

11. Mussolini declared the Empire

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1. Declaration of the Empire by Mussolini

On 9 May 1936, Mussolini announced excitedly to Italy and the world the foundation of the Italian Empire from his balcony from Palazzo Venezia in Rome. His discourse was acclaimed by a big crowd in the street at 22:30 in the evening. The discourse was then transcribed, sculpted in marble and hung in Casa del Mutilato.

Giuseppe Spatrisano, the architect of Casa del Mutilato, was also the artistic director of the project, he directed and curated also the decorative part of the works. The building was conceived as an intimate and spiritual space where the celebration of sacrifice, the cult of the fallen soldiers gave to the "patria" a high religious content¹. In this perspective, all the frescoes, sculptures, inscriptions and epigraphs were placed with the aim to reflect the sacral function of the building, this function was to make the citizen identify with the soldier, this in line with the process of militarisation of the Italian society pursued by Mussolini's regime.²

Decorations are used in the building both for expressing the representative function of the building and for imposing order and canalising the attention on the most interesting and emblematic parts of the building. On the epigraphs placed at the sides of the vestibule that introduces to the sacrarium there are - as a celebration of the victorious regime - the Bulletin of the Victory of November 4th 1914, proclaimed by General Armando Diaz and, on the left side the discourse pronounced by Mussolini on 9th May 1936 for the proclamation of the Empire.³

¹ 'Giornale di Sicilia', (20 Agosto 1937), in E. Ciarmatori et al., *La Casa del Mutilato di Palermo. Progetto di restauro di un Monumento del Ventennio*, (Tesi, Università degli Studi di Ferrara, A. A. 2015/2016)

² C. Mancuso, Palermo in camicia nera. Le trasformazioni dell'identità urbana (1922-1943), in *Storia Mediterranea*, 5: 14, (2008) http://www.academia.edu/24976367/Palermo_in_camicia_nera_Le_trasformazioni_dellidentit%C3%A0_urbana_1922-1943 [accessed June 2018]

³ E. Ciarmatori et al., *La Casa del Mutilato di Palermo. Progetto di restauro di un Monumento del Ventennio*, (Tesi, Università degli Studi di Ferrara, A. A. 2015/2016)



Mussolini's discourse carved on Carrara marble stone at Casa del Mutilato entrance

1.2. The text

9 May 1936, fascist year 14

IX May MCMXXXVI-XIV

THE FOUNDATION OF THE EMPIRE

Officers, Non-commissioned Officers, Gregarious of all the armed forces of the State in Africa

and in Italy, Black Shirts of the Revolution, Italians and Italians at home and in the world, listen to the decisions that you will know in a few moments and which were acclaimed by the Great Council of Fascism, a great event takes place: the destiny of Ethiopia is sealed, today, May 9th, the fourteenth year of the Fascist Era.

All the knots were cut by our lucent swords, and the African victory remains in the history of the homeland intact and pure as the fallen and surviving Legionaries dreamed of and wanted it. Italy finally has its Empire. Fascist Empire, because it bears the signs indestructible of the will and power of the Roman lictor because this is the goal towards which during fourteen years the irrepressible and disciplined energies of the young, vigorous Italian generations were re-enacted. Empire of Peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for all and it is decided to the War only when it is forced by imperious unstoppable needs of life. Empire of civilization and humanity for all the peoples of Ethiopia. It is in the tradition of Rome, that after winning, they associated the peoples with Rome's destiny. Here is the law, oh Italians that closes an erosion of our story and opens another as an immense open door on all the possibilities of the future.

1 - The territories and people belonging to the empire of Ethiopia are placed under the full and entire sovereignty of the Kingdom of Italy.

2 - The title of Emperor of Ethiopia is taken for himself and for his successors by the King of Italy.

Officers, non-commissioned officers, Gregarious of all the armed forces of the state in Africa and in Italy, black shirts, Italian men and Italian women! The Italian people have created with their blood the Empire fertilized it with their work and defended it against anyone with their weapons. In this supreme certainty raised up, oh Legionaries, the insignia, the iron and the hearts, to greet after fifteen centuries the reappearance of the empire on the fatal hills of Rome. Will you be worthy? This voice is like a sacred oath of your commitment before God and before the people, for life and death. Black Shirts, Legionaries: Greeting to the King! Mussolini

1.3. Analysis of the text

1.3.1. Fascism and colonialism

“Italy has finally its own Empire [...] a Fascist Empire because carries the indestructible signs of the will and the power of the Roman *Littorio*”. The *fascio littorio*, in the ancient Rome was a weapon used by the *lictors* (civil servants) for protecting the Roman institutions, it was constituted of wooden sticks tightened together and it was used to punish criminals or to execute them, in this case, an axe was attached to the bundle. The name “Fascism” comes from this weapon that, in the Fascist regime, was used as a symbol of sovereignty and power over life and death. The power to make live and let die is strongly linked to the idea of imperialism and colonialism. The colonised is bearer of “bare life”⁴, his/her life does not have political connotations, he/she is a passive object that can be moved and placed in camps, in colonial laboratories where the coloniser has the power over the life and death of the colonised. Colonialism, bodies and space are tightly linked to each other as the architectural and urban plans of the colonised cities show. The number of buildings, railways, streets built in the colonies is used by propaganda to endorse the narrative of a civilizing mission for the uncivilised native, and it is still used nowadays to avoid the responsibilities of Italy in one of the most ferocious colonisations of modern times. The myth of “*Italiani brava gente*” hides a colonial trope, common to all the Imperial powers, a history of segregation, displacement, death.

“The legend of Italian colonialism as different, more tolerant, and more humane than other colonialism’ remains obstinately at large”⁵

1.3.2. ‘Empire of peace’

Mussolini’s speech continues by labelling the Empire as an “Empire of peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for everyone and decides to go to war only when it is forced by urgent and pressing life necessities”.

The idea of a threatening enemy coming from far countries is still a very effective tool of propaganda, the psychological impact of fear is strong and uncontrollable and produces an idea of knowledge that reinforces the power and interacts with it.⁶ The knowledge of the occupation of the Ethiopian Empire is linked to that kind of power and acts by creating a dominant narrative that excludes all the other existent narratives: Italy wanted to civilise the African Horn in order to gain and bring peace, the deaths of the locals and soldiers are just a collateral damage, necessary to pursue a greater purpose. The records of

⁴ G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il Potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1995)

⁵ A. Del Boca, *Italiani brava gente?* (Milano: Neri Pozza, 2005)

About the ‘italiani brava gente’ rethorics see also:

Fuller, Mia, ‘Italy’s Colonial Futures: Colonial Inertia and Postcolonial Capital in Asmara’, in *California Italian Studies*, 2:1, (2011), pp. 3-19, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mb1z7f8> [accessed June 2018]

Labanca, Nicola, ‘Colonial rule, colonial repression and war crimes in the Italian colonies’, in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9:3, (2004) pp. 300-313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571042000254737> [accessed June 2018]

⁶ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977)

the war recount a different history, made of atrocities that can hardly be seen as self-defence acts: as Dr. John Melly, who led the British Ambulance service in Ethiopia, describes: “[...] This isn’t a war – it isn’t even a slaughter – it’s the torture of tens of thousands of defenceless men, women and children, with bombs and poison gas. They’re using gas incessantly [...]”⁷.

1.3.3. ‘Empire of civilisation’

The third part of Mussolini’s speech talks about an “Empire of civilisation and humanity for all the populations of Ethiopia. This, in the Roman tradition that, after having won, used to link the populations to its own fate”.

The Ethiopian Empire was founded in 1137 in continuity with the ancient Reign of Axum, the first Christian reign in the area, that lasted from IV century B.C. to IX/X century A.D. The Reign was considered as one of the most powerful in the ancient world, along with Rome, Persia and China. The Empire of Axum coexisted with the Roman Empire and has never been a part of it.

Fascism refers to the Roman history to claim a territory that never belonged to Rome, in order to complete what the Roman Empire had started.

Nevertheless, there are fundamental differences between the Roman and the Fascist Empire: the Fascist regime refers to a completely different ideology, built upon imperialism, capitalism and the idea of race, that emerged only in the XV century. The glorious empire of Axum, never conquered by Romans, is considered by Fascism as a sort of mutilated victory to pursue at any cost. The masses of Africans to be conquered represented just an obstacle to the potentially endless expansion of the Fascist Empire.

The mutilated history and the ignored narrative of the people conquered by the Fascist regime tell a different history, the Ethiopian people claims that Ethiopia has never been colonised, this based on concrete historical facts: Ethiopia and Liberia were the only two countries that avoided the colonization started in 1882 with the British occupation of Egypt . Only between 1936 and 1941 Ethiopia was illegally annexed to the “Africa Orientale Italiana”. During this period the Ethiopian resistance was significant, “The resistance movement was based on the ideals of restoring national independence and preserving cultural identity.”⁸

Many Ethiopians raised their voice against Imperialism claiming the existence of an Ethiopian anti-colonial identity; popular songs, plays, novels, poems, articles have been sung and written before, during and after the Fascist occupation.

2. Questions on the use of the inscription

Considering these reflections on Colonialism, Fascism, Anti-colonialism and taking into account their consequences on the contemporary Italy and its relation to the countries that were part of the “Impero d’Etiopia”, some questions about the meaning of the Mussolini inscription today, need to be posed and discussed:

⁷ From a letter of Dr. John Melly, December 4th, 1936 in S. Pankhurst “Italy’s war crimes in Ethiopia” in *New Times and Ethiopia News* (April 1945)

⁸ B. Aregawi, “Revisiting resistance in Italian-occupied Ethiopia: The Patriots’ Movement (1936-1941) and the redefinition of post-war Ethiopia”, in Abbink, J. et al (eds.), *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History*, (Leiden: Brill, 2003)

- How can this inscription be a starting point for acknowledging Italian colonial history and African counter histories, in order to lay the basis for a productive debate in an anti-colonial and de-colonial perspective?

- How should we deal with this heritage represented in the Mussolini speech in Casa del Mutilato?
 - Erase it? What would be the consequences of this act?
 - Make visible the counter narratives of the colonised? How?
 - Claim the history of the “Empire” as a unified territory for claiming the right of all the people who were part of the “Impero” to occupy, re-appropriate, re-use the building?



Mussolini's discourse Source:unknown



Mussolini's discourse Source:unknown



Giornale di Sicilia, May 1936
 Source: Central Library of the Sicilian Region
 Biblioteca centrale della Regione Siciliana

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