

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Colonization of Libya for Italy

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Italy had not become unified as a state until 1860 and did not have a large navy. Therefore, it was not able to take part in the 19th century colonization of Africa by the countries of Europe. As they partitioned the continent of Africa, Italy was left with Eritrea and some small and very poor colonies in East Africa. Italy's main goal, however, was the colonization of Tunisia, only a few miles from the Sicilian coast. France's conversion of Tunisia to one of their colonies infuriated Italy. Many Italians believed that because of its proximity to Sicily, Tunisia should belong to Italy. Libya was the only African territory left after the other European countries were done claiming theirs. Every important European country at the time had colonies and Italy wanted their share. Nominally under the Ottoman Turks, Libya's proximity to Italy made it an ideal colony for them. Around the turn of the century, Italy began to expand its trade with Libya. They also began a diplomatic crusade with the other nations of Europe to gain acceptance of Italy's claim to Libya. In September 1911, Italy created a crisis claiming that the Ottoman Turks were supplying arms to the Arabs demanding the right to occupy Libya. Hearing no response from the Turks, Italy demanded the right to protect Italian citizens in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica provinces and declared war on the Ottoman Turks. Since the Ottomans were fully engaged in a war in the Balkans, they ceded Libya to Italy.

After Mussolini and the Fascists grabbed power in Italy in October 1922, they first condemned Italian expansion into Libya. After the Treaty of Lausanne of 1922, which effectively spelled the end to the Ottoman Empire, Mussolini ordered troops to occupy the Sanusi territory near Benghazi. This sparked a war with the resistance movements within Libya. The conflict continued with no resolution until 1929, when Mussolini placed Rodolfo Graziani in charge of the effort. Graziani stepped up the campaign against the resistance lead by Omar Mukhtar, destroying wells and killing livestock. He conducted search-and-destroy missions and targeted the Bedouin tribes. Graziani built a barbed wire fence at the Egyptian border and used armored cars and airplanes to patrol it. Anyone discovered along the fence was attacked. Against the superior Italian forces, Mukhtar was captured in 1931, sentenced to death and hanged. 20,000 Arabs were forced to watch his execution. This ended the resistance against Italy. By 1934, Libya was completely under the control of Italy. A new governor, Italo Balbo began integration between the Italians and the Libyans. Mussolini visited Libya in March 1937. By 1939, Italy passed a law that permitted Libyan Arabs to join the Italian Fascist Party. Libyan military units were formed that year and integrated into the Italian army. Mussolini accelerated the colonization of Libya, increasing the number of Italians from 30,000 to over 100,000. They were given lands in Tripolitania and in Cyrenaica. By 1940, Libya was well under way to becoming fully integrated into the Italian sphere of influence. This provided distinct advantages to Mussolini's Italy.

Advantages to Italy

Many in Italy dreamed of re-creating the province of the Roman Empire. Mussolini wanted these former possessions under the control of Italy once again. A strong nationalist movement spread across Italy, beginning in the 1900s, and culminating when Mussolini came to power.

The nationalists, calling themselves irredentists, called for the expansion of the Italian Empire. The idea of a new Roman Empire began with the areas adjacent to Italy and spread to include Tunisia and Libya. The Italian press wrote about the old Roman Empire, further fueling the cries for expanding Italy's territory. In *Italian Colonial Policy in North Africa*, Schanzer described the government position:

Italy knows her duty as a colonizing power, the duty of endeavoring to reconcile the supreme necessity of colonization with the vital needs of the indigenous populations, and of limiting the use of force and coercion to absolute necessity...the Italy of today wishes to develop her African possession for the benefit not only of the home-land but also of the subject populations and of humanity as a whole.

They suggested that Tunisia and Libya rightfully belonged to Italy. Mussolini's desired to make Libya an example of Italian expansion and colonization. Mussolini believed the large investments in Libya would make it the bread basket of the Italian empire, much as it was during the Roman Empire. This would prove to the world that his grand worked. Mussolini referred to Libya as the "Fourth Shore." The term implied that the Italian colonization of Libya would add to and become a partner of Italy's other three shores - Sicilia, the Tyrrhenian and the Adriatic. Libya was to be Italy's jewel in this new empire. Mussolini's plan was to create a viable infrastructure that would guarantee Italy's security and make it a power in the region equal to Spain and France.

The increase of trade and tourism were other reasons for Italy's colonization of Libya. Located in Northern Africa and bordering the Mediterranean Sea, Libya had large ports that traded with Europe, India and the countries along the Mediterranean. The recently completed Suez Canal made trade more efficient. The Mussolini government made large investments in the Libyan economy and in transportation. These investments included the improvement of roads, railways and port facilities. These improvements made it cheaper to get goods to market. Additionally, improvements in irrigation improved the crop yields. A majority of the land was used for growing olives, wheat and grapes. The Libyan Colonization Society, an Italian state corporation, managed and encouraged the establishment of olive orchards. Italian investments in raw material extraction were a further benefit to the Italian war economy. Government plans for the development of Libya mirrored those of the towns built across Italy in the 1930s. Mussolini regarded the settlements in Libya as solutions to Italy's poverty through economic development. Mussolini praised the positive effects the Italian settlers had on the hygiene and modernization of the Libyan people. Through the promotion of economic activity, the government was building a labor force that would contribute to Italy's economy. Tourists were encouraged to visit Libya. The tourist system reached a high level as a result of the modernization program of Italo Balbo, Libya's governor. The construction of roads and public services helped create a well-organized and efficient tourism system.

A third reason for Italy's colonization of Libya was the formation of colonies where native Italians could move and reduce the overpopulation and unemployment in the south of Italy. Mussolini planned to turn Libya into a political and ethnic extension of Italy. In 1938,

immigration was accelerated and Italians began settling in Tripoli and Benghazi on the Libyan coast. Libya was officially integrated into the Italian government structure on January 9, 1939. In October 1938, Italo Balbo organized the first large movement of people from the Italian peninsula to Libya. 20,000 colonists called the Ventimilli were part of the huge convoy. More colonists were soon to follow. By 1940, the government claimed that over 110,000 Italians had migrated to Libya. This represented about 15 percent of the population of the country. Mussolini's goal was to populate Libya with 500,000 Italians by the 1960s. In the 1930s, Italy had a large peasant population. The prospect of owning land was very attractive to the poor of southern Italy. The new settlers were given the land most suitable for agriculture. The new farmers cultivated their new plots that had been part of the desert for centuries. In addition, twenty six separate villages were developed for the farmers to occupy. Mussolini's idea was to transform the Libyan land into an ideal Fascist way of life. These villages would also prove to the world that Italy's fascist programs were successful. The settlers that were chosen to migrate to Libya were carefully selected so that they would fit the mold of Mussolini's Fascism. They had to have a peasant background and be capable of working the land.

Disadvantages to Italy

The Italian colonization in Libya offered a few Italians new opportunities, but for the majority, both in the colony and at home, Libya was always a tremendous economic burden.

Due to the very difficult conditions and obstacles to agriculture, the successful undertakings during the early periods of colonization were supported with large land grants and funded with private investment. The continued success of Libyan colonization depended on a large and prolonged investment that Italy found difficult to afford. Italy was expanding and attempting to build a new empire. These funds could have been used elsewhere towards that effort. Italy's total colonization budget for 1937-1938, for example, totaled about 12.5 percent of the total government budget. In *Italo Balbo and the Colonization of Libya* Claudio Segre writes:

The colonies contributed only a small fraction, usually about one-third. The rest had to be made up through special taxes levied at home and through a steadily declining standard of living for the majority of Italians. Balbo must have been well aware of the enormous expenditure in Libya because his technical advisers were always concerned with explaining the spiraling costs of the projects. As they frankly admitted in one report, 'Such high costs may raise doubts about the advisability of carrying out the programs. However, the report argued, the costs had to be seen in perspective; in part they were high because the Italians were starting with nothing.

Another problem for the Mussolini government was issue of property ownership by the new Italian settlers. Gary Fowler describes this problem in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*:

Although Italians proclaimed that peasant agricultural colonization heralded a new era in African development, the settlements faced serious problems. First, the length of the initial stages of tenancy could not be regulated by law. The colonists were destitute and generally ignorant of the capabilities of their new land, yet the contracts obligated them to purchase the farms according to a set price in a given time with products from a prescribed land use system. Second, plans assumed that the land in each settlement

was uniform in quality. This was unrealistic, as variations in farm productivity soon were apparent. Finally, the company monopoly on marketing restricted the colonists' access to a local market which, because of the war, was lucrative. The state's objective was to secure the settlement of Italian peasant proprietors at any cost. But the families faced the possibility that they might be in perpetual salaried labor.

An additional disadvantage for Italy of the colonization of Libya was the way the Italians occupation was viewed by the Libyan people. This view caused resistance and problems for the Italian colonization of Libya from years. While Italy and Mussolini dreamed of returning to the days of the Roman Empire, where North Africa was in the sphere of influence of Italy, the Libyan people did not see it that way. Resistance to Italian occupation would continue from 1911, through Mussolini's rise to power, until 1932. Libyan resistance was especially strong in the Cyrenaica area of Libya. The Italian occupiers were frustrated by the resistance and deported many resistance leaders and several thousand followers to Italy. The whole population of Cyrenaica's Jabal region was sent to Italy. The Italians could not understand why the Libyans resisted their occupation, so in the late 1920s they forced anyone who supported the resistance into concentration camps. By early 1921, the Italian governor in Tripolitania had lost patience with the Libyans and attacked Libyan towns. In March 1922, negotiations broke off with Libyan leaders after the national Reform Association refused to discuss the regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica separately. It was obvious to all that conflict would follow. Between 1930 and 1933, the Italians opened sixteen camps in the Cyrenaica area. Approximately half of the population of eastern Libya, about 100,000 people, was taken to the camps. In 1931, the Mussolini government built over 160 miles of barbed wire fence along the border with Egypt in order to stem the flow of supplies to the resistance. Most of camp inhabitants were farmers and herders who lost their animals as a result of internment. Forty percent of the Libyans taken to the camps died. While the Italians believed they were doing what was necessary to control resistance to colonization, they created hatred by the Libyans and tied up Italian forces and resources for twenty years. The Fascist government of Benito Mussolini could have used those precious forces and resources elsewhere as it expanded and attempted to create a new empire.

Advantages to Libya

Italy's colonization of Libya created some advantages for Libya and some disadvantages. Modern medical care was brought to the country for the first time and improved sanitation in its towns. The agricultural sector saw a boom and its economy and building construction increased significantly. In his paper for the General Staff War Office, Howard Christie wrote:

The Italians started many and varied businesses in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. These included an explosives factory, railway workshops, Fiat Motor works, various food processing plants, electrical engineering workshops, ironworks, water plants, agricultural machinery factories, breweries, distilleries, biscuit factories, a tobacco factory, tanneries, bakeries, lime, brick and cement works, Esparto grass industry, mechanical saw mills and the Petrolibya Society. Italian investment in her colony was to take advantage of new colonists and to make it more self-sufficient.

Many Libyans were employed in these industries. Freedom for individuals, the sanctity of their homes and property and the right to employment were guaranteed to all Libyans in December 1934. They were also given the right to join civil or military organizations. The Italians build many railroads, with the last one between Tripoli and Benghazi. It was never completed due to the end of World War II.

Disadvantages to Libya

One of the disadvantages of Italian colonization was the use of Italian investments. There were made primarily to promote settlements or for the extraction of raw materials. The Arab Libyans did not benefit much from the schools that were built. They were mainly for the Italian settlers. The jobs created by Italian investment and development projects went to the higher educated Italians, since the Arabs did not receive advanced education. While Mussolini was fond of calling the Libyans "Muslim Italians," there was not much done to directly improve the living conditions of the Arabs. The Italian government's objective was to force the local population from the more fertile lands into the country's barren interior. The land that was seized was grazing lands of the Bedouin tribes. It was bought or just taken and given to the settlers. In *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy Since 1796*, Christopher Duggan writes:

From 1930 to 1931 during the Pacification 12,000 Cyrenaicans were executed and all the nomadic peoples of northern Cyrenaica were forcefully removed from the region and relocated to huge concentration camps in the Cyrenaican lowlands. Propaganda by the Fascist regime declared the camps to be oases of modern civilization that were hygienic and efficiently run - however in reality the camps had poor sanitary conditions as the camps had an average of about 20,000 Bedouins together with their camels and other animals, crowded into an area of one square kilometer. The camps held only rudimentary medical services, with the camps of Soluch and Sisi Ahmed el Magrun with an estimated 33,000 internees having only one doctor between them. Typhus and other diseases spread rapidly in the camps as the people were physically weakened by meager food rations provided to them and forced labor. By the time the camps closed in September 1933, 40,000 of the 100,000 total internees had died in the camps.

While being promised a voice in their affairs, the reality for the Libyan people was soon to be different. Helen Chapin Metz wrote in her book titled *Libya: A Country Study* the following observations:

Once pacification had been accomplished, Tripoli, Misratah, Benghazi, and Darnah-- which were formally linked as a single colony known as, thus officially, resurrecting the name that Diocletian had applied nearly 1,500 years earlier. Fezzan, designated as South Tripolitania, remained a military territory. A governor general, called the first consul after 1937, was in overall direction of the colony, assisted by the General Consultative Council, on which Arabs were represented. Traditional tribal councils, formerly sanctioned by the Italian administration, were abolished, and all local officials were thereafter appointed by the governor general. Administrative posts at all levels were held by Italians.

Life for the Libyan native was not easy under Italian occupation. They were expected to render the Fascist salute and the youth were expected to participate in Fascist youth groups. When the concentration camps were created in Cyrenaica in the early 1930s, the old or sick that could not walk to the camps were executed along the march. In an effort to dampen resistance, Libyan writers and journalists were not permitted to publish during the entire period of fighting. While Italo Balbo was pro-Jewish the laws enacted in 1938 placed the Libyan Jews below their Muslim neighbors. The Libyan Jewish population of about 22,000 was permitted to integrate into society without any problems until the arrival of the German Afrika Korps in 1941. After they arrived, the Jews were moved to concentration camps in Libya and placed under Nazi SS control.

Conclusion

Many European countries started to colonize Africa during the 1800s. Italy had unified as a nation late and believed it missed out on the drive for colonization. Italy, especially under Mussolini, believed they had several good reasons to expand. Once France had taken Tunisia, Italy looked to Libya. One principle reason for the colonization of Libya was economics. By controlling Libya, Italy gained natural resources and an ability to expand its agricultural production. Another reason for colonization was political. The Mussolini government believed that by colonizing Libya and making it a successful addition to the new Italian Empire, the powers of Europe would accept Italy as an equal partner. Mussolini believed that without territory in Africa, Italy would be perceived as inferior and other nations would take advantage of Italy. A third reason for Italy's move on Libya was to ease the burden of poverty and unemployment in southern Italy. Mussolini planned for the eventual immigration of 500,000 native Italian settlers to Libya. Perhaps the most important reason for Italy's desire to colonize Libya was nationalism. Italy saw Libya and other countries of Northern Africa as part of the old Roman Empire that rightfully belonged to Italy. By colonizing, they were just returning these countries to the empire where they belonged. Regardless of the reason for colonization, there were many advantages and disadvantages to both Italy and to Libya.

For Italy, the re-creation of the Roman Empire was a source of nationalism and pride. It was something that the nation could rally behind and was an advantage for Benito Mussolini. Mussolini also believed the investments in Libya would make it the bread basket of the new Italian empire, lessening poverty and providing more food to the nation. The increase of trade and tourism in Libya was another advantage for Italy. The migration of Italian settlers from the poor southern areas of Italy to Libya would help to minimize the poverty and unemployment in the area. Libya had large ports that traded with Europe, India and the countries along the Mediterranean. Italy improved the infrastructure of Libya, building railroads and highways to promote trade and tourism. Italy built new villages and exported Fascists ideas to Libya. Mussolini hoped the success on Italy in Libya would be a validation of Italy and his Fascist ideas. For Libya, the Italians brought modern medical care to the country for the first time and improved sanitation in its towns. The agricultural sector saw growth in its economy and building construction increased significantly. The Italians started numerous and diverse businesses in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Libyan individuals were guaranteed the sanctity of their homes and

property and the right to employment by the Italians. They were also given the right to join civil or military organizations.

A disadvantage for Italy was the cost of colonization. It presented a tremendous economic burden for the Italians at home. Taxes were raised in an effort to cover the costs. Italy's total colonization budget for 1937-1938, for example, totaled about 12.5 percent of the total government budget. While Italian settlers were promised property, ownership was complicated and tied to productivity. Many settlers wondered if they would always be salaried workers. Perhaps the greatest disadvantage for the Italians as they tried to colonize Libya was the way the Italians occupation was viewed by the Libyan people. The Libyans did not see themselves as citizens of the Roman Empire and resisted for as long as they could. Because of Libyan resistance, resources and troops were required in Libya for twenty years before it finally came under the control of the Mussolini regime. For Libya, the disadvantages of Italian colonization were many. Not only did they lose their country to a foreign nation, the investments made by the Mussolini government were made primarily to promote settlements or for the extraction of raw materials and not to the advantage of the Libyans. As the jobs that were created by the Italians required education, Libyans did not benefit much. Schools were built were mainly for the Italian settlers. The fertile lands of the Bedouin tribes and local population was seized and given to the new Italian settlers. The former Libyan land owners were forced into the country's less productive and barren interior. Men, women and children were marched to concentration camps. Those who were too sick to make it were executed. Over 40,000 Libyans died in Italian concentration camps and countless others lost their life resisting Italian occupation. Libyans, who had served on customary tribal committees, were removed and all local officials were appointed by the Italian governor general. Managerial jobs that were held by Libyans were not held by Italians.

The question of what extent did colonization of Libya have advantages for Italy during Mussolini's rule has been examined in this essay. It is clear that there were some advantages in colonization for Italy. It is also clear that there were many disadvantages for both Italy and for Libya and its people. Mussolini's vision of a new Roman Empire not only placed severe burden on the Italian economy it created adverse conditions for the Libyan people. As one compares the advantages to Italy to the disadvantages to Italy and to Libya, one can conclude that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages of the Italian colonization of Libya.

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