DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 03.10.2025 | Andrea Enrici

Italy's colonial amnesia

Ninety years after its invasion of Ethiopia, Italy continues to honour the perpetrators of crimes it should instead confront

Ninety years ago, on 3 October 1935, Italian troops invaded Ethiopia, opening one of the darkest chapters in modern history. Ethiopia, uniquely independent when the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 started the European 'Scramble for Africa', suddenly faced an assault by a state determined to complete the colonial map.

The campaign was not a sideshow. It was the last large-scale European colonial conquest in Africa — a deliberate war of aggression that defied the League of Nations and shocked contemporaries. Italian planes dropped mustard gas on soldiers and civilians alike. Entire villages were bombed and burned; survivors were deported to camps. Tens of thousands died.

Yet for decades, this invasion has remained at the margins of public memory. Italians tend to recall the fall of fascism or the devastation of the Second World War, while the Ethiopian war – and earlier aggressions in Libya, Somalia and Eritrea – are still dismissed as an embarrassing footnote. It is all the more paradoxical that, just a few days before this 90th anniversary, the Italian Parliament unanimously found the time and resources to reinstate October 4 as a national holiday in honour of Saint Francis, Italy's patron saint, while near-total amnesia persists over the country's colonial past.

The myth of the 'good Italian'

A central reason lies in the enduring myth of '*italiani brava gente*' — the belief that Italians were somehow 'better' colonisers. As the historian Angelo Del Boca has shown, this narrative was cultivated from the very start of Italy's expansion in 1885. Governments and cultural institutions promoted the idea that they brought roads, railways and architecture rather than chains and massacres. For decades, textbooks framed Italy's presence in Africa as a civilising mission, while popular culture

romanticised the colonies as lands of adventure. Echoes of this narrative still linger.

But the story collapses under the weight of evidence.

The conquest of Ethiopia was meant to be Mussolini's crowning achievement: proof that a 'new Roman Empire' could be built in the 20th century. Yet Italy's imperial ambitions pre-dated fascism. Liberal governments, with full backing from the monarchy, had seized Eritrea and Somalia in the 1880s and 1890s; attempted and failed to conquer Ethiopia in 1896 at Adwa; and in 1911 invaded Ottoman Libya, carrying out mass deportations and pioneering aerial bombing of civilians. These campaigns foreshadowed the brutality of the 1935 assault.

From conquest to oppression

In 1935, Italian forces advanced from Eritrea and Italian Somaliland, deploying tanks, aircraft and chemical weapons in violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. On 5 May 1936, Marshal Pietro Badoglio entered Addis Ababa at the head of his victorious troops and proclaimed the end of hostilities — yet the war was far from over. Less than a quarter of Ethiopia's territory had been occupied, and at least 100 000 soldiers loyal to Emperor Haile Selassie remained at arms. What followed was a hidden war of resistance, largely suppressed by censorship, that lasted until February 1937. The war is estimated to have claimed the lives of around 70 000 Ethiopian soldiers and between 120 000 and 200 000 civilians.

Italian control lasted until 1941, when Ethiopian resistance, British intervention and the Second World War brought down Italian East Africa.

Even as clashes continued, Mussolini declared the creation of Italian East Africa, merging Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia into a single colony, and crowned King Vittorio Emanuele III as Emperor of Ethiopia.

Occupation was marked by systematic violence. The most infamous episode was '*Yekatit 12*', when reprisals after an assassination attempt on viceroy Rodolfo Graziani left more than 30 000 civilians dead. Villages were razed to the ground, populations deported and forced into labour on infrastructure projects under brutal conditions. Resistance was met with executions, mass imprisonment and concentration camps where thousands died from disease and starvation. Italian authorities dismantled traditional governance, imposing language and culture in a bid to eliminate Ethiopian self-rule.

Italian control lasted until 1941, when Ethiopian resistance, British intervention and the Second World War brought down Italian East Africa. Haile Selassie was restored to the throne, but the scars of occupation – physical, social and political – remained.

Silence and denial

After 1945, Italians struggled to confront fascism's crimes abroad. Successive governments found it easier to stress Italy's victimhood under Nazism than its role as a colonial aggressor. Unlike Germany, Italy never underwent a systematic reckoning with its imperial past. This amnesia also reflects a deeper issue rooted in the post-war period, when the Resistance was elevated to a founding myth of the new Republic. The heroism of some 200 000 partisans and their supporters allowed the country to reimagine fascism not as a national project, but as a tragic aberration inflicted on Italians. In this version of history, Italians emerged as victims, absolved from the complicities that sustained two decades of dictatorship — a far cry from the antifascist intellectual Piero Gobetti's indictment of fascism as 'the autobiography of the nation'. This narrative, however, left no room to acknowledge responsibilities for the crimes committed during the occupation of Ethiopia and the other colonies.

The result is striking: public commemorations of the Ethiopian invasion are minimal. When the subject surfaces, it is often accompanied by nostalgia for roads, bridges or Art Deco buildings. Public figures have even celebrated the modernist legacy of 'our architecture', reflecting an aestheticised memory that sidelines violence. The return of the Axum obelisk from Rome to Ethiopia in 2005, after decades of dispute, remains one of the few symbolic acts of acknowledgement. When it was re-erected in 2008, critics, such as then-minister Vittorio Sgarbi, opposed the restitution and, years later, even encouraged attempts to 'get it back' on grounds of alleged neglect, implying Italians would be better at preserving the monument. Apart from Italian-Libyan diplomatic reparations in 2008 – when Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi apologised 'for the suffering inflicted during the colonial period' and signed a treaty worth $5 billion in investments and compensation – Italy has never publicly reconciled with its colonial violence through state apologies or reparations. Debates exist in academia and among activists, but not at the level of official national policy.

In a political climate where PM Meloni defends

However, remembering the Ethiopian war is not just an academic exercise. It speaks directly to questions of historical responsibility and the

nationalist narratives that echo fascist talking points, Italy continues to honour the perpetrators of crimes it should instead confront.

politics of memory in Europe. While statues of imperial figures spark fierce debate across much of the Western world, Italy's colonial record is largely absent. Even the Black Lives Matter wave had limited traction beyond 2020's mass rallies. Perhaps the most visible flashpoint was the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan – defaced in 2020 over his admitted 'marriage' to a 12-year-old Eritrean girl during the colonial war – which triggered a culture-war backlash rather than a sustained reckoning; the mayor refused to remove the monument.

Acknowledging this past would also give depth to Italy's contemporary relationship with Africa. Migration, trade and development policy are all shaped by historical ties, whether recognised or not. Pretending colonial ventures were benign does nothing to build mutual respect. Ninety years after the invasion, Italy does not need rituals of guilt, but it does need clarity. In a political climate where Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni defends nationalist narratives that echo fascist talking points, Italy continues to honour the perpetrators of crimes it should instead confront. In 2012, the town of Affile inaugurated a monument to Rodolfo Graziani, the viceroy who ordered the 1937 Addis Ababa massacre, while nearby Filettino – home to the Graziani family – still hosts a public park bearing his name, renovated with regional funds as recently as 2017. Confronting the full reality of Italy's colonial past, and the violence it inflicted on others, is more urgent than ever.



Andrea Enrici

Andrea Enrici is a media and policy professional with expertise in political communication, international affairs, law and EU governance. He has an academic background in Media Studies, International Affairs and Law. Andrea previously worked as delegate for *Il Tempo della Storia - Il Novecento*, an educational project promoting contemporary history for high school students.