

# From Home to Port: Italian Soldiers’ Perspectives on the Opening Stage of the Ethiopian Campaign

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“Maintaining a diary in these conditions is not an easy thing; it requires sacrifice, willpower and dedication; how many hours of sleep and rest are enclosed in these pages that contain my present life... in the end I am not a writer, nor a novelist, nor a scholar, I do what I can—that which my limited capacities allow.”  
- Elvio Cardarelli (1935)

As a cool, evening breeze rocked the bridge of his assigned troop ship, twenty-three year old Liberto Micheloni looked out on a port in motion.<sup>1</sup> Several decks below his perch scores of laborers hurried to load last-minute provisions. Several priests delivered final benedictions. A full military band marched in formation and blared a continuous stream of national hymns to raucous public applause. It was September 21, 1935, and across Naples’ central pier thousands of Italian foot soldiers, packed shoulder to shoulder, were on the move, ambling slowly, anxiously, down the quay toward a flotilla destined for the shores of Italian East Africa. They had come from across the peninsula—farmers, students, and career soldiers by trade—promised adventure and heroism on the far-flung frontiers of Italy’s colonial empire. For many, this moment was the culmination of months of travel and preparation—a long-awaited crescendo of Fascist military solidarity. For others, it was the last time they would set foot on Italian soil.

<sup>1</sup> Liberto Micheloni, *Diary of Liberto Micheloni, Dall’Italia all’Africa Orientale, 1935-1938*. MS. Archivio Diaristico Nazionale, Pistoia, Toscana, 10.



Turning from the spectacle below Micheloni directed his attention to a small sheaf of papers splayed out before him. Not yet bound, it numbered some nine pages in all. Since departing his native Pistoia several weeks prior—a provincial capital nestled in the heart of Tuscany’s rolling green hills—Micheloni had often found himself turning to these loose pages to record and reflect on his journey. Thus far, his entries comprised little more than a string of scattered observations, including notes here and there of appointments made and missed, of enlistment procedures, or of the weather. By the time of Micheloni’s arrival in Naples it was not quite a diary. Not yet. But by the end of his three-year tenure in East Africa it would comprise 168 pages, revealing in exacting detail the story of one young man swept up in the first totalitarian military campaign of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

It was nearing 8 p.m., and the sun was just beginning to sink beyond the horizon. By now Micheloni had been aboard for over two hours. He was growing impatient and restless. Putting pen to paper he began, haltingly, to write. “The wait is becoming enervating...” he trailed off, almost hesitant, before exclaiming, “I don’t understand why we have not yet set sail!”<sup>3</sup> A few moments later, as if on cue, a motor groaned to life.

At precisely 7:40 p.m., “the ship cast off from the pier, pulled by a tug-boat” into the murky waters of the Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> Deafening cheers of soldiers and citizens alike pierced the evening air. Overwhelmed by the majesty of the moment—by the sights and sounds of so many of his countrymen united in common exultancy—Micheloni turned once more to the scattered pages at hand:

The moment is exciting, indescribable; the cheering crowd waves handkerchiefs and tricolor flags, the military band plays, everyone aboard sings, all in unison, a patriotic

<sup>2</sup> For this article, I have focused my research primarily on private, posthumously published wartime diaries maintained over the seven-month duration of the Ethiopian Campaign, sourced primarily from Italy’s National Diary Archive in Pieve Santo Stefano, Tuscany (l’Archivio Diaristico Nazionale). Diaries, for my specific aims here, are uniquely valuable source materials for a number of reasons. Unlike letters, memoirs, or oral histories, a diary’s audience is typically a very limited audience. Whether merely to chronicle the passage of events, or to reflect on one’s place in them, writing a diary is both a personal and voluntary process. As this is an inherently spontaneous act of expression, so too do these resources provide special insight into the degree of ideological spontaneity that characterized each diarist’s participation in the Ethiopian campaign. Originally written and transcribed in Italian, all diary translations—unless quoted from English language secondary sources—are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Liberto Micheloni, *Diary of Liberto Micheloni, Dall’Italia all’Africa Orientale, 1935-1938*. MS. Archivio Diaristico Nazionale, Pistoia, Toscana, 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

song... as the ship moves ever further away, and our land disappears from sight, eyes grow moist.<sup>5</sup>

To Micheloni, the sheer energy and enthusiasm of the departure was a moving spectacle to behold. And yet, as was the case with many of his comrades, his catharsis was rooted in more than the pageantry playing out before him. As Mussolini would proclaim but a week and a half later—before yet another teeming throng of expectant onlookers assembled to hear Il Duce’s much-awaited declaration of war against Ethiopia—“never before as in this historical epoch has the Italian people so revealed the quality of its spirit and the power of its character.”<sup>6</sup> After decades of being relegated to a secondary position in European politics, this was, at long last, to be the beginning of Italy’s resurgence. After trying and failing to conquer Ethiopia forty years prior, this would be Italy’s redemption.<sup>7</sup> More than another display of Fascist military might, more than a parade of popular mobilization, this departure was, like the war to come, a proclamation of fascist Italian glory.

Returning to his notes, Micheloni searched for the words to articulate what he had witnessed. As a volunteer for the Ethiopian campaign Micheloni had long been drawn to the historical gravity of fascist rhetoric—its bombastic assertions of national exceptionalism and the promise of a powerful, modern Italian state rooted in the glories of Italy’s Roman and Renaissance past. After some reflection, his mind wandered to Dante. Recalling a passage from the *Purgatorio* in which

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Benito Mussolini, *Scritti E Discorsi Dal Gennaio 1934 Al 4 Novembre 1935* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1935), 218-220.

<sup>7</sup> In what would soon be rewritten as the First Italo-Ethiopian War, Italian and Ethiopian forces first clashed in December 1894 following the forced imposition of an Italian protectorate over the Kingdom of Menelik II. After more than a year of intermittent combat, hostilities concluded with the ignominious Italian surrender at Aduwa on March 1, 1896, where some 10,000 Italian soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured in what historian George W. Baer has called the “greatest military defeat incurred by any European nation at the hands of Africans in all of the nineteenth century.” George W. Baer, *The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 4. Years, even decades after the surrender, the shame of Aduwa would linger perniciously in the Italian psyche. For many Italians, even those who had had no direct participation in the conflict, the “Aduwa Complex” was an enduring source of national humiliation; a constant reminder that Italy was in some way inferior to the rest of imperial Europe. As historian Alexander de Grand writes, “memories of the defeat would be recalled [at every moment of national hesitation]... as a sign that Italy might once again buckle under pressure.” Alexander de Grand, “Mussolinis Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940,” *Contemporary European History* 13 (2004): 129. In this way, it is clear that Mussolini conceptualized the Second Italo-Ethiopian War not merely as a military conquest but as a means of cauterizing Italy’s “deep wound that would not heal.” Indeed, as Mussolini roared from his pulpit in Rome on the eve of Italy’s second invasion of its colonial neighbor, “With Ethiopia we have been patient for forty years! Now, it is time to say enough!” Benito Mussolini, “Mussolini Justifies War Against Ethiopia,” Speech, Rome, October 2, 1935.

Dante, having escaped from hell, begins his harrowing ascent to paradise, Micheloni somberly recited:

It was now the hour that turns back the longing of seafarers  
and melts their hearts, the day they have bidden dear friends  
farewell.<sup>8</sup>

Micheloni turned to the next sheet of paper. His diary was now ten pages long. After jotting down a few more thoughts, he paced pensively to the bridge from which he had first beheld the fanfare that roiled the Port of Naples. The day had been “full of emotions.”<sup>9</sup> Staring, now, into the darkness, he felt at once exhausted and full of nervous excitement. For months he had contemplated the prospect of war in the abstract; seen and felt the palpable swell of colonial fervor as it swept through Italy. Now, as his ship churned slowly, relentlessly south, Micheloni’s journey had suddenly become all too real.

He was not alone in this regard. To a large extent, Micheloni’s story is typical of the hundreds of thousands of Italian soldiers who were ferried across the Mediterranean to fight in the Ethiopian theater—young men, often the children of World War I veterans, raised with only a dim recollection of Italy as it had existed before Mussolini. Like Micheloni, most of these soldiers would remember their embarkations in almost exclusively euphoric terms and as an unvarnished triumph of fascist purpose and dynamism. Yet, for many, this level of enthusiasm was a relatively new phenomenon. Indeed, by the time they set sail for the Ethiopian frontier, I argue that most Italians had already begun a substantial emotional and ideological evolution in the weeks and months between their departure from home and their arrival at the Port of Naples. For some this was as simple as swallowing the sorrow of leaving home and embracing the virtuous pursuit of shared sacrifice. For others, it meant sincerely grappling with the pro-war fervor that had come to grip Italy and beginning to conceptualize themselves as agents of fascist conquest. This was a process that would reach its climax on the docks of Naples, but have its roots in these soldiers’ initial journey across the peninsula.

### **The Volunteers**

For volunteers like Micheloni the enlistment process was a relatively painless ordeal. Beyond constituting an act of volition, the process could occasionally be planned to minimize the resultant disruption to

<sup>8</sup> Micheloni, *Dall'Italia all'Africa Orientale*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

family life. But this was not a luxury afforded to everyone. Indeed, for the vast majority of Italians who were mobilized, news of their participation often came suddenly, like a bolt out of the blue, with the reception of a single telegram or postcard summoning them to the local recruitment station.<sup>10</sup>

Such was the case of Mario Saletti, a young telegraph operator from the Tuscan town of Montepulciano. Having submitted his enlistment papers several days prior he described his recruitment as follows: I am sitting alone in my office, thinking about my examination, my approaching departure date, when the machine activates and I receive the following telegram:

‘Extremely Urgent—Post Office of Abbadia di Montepulciano  
By order of the Colonial Ministry applicant Saletti, Mario to  
report to the Colonial Recruitment Station of Naples  
with camp bed, mattress, and blanket between October 16 and  
the first hours of Oct 17 to receive embarkation ticket  
and boarding pass STOP

- Director of Province Borgiotti.’<sup>11</sup>

The date was October 16, 1935. To make it from Montepulciano to Naples within the next twenty-four hours—a journey across more than a third of the Italian peninsula—he would have to leave immediately. Scrambling, Saletti raced home, arriving with but an hour to pack his belongings, scarf down a harried meal, and bid his loved ones farewell. For some of Saletti’s family members, still unaware of Saletti’s call to arms, the sudden news of his departure was almost too much to bear:

Mother cries, the poor thing is so good, she has worked so hard and who knows how much more she will have to work and suffer still...I must depart, we do not even have the time to say anything to one other [sic.] beyond a greeting. I leave her! For those who do not know it seems a crime, while it is a sacrifice that burns my heart and leaves a lump in my throat.<sup>12</sup>

The scene was emotional and anguished. But even amidst the frenzied turmoil of his departure—as Saletti embraced his mother for perhaps

<sup>10</sup> Historian Angelo del Boca suggests that of the “500,000 Italian troops” eventually deployed to the Ethiopian theater, “the conscripts outnumbered the volunteers by five to one.” Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War: 1935–1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 57.

<sup>11</sup> Mario Saletti, *Diary of Mario Saletti, Sono in Ufficio Soletto, 1935-1936*. MS. Archivio Diaristico Nazionale, Montepulciano, Toscana, 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

the last time—his resolve remained steady. By now he had made up his mind. He “must depart” and make a “sacrifice.” Though painful to behold, his mother’s tears would not sway him from seizing his destiny. At 2:30 p.m., after “a moment of emotional hesitation,” Saletti’s father accompanied him to the local train station.<sup>13</sup> Moments later the two embraced for a final farewell. They did not say much. They did not have to. Between them, there was an unspoken understanding that Saletti had been called to serve something greater than himself—a cause that transcended the bond between father and son. As the train pulled away, and Saletti struggled to compose himself, he took solace in the knowledge that his departure carried his father’s implicit blessing:

I think of my father, try to rally my spirit, in a desperate effort to overcome the urge to cry from the homesickness that always grips me so strongly... my father is sick, he has had a stroke, and yet he is of my opinion; he himself would have pushed me to leave, if there had been a need for it, for country, for faith.<sup>14</sup>

Separated by age and circumstance, the shared convictions of Saletti and his father were telling. What the next months and years would ask of them neither could yet know. What they did know was that in this moment of grief, uncertainty, and fear, there was also hope. Hope in the virtue of shared sacrifice, in the pursuit of national grandeur, and in the power and promise of fascist militancy.

This was, in many ways, the defining sentiment of Saletti’s fellow volunteers as they began their journey to the Port of Naples. For these soldiers, war had not torn them from their families and homes. This would be a trying ordeal, but in the words of another volunteer, Giuseppe Ghione, on the eve of his own departure, the pain of parting was also a clarifying experience:

I go home to say farewell to my family before my departure for East Africa. I spend the day in their company. Will it be perhaps my last? The moment is painful, but there are other duties that diminish this sense of separation, or at least make it less painful. Duty before all else!<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Giuseppe Ghione, *Diary of Giuseppe Ghione, Appunti della Mia Vita in Africa, 1912-1940*. MS. Archivio Diaristico Nazionale, Savigliano, Cuneo, 2.

It had not been imposed by Il Duce, nor by the need to protect their country from external aggression. Rather, war had been personally seized upon as an opportunity to do something more—to forge a more glorious future for themselves and fascist Italy on the Ethiopian frontier. Like any sacrifice, it would necessitate giving up part of the life they had known in the service of something larger than themselves.

### **Conflicted Conscripts**

For the many soldiers who conceived of their departure as a painful but worthwhile sacrifice, there were countless more—particularly those who had not volunteered to fight—that first understood their conscription in much more tenuous terms. Generally, this did not constitute dissent so much as lingering uncertainty. Reading the opening pages of most diaries from the period one gets the overwhelming sense that individuals were keenly aware of the pro-war fervor that had swept through the Italian peninsula—and of the single-minded devotion to fascist imperialism that was supposedly propelling them forward—and yet were still markedly unsure about their role in the campaign unfolding before them.

Particularly illuminating in this regard is the testimony of Manlio La Sorsa, a twenty-six-year-old medical officer from Lecce, located in the heel of the Italian boot. With a university degree in chemistry and pharmacy La Sorsa was, in many respects, a deliberate and methodical thinker. This much is made clear within the opening sentences of his diary, which begins with a stirring proclamation of purpose:

It is my intention to record in this diary the impression that I will have during my journey in Africa...This is not a pleasure trip (if that were true, I would not have come)...but a duty to fulfill, a mission to perform. I believe that Africa would never have presented itself more beautifully and full of emotions to me without the background of a war. And that's exactly why I'm going, attracted above all by the thought of living a more adventurous life.<sup>16</sup>

For La Sorsa's supposed ideological certitude, however, a closer look at the passage belies a fundamental tension in his self-analysis. On the one hand, like Saletti and Ghione, La Sorsa demonstrated a clear appreciation for the gravity of his participation in the campaign. As

<sup>16</sup> Manlio La Sorsa, *Diary of Manlio la Sorsa, Il Mio Viaggio in Africa, 1936-1937*. MS. Archivio Diaristico Nazionale, Lecce, Apulia, 1.

he wrote, his departure was fundamentally “a duty” and “a mission” in the service of fascist Italy. This would seem to suggest a somber, selfless dedication to the cause—a claim that is, nevertheless, somewhat undermined by La Sorsa’s later acknowledgement that he was “attracted above all by the thought of living a more adventurous life.” This implicit tension, between responding to a collective call to arms, and an individual thirst for adventure, was only amplified as La Sorsa continued to expound on his main sources of inspiration:

I have never had the temperament for hunting, but the fact remains that I have always immensely enjoyed the natural spectacle of dense forests inhabited by lots of ferocious animals, of vast deserts, of rivers full of crocodiles, of villages devastated by locusts, of caravans wiped out in front of some dry and abandoned oasis... no film has ever excited me as much as [the 1930 American documentary] *Africa Speaks*, and others like it.<sup>17</sup>

Suddenly, as if guiltily catching himself mid-digression, La Sorsa switched gears again, reminding himself that while certain elements of his journey may have been more thrilling than he originally allowed himself to believe, he still remained, at his core, motivated by more noble aspirations:

But as I said before this is not only a trip that I am making, but a duty, indeed a duty above all, and I am sure that I will spare nothing of myself, because the trust placed in me will never be betrayed.<sup>18</sup>

La Sorsa’s vacillation between altruism and adventurousness is notable for a number of reasons. At face value, La Sorsa’s still less-than-ironclad ideological convictions suggest that, at least at the outset of the campaign, many Italians probably understood their enlistment in considerably more banal terms than those espoused by the fascist propaganda machine. Given the evident pain and inner conflict of soldiers like Saletti and Ghione, this much is hardly contestable. What is significantly more contentious, however, is that this original uncertainty could, in turn, seem to support a more skeptical appreciation of fascist indoctrination.

Many scholars have also tended to prematurely point to precisely these kinds of testimonies—in the limited capacity that these testimonies are addressed at all—to make blanket statements about the

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

limited ideological motivations of Italian troops for the duration of the campaign. Historian Christopher Duggan provides one such example. In his own treatment of La Sorsa's testimony, Duggan speculates that "most of those who went out to Ethiopia in 1935-1936 probably viewed their time abroad in predominantly more mundane terms: as a relief from unemployment and hunger back home, and also, in many cases, as a welcome opportunity for novelty and excitement."<sup>19</sup> In this reading—widely espoused among scholars of fascism as well as in popular Italian discourse—La Sorsa's vacillation is thus primarily illustrative of a static internal disconnect that defined the experience of most Italians in Ethiopia. That is, it betrayed a disconnect between a simultaneous appreciation of the high-flown fascist idealism that should have been motivating their participation, and an awareness of the personal desires and aspirations that actually were motivating their participation.<sup>20</sup>

Still, this is not the only way of understanding La Sorsa's vacillation. Rather than an essential consequence of grappling with fundamentally incompatible sources of inspiration—in which any apparent display of fascist fealty was compromised by an equally apparent pursuit of personal aggrandizement—this vacillation can also be seen as a moment of transition and reflection. It was a first step towards finding a deeper, more fulfilling sense of purpose in the service of fascism. After all, if the Ethiopian campaign was at least partially engineered as a vehicle for fostering the fascist indoctrination of the Italian polity, moments of initial uncertainty would not only have been normal and expected, but entirely compatible with the larger ideological program of the Mussolini regime.

From this perspective, what is most striking in reading soldier testimonies from the opening phase of the Ethiopian campaign is less a prevailing mood or energy about the process of mobilization so much as a lingering lack of personal ownership over their participation in the conflict itself. This sense of existential disconnect was pervasive, though it was perhaps most immediately obvious in the diary entries of conscripts like Elvio Cardarelli—individuals who, at the outset of the campaign, often understood their calls to enlist as little more than an unwelcome imposition by distant government authorities.

<sup>19</sup> Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, 268.

<sup>20</sup> See, too, historian Richard Bosworth, who concluded his 692-page treatise on Mussolini's Italy by saying simply that "when all the huffing and puffing had been done, Italians had not become the fervent adepts and peerless warriors of a new political faith. Instead, in the best parts of their minds, they had found solace in the understanding that, under a dictatorship such as Benito Mussolini's, to endure was all." R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the Dictatorship, 1915-1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 572.

By the time Cardarelli received his enlistment orders in February of 1935 he was twenty-three years old. A native of Vignanello—a commune of some 4,000 located thirty-seven miles north of Rome—Cardarelli was the third of four children in “a family of noted butchers and grocers.”<sup>21</sup> Like many of his comrades, he had been born as the specter of the Great War was just beginning to cast its shadow over Europe. By the time his father was called to serve in the early months of 1915 Cardarelli was only three—not yet old enough to appreciate the significance of his father’s sudden departure. Yet for the next three years, his very real sense of abandonment, and the subsequent economic hardship it brought his family, would profoundly alter his understanding of the world. Indeed, in the years following his father’s return, Cardarelli is said to have voiced a frequent lament for the trauma of war, saying that if he “ever had a family he would prefer to have daughters, since one day the boys would go to war, forcing the family to suffer as he once had.”<sup>22</sup>

At 17, having completed his secondary education, Cardarelli left home for his first extended sojourn abroad. Following in the occupational tradition of his family he traveled north, to Munich, to undergo training as a professional waiter, before ultimately completing his education in Paris.<sup>23</sup> In 1932, having returned to Vignanello, Cardarelli enlisted in the army to complete his mandatory military service—institutionalized since Italy’s unification in 1861—eager to put his military obligations behind him and embrace the quiet comfort of life in his hometown. After a year and a half in the service of the *Corpo Automobilistico dell’Esercito* (Army Automobile Corps) in Florence, Cardarelli returned home for what he hoped would be the last time. He began working with his father, marrying soon thereafter.

Cardarelli looked forward to the beginnings of a happy, comfortable life, but these hopes were to be short-lived. They were upended by the delivery of a nondescript government postcard in the first weeks of February 1935:

Around 18 months after my discharge, when the course of my private life had resumed brightly and I was even beginning to think about settling down (having found my ideal woman—a good, loving girl with the best qualities) I unexpectedly received my draft card calling me to arms.

<sup>21</sup> Elvio Cardarelli, *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte: La Guerra D’Etiopia Raccontata Da Un Soldato Nel “Diario Del Mio Richiamo”* (Vetralla: Davide Ghaleb Editore, 2008), 103.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Given that for some time there had been talk of Italy setting her sights on Ethiopia... I immediately understood that my turn had come. It is therefore useless to describe the dismay that this call aroused among my loved ones. Particularly my mother, who has a limitless affection for me, could not bear the thought of my leaving so soon.<sup>24</sup>

Cardarelli tried to assure his mother that everything would be fine; that “even though [he] had to leave for Africa” he would be gone for “no more than a few months.”<sup>25</sup> He managed to see her “a little calmer.”<sup>26</sup> Yet when the time came for his departure, Cardarelli was stricken. Before boarding the train, he gripped his father in one last tearful embrace, notably devoid of the mutual convictions that characterized Saletti’s final farewell. For Cardarelli there was no sense of purpose or optimism in his departure, only a deep, seemingly all-consuming depression:

[Once aboard] I slowly made my way towards the troop quarters, seized by a sense of nostalgic sadness: I think of all the sad things in life, I think of this train that runs swiftly through the night, of my home, of my mother, of all my loved ones, of my loving wife, my God-given companion, whom I love deeply: things dear and loved, when, when I will see you again?<sup>27</sup>

Cardarelli was not alone in his anguish. Looking around after a brief stop to pick up more recruits—most of whom had only just bid their own families farewell—the shared sense of sorrow in the cabin was manifest:

The train resumes its run... I do not have time to be with my sad thoughts, my comrades are there with me, on their faces I read my own pain...we try to raise each other’s spirits, we begin with eating, we try to joke, but our voices sound fake, every so often I have to drive back the tears that start to well up. We need more liveliness, more cheerfulness, we begin to sing, I see one of my comrades in front of me weeping as he sings. I understand that everything is useless... our suffering cannot be stifled, at least for now.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 136.

Nowhere, however, was Cardarelli's sense of resignation and detachment more apparent than in the way that he conceptualized his role in the campaign unfolding before him. At least implicitly, this disengagement was obvious even in Cardarelli's original description of the circumstances surrounding his enlistment—brought about as a consequence of “Italy setting her sights on Ethiopia” rather than any personal display of nationalism—as well as his assessment of the geopolitical rationale for the Italian war effort:

The Italo-Ethiopian dispute has intensified... new incidents have arisen and Italy has made perfectly clear that she wants to take advantage of them to execute plans that have been in motion for several years. Meanwhile she recalls the class of 1912, forms new divisions, and prepares to start final training...of which I am a participant.<sup>29</sup>

Here, at the most basic level, Cardarelli's brief appraisal of Italo-Ethiopian relations belied an almost uncanny understanding of the campaign's primary political overtones. In mentioning “new incidents” in the *East African Theater*, for example, he was likely referring to the then-infamous Walwal incident which had occurred in early December 1934, in which a small number of Italian and Ethiopian forces clashed in an ambiguously defined border region between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland. By February of 1935 news of the incident had been widely broadcast throughout the peninsula. In the months following the confrontation, Mussolini had ordered the press to “blow it up into a front-line story,” featuring the incident as an act of wanton hostility so serious in nature that it could not be ignored.<sup>30</sup> Though a number of contemporary maps showed the conflict zone well within the territorial confines of the Ethiopian Empire, Mussolini was unequivocal. As he wrote to his generals shortly thereafter, “the problem of Italo-Ethiopian relations is a historic problem that must be resolved in the only manner with which these problems are always resolved: by force of arms.”<sup>31</sup>

Today it remains unclear which side fired first on those fateful December days. And yet, scholars overwhelmingly concur that the immediacy of Mussolini's response, coupled with the intensity of the regime's subsequent propaganda campaign, was primarily opportunistic, amounting to little more than a feeble bid to legitimize his otherwise longstanding colonial ambitions. After all, as noted scholar of Italian

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Boca, *The Ethiopian War*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale 2* (Roma: Laterza, 1979), 256.

colonialism Angelo Del Boca has noted, “in the history of Italian-Ethiopian [disputes] the Walwal incident was hardly the first or even most serious.”<sup>32</sup> By late 1935, “at least 51 border skirmishes had been recorded” in the preceding twelve years alone.<sup>33</sup> In this regard what is striking about Cardarelli’s testimony is that even mere months after the flare-up—thousands of miles from the conflict zone, in a society saturated with bellicose propaganda—he was seemingly well aware that the Walwal incident was nowhere near as grave or unprecedented as the Mussolini regime would have him believe. Indeed, as Cardarelli discerningly surmised, his conscription was hardly the result of a sudden, outrageous assault by a foreign invader, but a predictable consequence of “plans that [had] been in motion for several years.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Collective Self**

Similarly evident in this excerpt—and even more representative of his comrades’ attitudes—is the sense that Cardarelli still remained largely uncertain about his particular position in the Italian war effort. Indulging his clear trepidation, and even cynicism, regarding the nature of the campaign, Cardarelli suggested that his participation was ultimately due to “Italy [having] made perfectly clear that she wants to take advantage” of the present situation.<sup>35</sup> “She”—not him, or a collective polity—had recalled “the class of 1912” and set “her sights on Ethiopia.” Here, Cardarelli’s use of the third person is particularly illuminating. By removing himself from the narrative—and describing a war effort driven by distant, almost intangible forces—Cardarelli implicitly paints himself as a passive participant, swept up in a campaign driven by external, rather than collective, visions for the future of Italy.

Given Cardarelli’s self-described perception of the campaign his limited identification with fascist rhetoric is hardly surprising. Yet this sense of detachment was similarly pervasive even among many of Italy’s most enthusiastic recruits. One telling example is the testimony of Guglielmo Morlotti, a twenty-three year old radio operator from a small town nestled in the shadow of the Italian Alps. Like Cardarelli, Morlotti had already satisfied his mandatory military service by the time of his embarkation for Ethiopia. Between 1929 and 1934 Morlotti had served as a wireless operator in the *Corpo Reale Equipaggi Marittimi* (Maritime Crews Royal Corps) where he had learned the skills for

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

his later career in radio. He liked the pace and order of military life, having voluntarily elected to stay in the service for three years beyond the standard two-year tenure of Italian peacetime conscripts.<sup>36</sup> When the opportunity to enlist in the Ethiopian campaign presented itself in early 1935, Morlotti jumped at the opportunity:

After five years of voluntary service in the Royal Navy I took my leave, on September 31 of the last year. A new life, new thoughts, new duties... but the days pass swiftly and Italy desires her place in the sun, Ethiopia offends her... I decide that I too should leave as a volunteer. I leave my job, send a telegram home, and then I am off!<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to Cardarelli, Morlotti showed no comparable anguish at the prospect of an extended stint far from home. If anything, after less than a year of civilian life, he was thrilled by the opportunity of returning to his former military pursuits. Yet, just as Cardarelli framed his appraisal of the Ethiopian campaign in a way that essentially removed himself from the larger calculus of the Mussolini regime—as an almost external conflict between distant, abstract political entities—so too did Morlotti portray Italy’s desire for “a place in the sun” more as a third-party ambition than a collective cause for action.

This relative sense of detachment between self and state was only further accentuated later on, as Morlotti expounded on the geopolitical rationale for the war:

Empire! Italy must provide space, sustenance, and work for 44 million Italians. The space is insufficient, Italy must expand herself, it is necessary. A necessity of life. At Versailles they cheated us, allowing us the crumbs after having seen the allies gobble up the remains of a great banquet..., And the Italy of those times, demoralized, disorganized and tired, protested feebly (or shamefully?). But soon she awoke, she transformed herself.<sup>38</sup>

At first glance Morlotti’s testimony reads as an almost exact regurgitation of the contemporary pro-war propaganda circulating throughout the peninsula. This is particularly evident in Morlotti’s description of Italy’s purported snubbing at the post-WWI Treaty of Versailles—incidentally the only part of his description that uses the collective

<sup>36</sup> Vanda Wilcox, “Encountering Italy: Military Service and National Identity during the First World War,” *Bulletin of Italian Politics* 3, no. 2 (2011): 287. JSTOR.

<sup>37</sup> Guglielmo Morlotti, “I Diari Di Mio Padre,” *I Sentieri Della Ricerca*, no. 12 (December 2010): 225.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

pronoun “us”—which would feature prominently in Mussolini’s declaration of war on October 2, 1935:

It is not only an army that strives toward its objectives but a whole people of 44 million souls against whom an attempt is being made to consummate the blackest of injustices: that of depriving us of some small place in the sun. When in 1915 Italy exposed itself to the risks of war and joined its destiny with that of the Allies, how much praise there was for our courage and how many promises were made! But after the common victory to which Italy had made the supreme contribution of 670,000 dead, 400,000 mutilated, and a million wounded, around the hateful peace table Italy received but a few crumbs from the rich colonial booty gathered by others.<sup>39</sup>

Seen side by side, the manifest similarity between these texts is striking. Yet this apparent concurrence was hardly representative of the sincere ideological indoctrination so sought by the Mussolini regime. Indeed, while Morlotti displayed a clear mastery of the rhetoric ostensibly motivating his enlistment, a closer reading of his particular testimony—examined in the context of contemporary fascist thought—also betrays a sense of ideological disconnect that is, in many respects, broadly comparable to Cardarelli’s.

Here it bears delving deeper into the finer points of fascist doctrine. As a political ideology, fascism was fundamentally premised on the primacy of the collective, wherein the individual was to be at once subsumed within the Italian fascist state without being wholly marginalized. As Mussolini wrote in *The Doctrine of Fascism*—published in 1932 as the purported philosophical manifesto of the regime—“if the 19th century was the century of the individual...we are free to believe that this is the collective century.”<sup>40</sup> Fascism, in this regard, was to be fundamentally “anti-individualistic,” predicated on the idea that “the only liberty worth having [was] liberty of the State and of the individual within the State.”<sup>41</sup> Whereas liberalism had held personal autonomy as a cornerstone of self-governance, “Fascism reassert[ed] the rights of the State as expressing the real essence of the individual.”<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, for the overwhelming centrality of the State, Mussolini was just as emphatic that fascism was not to be defined by the blind subservience of the masses. Rather, fascism was to produce a “State

<sup>39</sup> Mussolini, *Scritti E Discorsi*, 218-220.

<sup>40</sup> Benito Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1932), 25.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

based on millions of individuals who recognize its authority, feel its action, and are ready to serve its ends...not the tyrannical State of a mediaeval lordling.”<sup>43</sup> Most critically, this meant cultivating a radically new social consciousness across the peninsula—one in which Italians would not only prioritize collective concerns over personal ambitions but come to see the state as the purest incarnation of the self. In pursuing these ends Mussolini’s ideological program depended not on the elimination of the individual but on the total and willing identification of the individual with the state. As Il Duce elaborated, “Fascism desires the state to be strong and organic, based on solid foundations of popular support... in which the individual, by self-sacrifice, by the renunciation of self-interest, by death itself, can achieve that purely spiritual existence in which his value as a man consists.”<sup>44</sup>

Here, where monarchy had been defined by passivity and subjugation, fascism was to be defined by alacrity and totalitarian ownership. In this context, Morlotti’s testimony provides an example of fascist enthusiasm nonetheless still unfounded on a sense of true, collective ownership. For instance, although Morlotti is all too eager to espouse the necessity of Italian expansion, he, like Cardarelli, refrains from making collective statements of purpose in pursuing these ends. Again, Morlotti’s use of the third person is particularly illuminating. Rather than assuming a direct stake in the coming campaign, Morlotti asserts that “Italy”—as a distant and abstract political entity—“must provide space, sustenance, and work for 44 million Italians.” Similarly, whereas “Italy” was once “demoralized, disorganized, and tired,” Morlotti states she has, seemingly of “her” own accord, since “awok[en]” and “transformed herself.” Taken in context these subtle speech patterns have important implications. Far from furthering the prevailing party line—in which the Italian fascist state was to be the ultimate expression of the collective—Morlotti instead gives the impression of a unilateral political apparatus whose trials and triumphs were largely separate from those of the Italian polity.

In this regard, perhaps even more notable is the conspicuous absence of Morlotti in his own testimony. In stating that Italy “must expand herself,” for instance, Morlotti rhetorically distances himself from his own participation in the campaign, importantly refraining from a more possessive, fascist statement like “we must expand ourselves.” Later, this passivity is similarly apparent in Morlotti’s evaluation of Italy’s resurgence under fascism, where his eventual assertion that

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 39.

“[Italy] has transformed herself” reads more like the testimony of an outside observer than that of an individual who has, ostensibly, been similarly transformed. Perhaps most significantly of all, in the sole area where Morlotti does express a deeper identification with the Italian state—in its post-WWI repudiation at the Treaty of Versailles—he is referring to its pre-fascist form. Here again this is not so different from Cardarelli. Indeed, just as Cardarelli struggled to identify with the stated motivations for the Ethiopian campaign, so too did Morlotti demonstrate a clear enthusiasm for fascist rhetoric, and yet still stop short of identifying himself, individually, as a purveyor of fascism and an agent of imperial aggrandizement.

Taken together, the testimonies of Morlotti, Cardarelli, and their comrades speak to the diversity of perspectives that underpinned the opening salvo of the Italian war effort. For some—drawn, voluntarily, by the military fervor of the Mussolini regime—the departure from home represented a painful but worthwhile sacrifice. For others, it constituted little more than an unwelcome imposition. And yet, by and large, these soldiers—in spite of their widely divergent backgrounds and expectations—shared a common uncertainty about their role in the campaign, having yet to fully take ownership for their participation in a conflict still overwhelmingly understood in the abstract terminology of the state. Here, at this juncture in the campaign, a genuine sense of collective purpose remained lacking. Yet as Italian soldiers joined together—in trains, barracks and training camps across the peninsula—this critical sense of unanimity gradually began to take form.

### **From Provincialism to Nationalism**

For many soldiers, one of the key obstacles to identifying with a collective war effort was first identifying as a common polity. This had been a central limitation of Italian governance ever since the Italian Risorgimento, famously prompting unification leader Massimo d’Azeglio to quip: “We have made Italy; now we must make Italians.”<sup>45</sup> By 1935—almost three quarters of a century later—social and cultural fissures remained a defining feature of Italian life. Though fascism had aggressively sought to mitigate these internal divisions for over a decade, historians like Paul Corner have aptly noted that, from the beginning, a cardinal shortcoming of Mussolini’s regime was that the “fascist ‘national rebirth’ of Italy faltered at the medieval gates of a

<sup>45</sup> Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect: On Making Italians 1860-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1.

hundred towns and cities as local traditions—and local interests—met up with the novelty of the national movement.”<sup>46</sup> Pulled from every corner of the peninsula, Italian soldiers were hardly immune from these cultural divisions. Indeed, for those with limited experience away from home, connecting with their new comrades could often be a trying ordeal.

Particularly at the outset of the campaign, a frequent and visceral source of alienation for many Italian diarists was the marked linguistic dissimilarities between themselves and their supposed countrymen. More often than not, this was colored by a broader sense of homesickness, as was the case with a young Tuscan recruit, Vasco Poggesi, who inwardly noted “we are all Italian... but sometimes you feel a bit lost in the Babel of dialects and you long desperately to find a friendly face and a clear and distinct voice that you can only hear in Tuscany.”<sup>47</sup> Still other diarists were even more melancholic. “I feel alone here” lamented another soldier from the southernmost region of the peninsula, “there is no one else from Calabria...they’re all from northern Italy...at night I always dream that I am home.”<sup>48</sup>

Here, Mario Saletti was but another recruit who found himself naturally gravitating towards other soldiers from his own North-Central Italy. Following his arrival in Naples, Saletti had found himself immediately overwhelmed by the rough-and-tumble energy of the city’s inhabitants. Having managed to talk down an opportunistic cab driver from an astronomical 100 lire fare to 30 lire—“not without much fatigue”<sup>49</sup>—Saletti stumbled, exhaustedly, aboard his assigned troop ship. Later, after meeting a handful of fellow soldiers, he eventually found solace in the companionship of another North-Central Italian from the region of Emilia Romagna:

The others depart, a Romagnolo and I stay and organize our selves...the superintendent in the kitchen, a Neapolitan, has naturally made a rich risotto alla Napoletana. My appetite has disappeared; I eat very little, weighed down by a feeling of general malaise...my only comfort is my Romagnolo friend, a good and strong fellow who seeks me out often.<sup>50</sup>

For as much as Saletti may have originally preferred the companion-

<sup>46</sup> Paul Corner, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini’s Italy*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, 264.

<sup>48</sup> Francesco Milano and Antonio Milano, *Un Ragazzo Calabrese Alla Conquista Dell’Impero: Lettere E Appunti per Un Diario Mai Scritto 1934-1936* (Calabria: ICSAIC, 2005), 21; 39.

<sup>49</sup> Saletti, *Sono in Ufficio Soletto*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

ship of his provincial neighbors, however, circumstance would soon force him outside his comfort zone. At times this was clearly a grating experience. Particularly in his interactions with soldiers from Naples—a city known for the boisterous vitality of its inhabitants—Saletti struggled to find common ground with his supposed countrymen.

“Last night the Neapolitans made noise until midnight,” he scribbled to himself, sour and sleep-deprived, “peppered with the usual vulgar words.”<sup>51</sup> Not one for complacency, Saletti had not laid still for long. Rising from bed and storming over to the rowdy group, he quickly singled out the loudest southerner among them:

I made him understand that if he did not stop he would run the risk of accepting a well-placed shoe to his dull face; the gesture that followed the threat had some effect, and only a few minutes later I savored perfect silence...what a shame to confuse our healthy enthusiasm with the low intellect of this rabble.<sup>52</sup>

For better or worse, however, Saletti would soon find himself in the company of numerous Neapolitans within his platoon. At first this was met with the Tuscan’s usual consternation. But slowly, gradually, Saletti began to soften his tone.

As time went on, he began to discover a shared sense of purpose and belonging with his new comrades, eventually reevaluating his previous provincialism. “Among the Neapolitans,” he begrudgingly acknowledged later, “there are a few good fellows.”<sup>53</sup> A little while on, his animosity had all but evaporated:

The Neapolitans wish me well, they pay me many compliments; they are chatters, often peppering their sentences with lewd words, but at their core they are not bad people, indeed I must say that most have a heart of gold.<sup>54</sup>

Saletti’s small story provides a telling illustration of the significant national acculturation wrought through the enlistment process. Here, although it would be an exaggeration to say that every Italian soldier underwent a change of heart as dramatic as Saletti’s, it is clear that, in its execution, the process of enlistment for the Ethiopian campaign was instrumental in beginning to build the sense of collective Italian

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 6.

identity so desired by the Mussolini regime. Beyond merely mustering a vast number of recruits, wide-scale mobilization fostered meaningful communication between previously disparate peoples across the peninsula. It forced soldiers, firsthand, to challenge dialectic markers of separation. And through this process—and these crucial confrontations—it encouraged often heterogeneous companies and conscripts to begin truly thinking of themselves as a united fighting force.

Similarly instrumental, in this regard, was many soldiers' exposure to the country they had been called to serve. For some, the journey to the port of Naples was the first time they had ever experienced Italy as it existed beyond the confines of their hometowns. Likewise, in his harried sprint from Montepulciano to Naples, Saletti was among many soldiers who expressed a curiosity with the scenery that passed his compartment window. "I want to see the countryside," he lamented privately, but that was "impossible" due to the speed of the train.<sup>55</sup> For Saletti expedience was, unfortunately, of the essence. By the time he received his recruitment papers in mid-October 1935 Italy had already been at war for two weeks. There was, quite simply, no time for tourism.

Nonetheless, this sense of urgency was not always characteristic of the enlistment process. While soldiers like Saletti were rushed from home to harbor in a matter of hours, others often meandered across the peninsula for weeks and months at a time—stopping to pick up more recruits, or staying in military camps for rudimentary training—which afforded them the opportunity to explore parts of the country they still knew only by name. This could be a mesmerizing, eye-opening experience for soldiers accustomed to the predictable rhythms of village life, as was the case with one young recruit from Calabria, Francesco Milano, in a letter he penned home from Rome in late 1934:

[Now] I am in Rome, the capital of Italy, where there are many beautiful things to see... on November 11 there will be a big parade with Il Duce in attendance, and so I will also have the honor of seeing Mussolini.<sup>56</sup>

For Milano, simply beholding the architectural grandeur of Rome left him starry-eyed. Yet he was almost beside himself once the day of the parade rolled around, when he suddenly found himself face to face with Il Duce:

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Milano, *Un Ragazzo Calabrese Alla Conquista Dell'Impero*, 22.

Today there was the big parade that lasted until noon. I tell you that I saw Mussolini three times—but I assure you right up close—who spoke with us soldiers. Before, we—that is, us soldiers—halted in a big avenue and he passed on horseback but walking very slowly and spent the parade looking us in the eye one by one in a way that seemed like he wanted to talk to us and told us “courage men”: if you could see him, with a fixed gaze and gravitas like you cannot believe, just imagine how contented I felt to see Il Duce and to have him see my face, because he looked at all of the soldiers there one by one with those eyes that went up and down in a way that see everything.<sup>57</sup>

Far from an empty display of fascist regimentation, the parade proved to be a deeply and personally affirmative experience for Milano. Having grown up in Mussolini’s Italy, Milano had been bombarded by Il Duce’s likeness for almost as long as he could remember; seen and felt the radical transformation of Italian politics under fascism; listened, intently, to Il Duce’s thunderous speeches over the radio. Now, he had looked the man in the eyes. And Mussolini, as formidable as Milano had ever dared to hope, had stared straight back. As Milano strolled the streets of Turin several weeks later—dazzled, once more, by the majesty of Italian industry and architecture—he looked out on the world with fresh enthusiasm:

I walked around Turin and it is an even more beautiful city than I thought, and there are things here that hardly exist in Rome, and then I saw many factories for motorcycles, bicycles, and other things. I also saw Fiat buildings... how many beautiful things...I like Turin a lot.<sup>58</sup>

Elvio Cardarelli was yet another soldier who expressed a quiet reverence for Italy’s former northern capital. Still stricken by his unexpected departure from home, Cardarelli was only just beginning to come to terms with his enlistment when he arrived on the streets of Turin. Yet, along with his comrades, he could not help but feel moved by the sight of the city’s many monuments to Italian nationalism:

We visit the most beautiful spots in Turin: such as [the Basilica of] Superga, which is the tomb of the members

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 27-28.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>59</sup> Cardarelli, *Dove La Vita Si Nasconde Alla Morte*, 130.

of the House of Savoy... where the most illustrious people of the royal family lie. To climb up to the basilica, since it is located on a hill, you have to make the journey by funicular ... once there you can enjoy the great spectacle of all of Turin down below.<sup>59</sup>

By the time he arrived in Naples—following a month of intermittent travel and training outside Turin—Cardarelli was feeling noticeably more optimistic. By now he had grown close with several other soldiers. Thoughts of home, increasingly, did not evoke the visceral pain they once did. Resolving to make the most of the two days before his departure, he gathered a few friends for a trip into the city:

We all agree to go out in the morning, and return in the evening. We have a camera with us that will serve marvelously to record a few memories, and without further discussion, we go out like tourists.<sup>60</sup>

As Cardarelli later mused in his diary, “the days passed rather well.”<sup>61</sup> Accompanied by his fellow soldiers, Cardarelli “visited most of the city, took photographs...and even took a dip” in the Mediterranean.<sup>62</sup>

For all of its apparent leisure, however, this was more than a simple pleasure trip. Rather, for a soldier pulled into war against his will—in service to a cause he did not yet identify as his own—Cardarelli’s cautious enthusiasm was representative of a much larger personal shift weeks in the making: one that had not only expanded his engagement with Italy’s national heritage, but significantly altered his appreciation of the country’s colonial ambitions. This would be all too apparent two days later, as Cardarelli surveyed the teeming crowd assembled to wish him well on his way across the Mediterranean:

The spectacle is beautiful: songs and music. The little ladies of the Red Cross distribute flowers and smiles, as well as two children that climb secretly aboard, who hand out writing paper and tissues ... the troops begin to board: the balilla and young fascists offer their handkerchiefs, the students imitate them offering badges that they have on their caps, patriotic songs are sung. And in the air an infinite sense of brotherhood and Italian spirit.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 137.

Cardarelli was not the only soldier with a renewed sense of camaraderie and national pride. Indeed, regardless of their backgrounds—or the myriad motivations behind their enlistment—soldiers would almost unanimously describe their embarkation in the same florid language, seemingly overwhelmed by the patriotic fervor that suddenly gripped them so deeply.

Here, Manlio la Sorsa was one of many soldiers who turned to his diary to wax eloquent about the majesty of the moment. Once visibly torn between the pursuit of selflessness and self-interest, he now marveled, above all, at the all-consuming collective ardor of his comrades and countrymen:

Finally, after witnessing many hugs and tears, many sad scenes, and also many hearty farewells, our steamer (Sardinia) packed full of men (more than three thousand between workers and soldiers), lifts anchor and heads slowly towards its distant destination. The spectacle is beautiful and evocative. Several hundred people are on the docks that wave hundreds of multicolored handkerchiefs, many (often the women) cry, others yell out the names of their loved ones, others sing, while a band plays patriotic songs. The morale of our troops is extremely high and worthy of the moment.<sup>64</sup>

The sheer energy of the departure was infectious; feverish. Yet perhaps even more telling than the manifest enthusiasm of many of these soldiers was their clear sense of catharsis—of having not only beheld the awe-inspiring might of Italian fascism, but having found, individually, a renewed sense of duty and pride in the service of something larger than themselves.

For some, like Guglielmo Morlotti, this was a profound moment of transition. Having once conceived of the Ethiopian campaign as a distant and abstract confrontation of political entities, Morlotti now looked inward. As his troop ship slowly pulled away from the Italian coast—seemingly propelled by the forceful cheers of the assembled crowd below—he turned to his diary to reflect on the significance of this next chapter of his life:

We leave the last strip of Italy behind. I feel no inner turmoil,

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>64</sup> La Sorsa, *Il Mio Viaggio in Africa*, 7-8.

no tears, but smiles. I will be moved when I see her again upon my return, beautiful, more powerful than before. I will be happier when I retrace this land because I will feel, above all, more worthy.<sup>65</sup>

One month later, as Mario Saletti continued his own journey across the Mediterranean, he would voice a similar sense of purpose and independence. “Only those who have left their country,” he mused to himself, “can understand the enthusiasm and emotion of these moments.”<sup>66</sup>

Looking up, Saletti stared out over the watery expanse that seemed to spread in every direction. Since leaving Naples several days prior, he had felt the air grow gradually, perceptibly warmer. Soon, they would make berth at Port Saïd at the mouth of the Suez Canal. “I realize that this is where the hard, difficult life will begin,”<sup>67</sup> Saletti scribbled in his diary, mentally steeling himself for the months ahead.

He put pen to paper once more.  
“But I will not lose my spirit.”<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article I analyzed the journey of Italy’s soldiers from home to the port of embarkation. Far from a united and uniform fighting force, I showed that Italian soldiers originally conceived of their enlistment in strikingly divergent terms. At the outset of the campaign some were clearly reluctant, suspicious recruits. Others, meanwhile, were broadly enthusiastic about the adventure and adversity that lay ahead. But all—to some degree or another—had yet to take firm personal ownership of the campaign they had been called to serve. Nonetheless, over the course of these soldiers’ journeys south, their first engagements with the country and countrymen that existed beyond the domains of their provincial homes ultimately yielded a crucial measure of national solidarity by the time of their embarkation for the Ethiopian front.

<sup>65</sup> Morlotti, “Il Diari di Mio Padre,” 226.

<sup>66</sup> Saletti, *Sono in Ufficio Soletto*, 2.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

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