

### **Mediterranean Empires of the Interwar Period: Biopolitics, Chronopolitics, Geopolitics**

**Veranstalter:** Research Network „The Modern Mediterranean: Dynamics of a World Region 1800/2000“; Patrick Bernhard, Universität Oslo; Manuel Borutta, Universität Konstanz; Fernando Esposito, Universität Tübingen

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Over the past decade, the Mediterranean has made its comeback on the international stage – first and foremost with the current humanitarian crisis that has been costing almost 20,000 lives only in the past five years<sup>1</sup>, but also as the object of renewed scholarly attention amidst the „transnational“ and „global“ turns<sup>2</sup>. What impact did the „Wilsonian moment“ have on the modern Mediterranean and especially how distinctive were the interwar years in redefining the region? Which dynamics did the Fascist challenge set in motion from the mid-1920s onwards, and what visions of *mare nostrum* emerged from all sides of the Mediterranean?

These were some of the central questions underlining the third workshop organised by the research network „The Modern Mediterranean: Dynamics of a World Region 1800/2000“, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), the École Française de Rome and the German Historical Institute in Rome. The workshop brought together an engaging ensemble of scholars based across Europe and the U.S. A core group, including the organisers and some of the chairs/speakers, had already participated in the network's two previous workshops on the place of the Mediterranean in modern concepts of time and space (March 2018) and on Mediterranean mobilities and borders (June 2018)<sup>3</sup>.

The workshop kicked off with ROBERTA PERGHER's (Bloomington, IN) compelling keynote address, in which she presented the central theses of her 2017 monograph on fascist „Nation-Empire“ in northern Italy and Libya. Arguing that settlement policies were pivotal to exert sovereignty, Pergher illus-

trated how fascist biopolitics were paramount to realising the regime's geopolitical strategy of an Italian racial majority. This related to a „particular interwar moment“, animated by a broad push to redefine the understanding of nations and empires, in which the fascists willingly used the language of the nation even in a clearly imperial context.

On the second day, the organisers sketched out the practical and conceptual frameworks of the workshop. Manuel Borutta underlined the network's main aim, namely to overcome the pre-modern dominance in Mediterranean studies and bring together the currently rather fragmented research on the modern Mediterranean, as well as provide a tool to promote young scholars and connect German institutes across the area. Patrick Bernhard and Fernando Esposito illustrated its conceptual framework. Defining the interwar years as a „crucial and paradoxical moment“, they argued that after WWI the Mediterranean was „reinvented“, i. e. moved from the margins back to the centre of political, scholarly and artistic attention. They then highlighted three major aspects that in their view defined the so-called Mediterranean empires: 1) their biopolitics – linking politics to the biological elements of population; 2) their chronopolitics – the implementation of „characteristic images of history and temporal order“ for political means; 3) their geopolitics, i. e. a biological understanding of geography according to which states were viewed as organisms, in need of „living space“.

The first section, revolving around the aforementioned concepts and chaired by Nora Lafi (Berlin), was opened by PATRICK

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<sup>1</sup>For the latest UNHCR updates see <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean> (19.6.2019)

<sup>2</sup>For an English-language overview of the concept since the 18th century see Martin Baumeister, 'The Return of Ulysses. Varieties of the „New Mediterranean“ between Mediterraneanism and Southern Thought', in Achim Lichtenberger, Constance von Rüden (eds.), *Multiple Mediterranean Realities. Current Approaches to Spaces, Resources and Connectivities* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2015), pp. 259-271; see also Manuel Borutta and Fabian Lemmes, 'Die Wiederkehr des Mittelmeerraumes: Stand und Perspektiven der neuhistorischen Mediterranistik', in *Neue Politische Literatur* 58 (3, 2013), pp. 389-420.

<sup>3</sup>For an overview of events and research projects see: <https://modernmediterranean.net/> (20.6.2019).

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BERNHARD (Oslo), whose work on fascist settlement policies aims at an innovative reassessment of the „Desert war“ and imperial biopolitics. Arguing that the latter constituted an international sensation, Bernhard outlined rhetorical responses to fascist re-settlement plans and experimentation in racial demographics at global level – first and foremost from a British and Commonwealth as well as a German vantage point. Further research will hopefully shed light on what exactly constituted a „fascist war“ and what actual transfers took place on the ground.

FERNANDO ESPOSITO (Tübingen) applied the concept of chronopolitics to the notion of *mare nostrum* in order to show how envisioning the fascist Mediterranean empire as a renewed Roman *mare nostrum* was decisive for its legitimisation through history. Esposito argued that not only religion and race but also temporality and history became crucial for the palingenetic renewal of Italian society and as a means of distinguishing „between civilizers and those that had to be civilized“. How this would lead to an innovative historicisation of the much-studied myth of the *romanità* will hopefully follow.

Finally, MANUEL BORUTTA (Konstanz) provided an eloquent analysis of the *longue durée* circulation of transnational geopolitical visions of the Mediterranean since the 1830s. In his examination of French responses to the fascist challenge over the *quarta sponda*, Borutta interpreted fascist Italy as a „game changer“ which during the 1930s prompted French intellectuals to redefine their understanding of the „liquid continent“. What bearings this had on the way the Mediterranean was experienced and managed by the French civil and military administration, settlers' communities and common citizens remains to be drawn.

The second section, chaired by Fabian Lemmes (Bochum), focused on contested islands. DEBORAH PACI (Venezia) illustrated the findings of her 2015 book on fascist ambitions over Corsica and Malta. The paper provided a traditional analysis of how geopolitical discourses made their way into the public sphere in order to reiterate how fascist policies often found their fullest expression at rhetorical level but did not translate into prac-

tical plans. Cross-referencing existing source material with local Maltese, Corsican, British and/or French responses would be particularly beneficial here.

ANDREAS GUIDI (Paris) provided a stimulating overview of his soon-to-be-published monograph, which aims at bringing the agency of islanders back at the centre of its examination of fascist-ruled Rhodes. Focusing on how colonialism and fascism operated in post-Ottoman multi-confessional settings, he highlighted how the regime change resulted in broader cross-confessional social transformations that converged into the issue of „youth“ and particularly of their evolving political identification with „exogenous“ movements – such as Greek irredentism, Zionism and Kemalism.

In his wide-ranging keynote, MARTIN THOMAS (Exeter) tackled the question of confrontation and co-imperialism in the French and British Mediterranean empires at the end of WWI. Interpreting biopolitics as intrinsic to imperial practices, he defined the interwar period as a distinctive „violent peace time“ but warned from interpreting it as a definite watershed by stressing that decolonising tendencies were much more visceral than the „Wilsonian moment“. Contesting the notion that when it came to European colonialism co-operation was more often than not the norm, Thomas argued that co-operation still tended to prevail in terms of British and French administrative organisations.

The third section on mutual perspectives, chaired by Esther Möller (Mainz), was kicked off to a very good start by FABRICE JESNÉ (Rome) who examined the role of fascist imperial agents within the French (and British) imperial projects. The Lebanese case well highlighted two of the workshop's central themes, namely how discourses of the past varied greatly depending both on their political expediency and the local context, constantly evolving between centre and periphery, as well as how citizenship was constructed during the transitioning from imperial frameworks to nation-states in what these historical actors conceived as a „contact zone“ between Western civilisation and the Arabic-Muslim „barren world“.

JACOPO PILI (Leeds) illustrated a section

of his nearly completed doctoral thesis, in which he argues that Italian-British rivalry over *mare nostrum* in the 1930s originated from WWI anti-British tropes. From the late 1930s onwards, this was accompanied by an increasingly racist treatment of the British, designed not only to achieve their total dehumanisation but also as an undercover critique of Italy's German allies. It would now be helpful to determine to which extent an imperial discourse had already emerged in the 1920s and how the broader historical context influenced its development<sup>4</sup>.

The panel ended with a thought-provoking paper by ARIE M. DUBNOV (Washington, DC), which analysed the emergence of an interwar Zionist Mediterranean cultural project and the growing fascination with fascist visions of a Mediterranean empire. Explaining how the use of mythological allusions to the Roman past for the construction of a modern Zionist „Iudea“ was first and foremost pragmatic, Dubnov urged not to overstate the role of the Mediterranean, highlighting the geographical – as well as political – fluidity of exchanges and models.

The fourth section, chaired by Jasmin Daam (Kassel), examined religious missions and their ambivalent role as either backers or critics of empire. As STEFAN PREISS (Konstanz) already made clear, missionaries rarely ascribed to such a binary attitude but rather adopted a range of strategies that shifted significantly over time. This was the case of the White Fathers and Sisters, whose aim of reconverting ancient Roman (and Christian) land arguably provided an example of colonial chronopolitics, with ancient Rome as central reference for French Christian imperialism.

ANNALaura TURIANO (Rome) added further complexity to this picture with a nuanced reassessment of the role played by the Salesian schools in trans-imperial contexts such as interwar Egypt. She highlighted how the schools became spaces where multiple negotiations took place, rather than „bastions of Italianness“. While the interwar period witnessed the strengthening of ties between political ambitions and religious aspirations, missionaries still adopted multi-layered and multilingual strategies on the ground that al-

lowed them to take distance from imperial ideals and practices.

In her lively paper on British and French missionaries in interwar Palestine, KARÈNE SANCHEZ (Rome) underlined how the workshop prompted her to engage with the Mediterranean paradigm for the first time. Tracing the presence of a „Catholic sphere“ in her sources, Sanchez argued that rather than focusing on how missionaries resisted colonial rule, what was crucial was the way they presented themselves as the only experts with the knowledge to avoid conflict and the implications that this had on their alliances with their governments.

In a very engaging and productive final discussion, participants debated to which extent the interwar period constituted a watershed moment, the soundness of the Mediterranean paradigm and the utility of the biopolitics-chronopolitics-geopolitics framework. Several contributors found focusing on the interwar period helpful and stressed how the co-existence of empires that were nation-states and vice versa might be considered distinctive (Preis). Others warned against strong terms such as „re-invention“, not only because of the crucial continuities that emerged in imperial frameworks – particularly since the opening of the Mediterranean in the 1830s according to Malte Fuhrmann (Berlin) – but also because such clear-cut caesuras made little sense in the North African and Middle Eastern contexts (Daam).

This in turn linked to the issue of the Mediterranean paradigm, used rather unevenly and mostly as a relational term (Guidi), and the bigger question of whether it makes sense to speak of the Mediterranean as a whole (Pergher), especially considering the stark differences in how the Mediterranean was conceived and experienced from all of its shores. This was the core of the most perceptive contributions, which stressed the continuing absence of the „perspective of the colonised“ and how the asymmetry and violence of colonial relations since the 19th century needed to figure much more strongly

<sup>4</sup> As in the case of Mussolini's promise to 'blow up the English, Asian, African empire', made at a crucial moment of the peace treaty negotiations of spring 1919, see (Benito Mussolini), 'Idee e Affari', in *Popolo d'Italia*, 20 April 1919.

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(Lafi) as well as the necessity of bringing in a global perspective to avoid overstressing the role of the Mediterranean or falling back into traditional Eurocentric methodologies. Finally, having a clearly defined analytical framework was generally viewed as refreshing (Dubnow), but it needed further conceptualisation (Sanchez), especially since chronopolitics was often used in rather vague terms, and geopolitics differed from the others as a *Quellenbegriff* (Lemmes). Furthermore, it was questioned whether other categories such as race, modernity and territory might have served the purpose just as well (Guidi).

All in all, the workshop's highly commendable aim of connecting recent scholarship on fascism with an inspiring „Mediterranean turn“ through a sound conceptual framework, combined with compelling empirical studies in the social, cultural and intellectual history of the Mediterranean, seems to have succeeded, if only in putting the transnational history of the Fascist *mare nostrum* firmly back at the centre of current research agendas. Future research will have to enquire into the viability of the Mediterranean paradigm from all sides of the Mediterranean by lending it additional empirical and methodological grounding – especially as the concept itself was often not present in the sources, and, whilst utterly compelling, its history of ideas would benefit from further examination of historical actors, social movements, and colonial practices on the ground as well as innovative source analysis such as cartography – and by strengthening its grasp beyond the European shores.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Keynote speech*

Roberta Pergher (Bloomington, IN): Reimagining Empire in a World of Nations. Italy's Expansionism in the Interwar Era

##### *Introduction*

Patrick Bernhard (Oslo) / Manuel Borutta (Konstanz) / Fernando Esposito (Tübingen)

##### *Section 1: Biopolitics, Chronopolitics, Geopolitics*

Patrick Bernhard (Oslo): Deadly Biopolitics.

Arabs, Jews and Italian Mass Violence in North Africa from a Global Perspective

Fernando Esposito (Tübingen): *Mare Nostrum*. The Chronopolitics of Fascist Empire

Manuel Borutta (Konstanz): Liquid Continent. Geopolitical Visions of the Mediterranean in the Interwar Period

##### *Section II: Contested Islands*

Deborah Paci (Venezia): The Renaissance of Imperial Geopolitics. The Irredentist Claim of Mussolini's Italy over Corsica and Malta (1922-1942)

Andreas Guidi (Paris): „Youth-as-politics“? The Italian Colonial Rule in Rhodes and the Emergence of Alternative Political Identifications

##### *Keynote speech*

Martin Thomas (Exeter): Confrontation and Co-imperialism in the French and British Mediterranean Empires after 1918

##### *Section III: Mutual Perspectives*

Fabrice Jesné (Rome): Servants of Empire in the „Others“ Empires. Italian Consuls in Lebanon during the 1930s

Jacopo Pili (Leeds): New Carthage. British Civilization, Empire and Race in the Fascist Italian Discourse

Arie M. Dubnov (Washington, DC): A Zionist *Mare Nostrum*?

##### *Section IV: Religious Missions*

Stefan Preiß (Konstanz): Catholic Mission and the Changing Tide of Colonial Rule in Algeria (1868-1930s). The Example of White Fathers and White Sisters

Annalaura Turiano (Rome): Italian Missionaries and European Imperial Rivalries in Interwar Egypt. The Salesian Schools in the Scramble for Influence

Karène Sanchez (Rome): For God and which Country? British and French Missionaries in Interwar Palestine

##### *Final discussion*

Did Empires Create the Mediterranean as We Know It?

Tagungsbericht *Mediterranean Empires of the Interwar Period: Biopolitics, Chronopolitics, Geopolitics*. 18.03.2019–20.03.2019, Rom, in: H-Soz-Kult 09.07.2019.