

**The Axis Powers and Decolonisation:  
Debating perspectives, difference, and  
entanglements of the end of empire in  
Germany, Italy and Japan**

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**Bericht von:** Giulio Salvati, Forum Transregionale Studien

For a long time, the alliance between Germany, Italy, and Japan – commonly known as the Axis Powers – has been seen as a military association defined by strictly pragmatic circumstances. Recently, these assumptions have been revised by a number of scholars who have highlighted how numerous exchanges existed among Germany, Italy, and Japan in the realms of ideology, sociopolitical projects, and imperial ambitions.

The workshop organised by Annalisa Urbano at the Forum Transregionale Studien provided a unique opportunity to build upon this emerging scholarship. While current debates tend to limit their focus to the Axis' military defeat in 1945, the workshop intended to push discussions further by testing two simple yet largely unexplored hypotheses. Firstly, connections that developed among Germany, Italy, and Japan did not fade away with military defeat in 1945 but left a legacy that can be traced in the post-1945 period. Secondly, aspects of this legacy can be understood better when set against the background of broader processes unfolding across the globe and, more specifically, against the framework of decolonization. A common legacy of all three powers is the debating of their future internationally after 1945, the territorial readjustments, and the movements of people in and out of the countries. In the last two decades, the dismantling of colonial empires has spurred burgeoning, compelling, and lively historiographic debates. Yet, works on decolonization usually focus on case studies that spanned between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s. Thus, these studies rarely included the end of Axis empires into their discussions. Bringing together eleven scholars with different regional expertise, the workshop was an important occasion to bridge

these different disciplines and historiographic traditions.

The two-day workshop comprised of an introductory address and a concluding session, two group discussions, and five thematic sections entitled „Colonial Occupation and Alliances“, „Imagining a World after the Empire“, „Post-war Reconstruction“, „Restoration and Recovery“, „Legacies and Memories“. During each session, scholars introduced different sets of scholarships that soon revealed striking commonalities across continents. As a starting point, most participants considered the various ends of the war as the beginning of decolonization. The cease-fires and peace treaties between Allies and the former Axis powers were signed at different times, yet they all contained a set of provisions aimed at ensuring post-war stability. In the process, millions of ethnic Japanese, Italians, and Germans were forcibly relocated to the mainland as they were perceived as „foreign settlers.“ The removal of these groups living outside brand-new borders became a crucial task for the new military administrators. This also meant that all war-torn societies faced the additional challenge of absorbing and integrating those former imperial subjects. This process proved to be an ongoing task that created various points of contact between politicians, diplomats, and social groups in former fascist ally countries – often-times in unexpected ways. PATRICK BERNHARD (Oslo) emphasized how the Axis was considered a source of inspiration for German veterans who awed the achievements of Italian colonialism well into the 1950s. Already as soon as the first discussions unfolded at the conference, it became evident that intertwined notions of an ethnic, political, and social decolonization structured the process of dismantling former Axis empires during and after World War II.

While the language and challenges of decolonization provided scholars with a vocabulary for exchanging historical knowledge and interpretative frameworks, the question of when and whether decolonization ended loomed large during the two-day workshop. Among other suggestions, Lori Watt proposed to understand decolonization as an „ideology of emancipation“ that could be de-

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ployed similarly by colonizers and colonized. Accordingly, it was a strategy to free oneself from a seemingly burdening relationship. At the same time, most presenters highlighted how colonialism itself remained an integral part of the post-Axis societies and post-war reconstruction. It was thus not surprising that in all three countries post-war governments immediately sought to maintain control over as many territories as possible through diplomacy and via new forms of international mandates. Legal terminology also figured prominently among discussions. While many agreed that the legal historical frameworks remained the main point of reference to frame the end of empires, it was also argued that the actual validity of these frames should always be questioned because the dismantlement of the imperial past was attempted in the social, cultural, political, and military field at different paces or not at all to this very day. Even after international treaties were sealed after the war and the empire disappeared from the public sphere, the empire continued, and still does, to shape the language and memory of colonialism.

A number of positive outcomes as well as stimulating challenges emerged during the two-day workshop. All participants agreed that looking at the end of Axis empires might help us rethink the often too simplistic chronology and pace of decolonization unfolding after the Second World War. Moreover, the workshop adopted a rather innovative spatial perspective. This not only allowed scholars to bring three different continents within the same analytical framework, it also made it possible to question categories defined by area studies or by the study of empire as well as by geographical binary divisions between metropolises and colonies. E. g., the burgeoning scholarship on the European postwar reconstruction has unintentionally reinforced the notion that after 1945 Germany had more in common with France than with its former ally Japan even if both countries faced similar challenges, such as the occupation regimes, a new political culture, and the displacement of their population. The latter points were especially emphasized by LORI WATT (St. Louis) who investigated how the United Nations handled the repatriation

of six million ethnic Japanese who returned to a war-torn Japan after the dismantlement of colonial settlements.

At the same time, the workshop proved essential to highlight several shortcomings. One of the most pressing challenges was how to develop a shared vocabulary that would help capture the process of dismantlement of Axis empires while addressing the inherent contradictions of its particularities. A number of examples illustrated these contradictions. For instance, is there a vocabulary that could better render the different layers of force and violence that unfolded during the decolonization of the fascist empires? Is there a language that better captures the actions of anti-fascist politicians who fought for maintaining control over colonies abroad or networks celebrating the colonial experience as „post-colonial empires“? The fascists developed ambitious yet imperfect imperial projects. For the discussants, addressing empire’s enduring presence after the end of the fascist regimes translated into the task of capturing continuities. In the case of Japan, SHERZOD MUMINOV (Norwich) highlighted how postwar transnational migrations across Eurasia and the Soviet Camp System represented a tangible continuation of flows of Japanese population that started with the Japanese empire. However, the Cold War made it possible to erase the empire from public discourse. In many ways, the erasure was a step towards „de-imperialization“ that helped conceal problematic memories while former elites started rewriting the Axis as DANIEL HEDINGER (ROME) pointed out. Issues related to the use and coinage of different terms also highlighted a discomfort connected with the failure of previous scholarship to properly address paradoxes embedded in the Axis colonization plans and the end of their empires.

In conclusion, the series of commonalities proves the deep ties that kept connecting the fate of the three Axis powers well beyond World War II. In the past years, scholars have started „rediscovering“ the imperial elements embedded in the Axis as forces that drove their actions. The workshop showed that this trajectory brings new questions about the end

of those imperial projects to the fore.<sup>1</sup> A challenge especially emphasized by PAMELA BALLINGER (Ann Arbor) who explored the „silent unravel“ of the colonies that, in contrast to the Algerian War, did not bring about a more conscious public debate about decolonization. As a result, ALESSANDRO PES (Cagliari) showed how in the Italian case politicians after the war still clung to a positive model of colonialism. A mindset that made it possible for the Italian state to resume a fascist project of internal colonization in 1947 to offer a solution for the displacement illustrated by GIULIO SALVATI (New York). But it also led to a multi-layered conflict presented by ANNALISA URBANO (Geneva) around the fate of Somalia where Italian Communist settlers insisted on their right to remain in the colony during the second half of the 1940s. As the workshop revealed, future exchanges will have to develop a language to address their contradictory „afterlives“ and manifold ends.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Session 1: Colonial Occupation and Alliances*

Manoela Patti (Palermo): Between Occupation and Liberation. Allied Rule of Occupied Italy: The Sicilian Case, 1943-1944

Stefan Pethke (Berlin): Muslims as Soldiers in the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS. Natural Allies or Neo-colonial Troops?

##### *Session 2: Imagining a World After the Empire*

Lori Watt (St. Louis): The United Nations, Japan and the End of Empire, 1942-1956

Patrick Bernhard (Oslo): After the Nazi Empire: Thinking About Former Axis Colonialism and Post-war Resettlements in West Germany

Group Discussion at the „Coffee House“: Problems and Advantages of Using the Concept of Decolonization to Analyse 'non-Classical' Cases

##### *Session 3: Post-war Reconstruction*

Sherzod Muminov (Norwich): Japanese Empire's Enduring Vestiges: Forced Migrations, Negotiations and the Struggle for Dominance

in Post-Imperial East Asia, 1945-1956

Alessandro Pes (Cagliari): Mobility and the Italian Decolonisation: The Italian Rimpatriati and the Colonial Question at the Origin of the Repubblica Italiana

##### *Session 4: Restoration and Recovery*

Giulio Salvati (New York): Recycling Colonial Plans and Colonists? The Aftermath of the Fascist Civilization Project in the Adriatic

Annalisa Urbano (Geneva): Poor Fascists and Good Colonialists: The Rehabilitation of Italy's Imperial Reputation After the Axis

Group Discussion at the 'Coffee House': Towards a Shared Bibliography? Old Texts and New Approaches

##### *Session 3: Legacies and Memories*

Pamela Ballinger (Ann Arbor): Italy's Long Decolonization: Repatriation, Refugees and the Remaking of Italy

Daniel Hedinger (Rome): Lost Legacies? The Axis, the Postcolonial and the Great Silence

Takuma Melber (Heidelberg): Research on the Sook Ching Massacre – its Relevance in a Comparative Perspective 75 Years After

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<sup>1</sup> Since Mark Mazower's bestseller „Hitler's Empire“ in 2008, scholars have moved to discuss more nuanced explorations on the imperial elements in the Axis countries. It does not seem such a trajectory will cease. Among the most recent book projects: Sayaka Chatani, *Nation-Empire. Ideology and Rural Youth Mobilization in Japan and Its Colonies*, Ithaca 2018; Stephen G. Gross, *Export Empire. German Soft Power in South-eastern Europe, 1890–1945*, Cambridge 2015; Roberta Pergher, *Fascist Borderlands. Nation, Empire and Italy's Settlement Program, 1922–1943*, New York 2017.