaganda on the conflict's motivations persist until the 1960s, with textbooks referring to the Italian need and right to secure a “place in the sun” and to the conduction of a civilizing and simultaneously revanchist mission. Gradually edging out the unreflective nationalist triumphalism that remained in evidence in the immediately post-fascist period, a more critical and complex narrative took shape in the ensuing decades, eventually engaging with the historiographical conclusions of authoritative scholars.

For a long period during the sample's extent, silencing and self-absolution showed themselves notably intractable in the sample with regard to war crimes and atrocities. Del Boca has pointed to a “conspiracy of silence” around “th[e] national shame” of the use of asphyxiating gases, which he considered Italian historians to have sustained until the mid 1960s.¹⁶⁴ Reflecting the lapse of time between the advent of historiographical advances and their incorporation into educational materials, the omission of these details from textbooks largely persisted up until the 1980s, with notable exceptions. Indeed, in our sample, it is not until the 1990s that textbooks regularly condemn the use of gas and set out the unequal character of the conflict. The dilution of responsibility similarly remained a long-standing feature of textbooks' accounts of the war's international relations context and of the Italo-German relationship, intersecting with issues of culpability for the outbreak of the Second World War and the issuing of the racial laws that historians consider an aspect of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War's international impact. Consistent strands of interpretation commencing after the end of fascism incorporated differing extents of passivity or agency ascribed to Mussolini: some textbooks posit him as in thrall to Hitler or effectively compelled by an unscrupulous France and Britain to side with Nazi Germany; others, with strengthening tendencies as the sample progresses chronologically, critically analyze him as a shrewd strategic operator and, eventually, lay bare the ideological nature of fascism itself as more than a simple surrogate for Nazism.

A transversal issue that emerged from the analysis is the persistence of colonial othering. Textbooks of the 1950s bear traces of fascist-era stereotypes and prejudices towards the Ethiopians, and – as far as matters appear in our sample – we wait until 1988, with Giardina et al., for explicit criticism of a denigrating propaganda aimed at “soliciting

¹⁶³ Antonio Gioia, *Guerra, Fascismo, Resistenza. Avvenimento e Dibattito Storiografico nei Manuali di Storia* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2012).

¹⁶⁴ Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale. La Conquista dell'Impero*, 495-7.

the unconscious racist instincts of the public.”¹⁶⁵ Despite an increasingly self-critical approach to colonial atrocities and the alteration or softening of explicitly prejudiced language, we observe a persistent Italo- and Eurocentrism that permeates even the most recent textbooks, blocking the path to multiperspectivity that postcolonialism has attempted to forge. Various instances of language indicate the deep-rooted intransigence of a colonizer’s perspective and the longevity of a colonial imagery that may support Tabet’s argument of a “racist system of perception” in Italy having evolved into “a daily routine ... [that] moves among adults and, constantly, among children.”¹⁶⁶

Taking the view that history textbooks hold an important social function as co-constructors of a collective historical memory and consciousness, their representations of events and processes arguably have a potential impact beyond the classroom. Into our century, our textbook sample continues to manifest, in a troublingly persistent manner, the legacy of colonial cultural attitudes Labanca has identified “in politics, in the way it treats migrants today; in the media, in the way they transmit and magnify the clash of civilizations; in the minds of Italians, in the way they remain imbued with stereotypes and racial prejudice.”¹⁶⁷ Evidently, arguments on the relationship between inadequate present-day knowledge of Italy’s colonial past and current societal prejudice and attitudes towards immigration in Italy require verification through sociological research. We caution at this juncture that, as indicated above, change in textbook discourses progresses at a slower rate than do historiographical shifts; schools are institutions that, by their nature, move “with a longer time frame and with a marked tendency towards repetition.”¹⁶⁸ History textbooks centrally present narratives that teachers and students can follow together, which tend to remain intact and impervious to change for longer periods. Future work might usefully study the authorial and editorial choices underlying textbook production and the impact of these decisions on users. Regular reviews of textbooks’ academic accuracy and currency would appear similarly sensible and beneficial.

Beyond the school context, emerging work on social representations of colonialism and public subscription – particularly among university students – to the myth of the “good Italian” has pointed both to the crisis of this myth and to the dearth of knowledge around Italian colonialism among the country’s younger generations.¹⁶⁹ In light of the resilience of colonial discourse to which our analysis points, it appears imperative to consider, taking the practical factors delineated above into account, whether Italian textbooks of our time disrupt or sustain the persistently colonial “culture and thought” for whose “deeper deconstruction” Labanca calls, and whether they open up or close down the memory of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. The growth of postcolonial critique across academic disciplines and the current emergence of multiple postcolonial initiatives

¹⁶⁵ Giardina et al., *Manuale di Storia*, 621

¹⁶⁶ Paola Tabet, *La Pelle Giusta* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), v.

¹⁶⁷ Labanca, *La Guerra d’Etiopia*, 241-2.

¹⁶⁸ Genovesi, *Il Manuale*, 63.

¹⁶⁹ Chiara Volpato et al., “‘Italiani Brava Gente’. Effetti di un Mito Storico sulle Relazioni Sociali Contemporanee,” in *Dietro il Pregiudizio. Il Contributo della Psicologia Sociale all’Analisi di una Società Multiculturale*, ed. A. Miglietta and S. Gattino (Napoli: Liguori, 2012), 137-50; Giovanna Leone and Mauro Sarrica, “Challenging the Myth of Italians as ‘Good Fellows’: Is Clarity About In-group Crimes the Best Choice When Narrating a War to Its Perpetrators’ Descendants?,” *Papers on Social Representations* 21, no. 2 (2012): 11.1-11.28; Giovanna Leone, Marialibera d’Ambrosio, Stefano Migliorisi, and Isora Sessa, “Facing the Unknown Crimes of Older Generations: Emotional and Cognitive Reactions of Young Italian Students Reading an Historical Text on the Colonial Invasion of Ethiopia,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 62 (2018): 55-67.

in Italy indicate that the time is ripe for such examination. Among other things, the year 2023 has seen the passing of a motion, put before Rome's city council by the Democratic Party, for the establishment of a day of remembrance for the victims of Italian colonialism in the capital, associated with the addition of context to signs bearing street names related to colonialism. The intent behind this "welcoming and preservation of historical memory," as the motion describes it, is to "tell history from the side of the victims, so that the colonial atrocities of the Italians do not continue to be washed away from the national conscience."¹⁷⁰ We consider such acts of reflection all the more urgent in view of an apparent revival of colonial discourse alongside a construction of "the image of the contemporary immigrant Other" pursued by an increasingly successful, populist, radical Italian right wing.¹⁷¹ The simultaneity of a decolonizing activation of memory and the resurgence of the colonizer's othering rhetoric eloquently embodies the fragility, inconsistency, and non-linearity evident in our textbook sample's oscillating evolution towards historiographical accuracy and historical justice, reminding us of the slow, painstaking, and vulnerable character of processes that seek institutional recognition of the wrongs of colonial pasts.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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¹⁷⁰ Segretariato Generale, *Mozione N. 232-2022, Mozione Ex Art. 109* (Rome, 21 June 2022), 1-2.

¹⁷¹ Marianna Griffini, "How Can You Feel Guilty for Colonialism? It Is a Folly: Colonial Memory in the Italian Populist Radical Right," *European Politics and Society* 24, no. 4 (2023): 477-93.