

Intelligence in Public Media

“Vincere!” The Italian Royal Army’s Counterinsurgency Operations in Africa, 1922–1940

Frederica Saini Fasanotti (Naval Institute Press, 2020), 202 pages, forward, photos, acknowledgements, acronyms and abbreviations, glossaries, notes, index.

Reviewed by Joseph Gartin

In October 2022, as voters elected Giorgia Meloni of the radical right Fratelli d’Italia party as prime minister, Italy also contemplated the 100th anniversary of Benito Mussolini’s fateful march on Rome. His rivals and doubters greatly underestimated him. And like Adolph Hitler to come, the table was laid for him by a disorganized and ineffectual opposition, a feckless king and timid generals, compliant bishops and businessmen, demobilized and demoralized soldiers. The list goes on. As historian David Gilmour observed in his masterful *The Pursuit of Italy*, “it was a remarkable case of collective liberal suicide.” That Mussolini set Italy on a course toward political repression, ill-chosen alliances, world war, and eventual defeat is familiar to even casual students of World War II. Less familiar, perhaps, are Italy’s two colonial conflicts in North Africa before the war: Libya (1922–31) and Ethiopia (1936–40).

Dr. Frederica Saini Fasanotti explores these fateful wars of choice in her excellent “*Vincere!*” *The Italian Royal Army’s Counterinsurgency Operations in Africa, 1922–1940*. For the intelligence practitioner or scholar who regularly encounters discussions of counterinsurgency operations in the pages of *Studies*, “*Vincere!*” (to conquer) is a slim but tightly packed book that explores the military dimensions of Italy’s arduous and fleetingly successful counterinsurgency efforts in its would-be North African colonies. Although Libya and Ethiopia differed significantly in many ways, they shared characteristics that would test Italian generals and soldiers alike: vast distances, terrain that favored the defender, complex and shifting alliances, and capable foes. Italy’s efforts ought to be as studied by counterinsurgency experts as much as well-known cases such as Kenya, Malaya, Vietnam, and, more recently, Afghanistan and Iraq. Fasanotti has made that possible after years of prodigious scholarship, combing the Italian military archives and walking the ground where battles were waged.

Rome’s strategy in both operations would be partly shaped by the army’s victory in the Italo-Turkish War

(1911–12), in which it won the Turkish provinces of Tripolitana and Cyrenaica (modern day Libya). That war featured the world’s first aerial reconnaissance mission and the first aircraft bombing (both by Italian pilots). The Italian high command was also intent on avoiding the mistakes of Italy’s costly involvement in World War I on the side of the Allied Powers. Lured by the prospect of seizing territory from a weakened Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy would see some 600,000 men killed and nearly a million wounded, many high in the mountains in desperate fighting along the border with Austria. In North Africa, Italian military planners envisioned a modernized, rapid style of warfare enabled by airpower, mobile ground formations, and limited logistics trains. Cooptation of local leaders and the construction of *perni di manovra*, small forts strung along important lines of communication, were adaptations that would be echoed in later colonial wars from Indochina to Algeria. Fasanotti notes, “territorial control required two things: the absolute safety of the garrisons and the search for weapons and insurgents using mobile columns, which would make stops in those secure outposts.” (103)

Intelligence was essential to help plan and execute counterinsurgency operations across such large territories; *L’Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI—Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Italian Somalia) alone comprised some 990,000 square kilometers, three times the size of Italy. *Regia Aeronautica* aircraft were used for reconnaissance and surveillance, border patrols, and aerial photography, again presaging technological advancements in counterinsurgencies to come. (174) Liaison with local troops provided tactical intelligence, and Italian intelligence officers compiled profiles of key leaders. (182) Over time, in both conflicts, primary responsibility for counterinsurgency operations fell increasingly to indigenous forces, again calling to mind similar strategies in Vietnam and elsewhere.

Fasanotti offers extensive notes along with helpful glossaries of Libyan and AOI terms and key players in the conflicts. Archival photographs give a flavor of the

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austere conditions facing combatants in both theaters. The publisher might have spared a few pages for maps; a single, dated map of the continent (showing Zaire, for example, which existed from 1971–97) is of no use to the reader trying to make sense of geographic demarcations of the 1920s and 1930s.

Throughout, Fasanotti reminds us that civilians paid a fearsome price in both theaters. General Guglielmo Nasi, one of Italy’s best commanders in East Africa, remarked, “It is not an army we have to defeat but an armed population which we have to submit, disarm, pacify.” (101) To that end, countless civilians in both theaters were shot, bombed, and gassed. Others were driven from their homes, robbed of crops and herds, left to the mercy of bandits, or shunted into austere camps to perish of disease and starvation. At times, “on both sides” logic intrudes. Fasanotti offers that Italians “did not distinguish themselves as diplomats and humanitarians” but “the

insurgents did not give the best account of themselves during the periods of Italian government.” (81) She repeats the argument almost verbatim 40 pages later.

On balance, though, Fasanotti makes a concise and compelling case that Italian Royal Army operations in Libya and Ethiopia ought to be included in the body of literature on counterinsurgencies. This is true even if success was hard won and short lived, even if Rome was motivated by colonial ambitions and justified by fascist ideology. As W.E.B. Dubois wrote for *Foreign Affairs* in October 1935 of the looming war in Ethiopia, “The world, or any part of it, seems unable to do anything to prevent the impending blow, the only excuse for which is that other nations have done exactly what Italy is doing.” By 1940, war in Europe was a certainty, the colonies were lost, the colonizers were left to their fates,^a and soon enough, Fasanotti ruefully concludes, “what remained of the Fascist imperial dream was only ruins.” (139)



The reviewer: Joseph Gartin is managing editor of *Studies* and a long-suffering student of Italian.

a. Pamela Bellinger offers a superb examination of Italy’s highly contested concepts of identity, citizenship, and the right of return for overseas Italians stranded at war’s end in Africa, Albania, and the Balkans, among others, in *The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Postwar Italy* (Cornell University Press, 2020).