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Cut-Throat: Italian Fascist Colonialism According to Razor Blades

Diana Garvin

Diana Garvin argues that tracing the historical trajectories of mundane everyday objects can pose fundamental questions about the past. She shows how a box of razor blades—distributed in the 1930s to Italian colonial soldiers in East Africa, made of Italian steel that helped fund this colonialism, and in boxes decorated with imperial propaganda about an Italian 'civilizing mission'—prompt reflections on the ways in which Mussolini's regime sought to permeate everyday life with its ideology, as well as on the sensory experience of being a soldier under Fascism. It is suggested that these often hard-to-find material remnants of everyday life are valuable not only for what they can tell us about the past, but also for how they change the way we think about the past and how they enable us 'to tell the truth in a way that people can remember'.

Source 17: Adua razor blades. Steel. Box 3cm by 1.5cm. Accession number: ETHI XC 2014.12.12.23.1-3. Published with the permission of The Wolfsonian—Florida International University (Miami, Florida). © The Wolfsonian.

Commentary

Italy's imperial archive is an overstuffed filing cabinet, packed with government memos, speeches, newspaper clippings and receipts. Paper records tracked the daily workings of government and legislature, the public realm. But it is frustrating how little these documents manage to capture in terms of the sensory details and the felt experiences of private life in Italy's East African colonies. In October 1935, Benito Mussolini's Fascist troops invaded Ethiopia. Research into military history has proved the Italian occupation to be brutal, including violations of international law like the use of poison gas and expanding bullets, aka 'dum dum bullets' (which violated the Hague Convention of 1899 and Geneva Protocol of 1925). Less is known about how the Fascist regime shaped everyday life in Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana, AOI).

Why has there been less research on this front? First, there are many more government records than there are household objects, because memos were understood as important within their own time, and were saved in repositories that are available today. Many household objects, like bars of soap, were meant to be consumed through use. Second, memos are much easier for historians to find, and to work with. They include names, dates, places and provenance. They are easily found in major archives in capital cities. Good luck tracking down the contents of a Fascist-period cupboard or closet, much less one containing objects from the East African empire. They are typically found in tiny, regional museums, accessible by the 5am bus that departs from Arezzo on alternate Tuesdays.

But these museums are worth the trek. Their collections of everyday objects speak to a kind of history that government memos cannot. They lend themselves to the kind of anecdotes that people remember, and repeat to others. Journalists often caution one another to avoid statistics when trying to convey the horror of war. Focus instead, they say, on the details: the bloody sock, lying abandoned in a field. If historical writing should aim for something, I think it is this: to tell the truth in a way that people can remember.

To understand the total impact of the Fascist regime in the colonies, I want to open the doors to bathrooms, bedrooms, kitchens and nurseries. The five senses—taste, touch, sight, smell and sound—centre human experiences. They form our memories, writing history in lime-scented soap, nicked necks and dull blades.[1] Objects like pocket mirrors, wallet calendars and razor blades act as scripts that prompted actions like looking, planning, caressing and shaving. These razors, which the Fascist state gave to Italian military recruits during deployment in colonial East Africa, are part of what anthropologist Ann Stoler called the ‘colonial intimate’.[2] Steel blades prompt questions about how soldiers interacted with the relationship between war, race and personal hygiene through small, everyday objects, holding enormous questions in the palms of their hands.

Objects like these razors can prompt actions. They can evoke answers to questions concerning everyday life in the colonial barracks by illustrating the options available. How was shaving in the army barracks in the colonies different from shaving in barbershops and bathrooms in Italy? For example, soldiers could have used locally made soap to shave with Italian razors. In Asmara, the Saponificio Eritreo Criueller on Via Toscana 12 offered perfumed soaps with enticing names like *San Cri Là*, *Ma-tu*, *Jannette*, *Creola* and *Flor*. They also offered an array of products dedicated to the male toilette, including unscented beard soap and crystallized brilliantine.[3]

We can examine this object as part of the Fascist soldier’s imperial toilette, alongside hand towels and badger brushes, but we can also examine it alongside the infrastructural productions of the Italian steel industry: beams and bridges, planes and trains. A steel razor for Fascist military use calls to mind the Pact of Steel. It also speaks to the autarkic politics that pushed Italian metal industry and mining to their productive limits during the East African occupation, from 1936 to 1941. To this end, in this commentary I use the material properties of razor blades to look at the economic relationship between the Italian steel industry and military enterprise, and to contextualize their use by a young recruit to the East African division of the Fascist paramilitary forces, and how he might have trimmed his whiskers.

Close shaves as military history

Since the days of Ancient Greece, shaving has been part of intra-Mediterranean military life. Alexander the Great famously promoted the practice on the grounds that beards were a wartime liability for Macedonian soldiers.[4] On the battlefield, it was easier to grab hold of a bearded soldier. Shaving before combat decreased the likelihood of a slit throat. Ancient Roman men adopted the Greek practice en masse. Julius Caesar was reportedly so fond of a fresh face that he had servants pluck out his beard hairs with tweezers. But most Ancient Roman men used a *novacila* (an iron blade) to shave, then a pumice stone to remove the remaining stubble. A regime of oils then softened the reddened skin. Perfumes scented it. The gap between public and private shaving marked out class

status. Because of this distinction, bare faces marked membership among the elite, and beards ranked men among the poor. The wealthy enjoyed their toilette at home with the aid of a personal household barber, while the merely well-off and middle classes would visit a *tonsor*, a barbershop. Many young Roman men celebrated their first shave as a semi-public rite of adulthood, with an all-male party. Then as now, barbershops were places of gossip and news. They were a space of masculinity and male bonding, held together by the regular act of shaving.

Focusing on how Italian men shaved in imperial contexts offers new ways of looking at the history of East African occupation and its lived experience. These trends continued into Italian modernity, with barbershops available in cities and small towns. But the technology changed, and with it the sociability of male shaving. Straight razors remained common in Europe through the early twentieth century. But the invention of the safety razor in 1903 increased self-shaving dramatically. The blades in Source 17 are an example of this: safety razors are a small piece of straight razor attached to a handle using a clamp. Double-edged safety razors proliferated during the Great War, thanks to wartime contracts between the national militaries and private companies. For example, the American brand Gillette became popular through this type of military contract, along with a post-war marketing blitz that reduced the price of a razor from $5 to $1. In 1918, the war ended and shaving at home became both familiar and broadly affordable. By the 1920s and 1930s, it was common military practice to supply each serviceman with their own shaving kit. For the Italian Fascist paramilitary wing, the Voluntary Militia for National Security (Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale, MVSN; more commonly known as the Blackshirts) the design of the shaving kits was an opportunity to broadcast imperial messaging to the soldiers critical to the regime's success. Barbershops in the metropole were a common distribution site for Black Venus (*Venere nera*) postcards. They showed beautiful, topless East African women, set against wide vistas. In a conflation of territorial and sexual conquest, the postcards included the address for military enlistment offices on the back. Barbershops provided an ideal distribution point for these materials. The all-male environment would have allowed conversations about sex and war to flow freely. In the home, men might have encountered far greater resistance to the Fascist military pitch.

The Fascistization of Italian steel

Razor blade production and distribution speak to the wartime steelworks of Italian empire. Across the peninsula and especially on the Italian islands, iron ore and coal, two key ingredients for smelting, lie just underground. Even under liberal government, the Italian state aimed to increase domestic iron ore production to limit dependence on foreign partners. This is not to say that Italy eschewed overseas trade connections. Indeed, steel production in this period often went into steamship construction and repair. In the late nineteenth century, Elba's blast furnaces forged the majority of Italian steel.[5] The growth of the Italian steel industry provided some of the financial ballast for liberal Italy to make a late entry into the European Scramble for Africa.[6] Industrial magnates purchased ports and expanded shipping claims in the Eritrean Bay of Assab, and then sold these holdings to the state, creating an Italian foothold in the Horn of Africa. Italians took the Eritrean port of Massawa, and then a garrison town, Asmara. Asmara was then rebaptized as the new capital of Eritrea. In 1890, Eritrea became the *colonia primogenita*, Italy's 'first-born' colony. Unlike these industrial takeovers, early Italian attempts at military expansion to Ethiopia were singularly unsuccessful. The 1896 Battle of Adwa resulted in a rout of the invading Italian forces by the Ethiopian army. It was the only major African victory over European forces at this time. Unsurprisingly, this led to divergent emotional memories connected with this battle. As historian of modern Ethiopia Bahru Zewde has observed, 'few events in the modern period have brought Ethiopia to the attention of the world as has the victory at Adwa'.[7] On the other hand, Ethiopianist Donald Levine has pointed out that for the Italians Adwa became 'a national trauma' that demagogic leaders like Mussolini would later strive to avenge.[8]

The Italian steel industry has long been part private industry, part state-funded enterprise. A mega-merger birthed Italy's largest twentieth-century steel plant, Ilva, in 1905.[9] During World War I, the Genovese steelworks benefitted from large state contracts to support the war effort. But the ensuing recession and anti-communist labour scares pushed Ilva up to the edge of bankruptcy. In 1922, the national Banca Commerciale Italiana took control of what had been a private company. With credit lines disrupted, Italian companies across the board were unable to obtain loans. Ilva, along with almost all inter-war Italian steelworks, struggled for solvency before succumbing to the reverberations of the American stock market crash in 1929.

Economic turbulence created conditions that led to an unprecedented level of Fascist control over domestic manufacturing. Namely, the financial crisis created a moment of financial exceptionalism. For the Fascist Party, it provided an opportunity to first absorb bank stakes in steel industry, and then to nationalize them. The Ilva steelworks were not alone, as the party took a parallel approach to the Italian chemical and weapons industries. Through the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction (Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale, IRI), a public holding company established in 1933, the regime acquired Ilva and many other companies, acquiring 48.5% of Italian shared capital by the following year. Through 'rescue' and restructuring, Ilva became part of Finsider, the IRI's specialized holding for steel production.[10] Thus economically insulated, Benito Mussolini launched unilateral military actions. Italy invaded Ethiopia, a fellow League of Nations member, on 3 October 1935. Every morning for the next six years, thousands of Fascist soldiers stationed in East Africa would have begun their days by shaving with these disposable razor blades, crafted from Italian steel.

Victory at Adwa? Marketing empire in the barracks bathroom

To garner support for the invasion among Italian soldiers and civilians, Fascist propaganda and corporate imitators relied on two narratives regarding the 1935 occupation: first, colonization was the coda to Italy's historic loss to Ethiopia at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, and second, colonization was a civilizing mission. Both themes appear in the design of these razor blades. To rewrite the losses in the First Italo-Ethiopian War, Fascism turned to *romanità*, promising to resurrect the glory of the Ancient Roman empire in Axum and Leptis Magna. Just as Benito Mussolini claimed to walk in Caesar's footsteps, so too did the Blackshirts aim to emulate the daily habits of Rome's imperial armies. Many scholars have written on the resonance of Fascist symbology and Ancient Rome, from the famous Roman salutes to the *fasces*, the senate's bundle of rods and their symbol authority. What this box of razors can add to this conversation is something far more intimate. Razors reveal how the practices of Fascist imperialism extended into private spaces, like bathrooms, and daily habits, like shaving.

These razor blades (Fig 17F and 17G) and their packaging (Figs 17A–E) speak to Western civilizing myths. Since the armies of Ancient Rome, the line between civilization and barbarism has been drawn at the neck. Barbarians, after all, were men who did not shave. The cardboard cover of the box (Fig. 17A) shows a smiling, clean-shaven East African man in a white coat. His eyes are darkened into obscurity, but his forehead and cheeks gleam in a bright light. He has benefitted, the box implies to us, from Italian cultural influence in the Horn of Africa, brought to him by the Fascist military. It is the defining image of this razor blade set, repeated on the paper envelope inside (Fig. 17C).

The Fascist civilizing myth also informs the inclusion of the two *tucúl* huts in the background (Figs 17A and 17C). With their round shape and thatched roof, *tucúl* huts corresponded with Italian conceptions of primitive architectural shapes and materials. At the time, Italian design celebrated rationalist architecture, with grids and right angles cast in reinforced concrete. But *tucúl* huts were insubstantial for a reason. They were temporary structures, used as stalls for livestock and storage space. People lived in sturdy *agdo* and *hidmo* dwellings, built to last. Yet in Italian imagery of East Africa, *tucúl* huts are represented as homes. Their rickety construction corresponded with what Italian architects wanted to believe regarding Ethiopian underdevelopment, and the need for an Italian civilizing mission in East Africa. Indeed, Fascist urbanism groups would later construct endless rows

of *tucúl* huts for Eritrean construction workers on the outskirts of Asmara, inscribing architectural myth on the cityscape.

The Pact of Steel industry

Today, we know an army recruit first and foremost by their grooming—their high and tight haircut and their lack of facial hair. Order, hygiene and discipline are all expressed through the regimented control of male facial hair. It is an intimate military uniform. Unlike clothing, you cannot change it throughout the day to suit different situations. Additionally, it is a uniform that requires daily upkeep, and specialized places, like bathrooms and barbershops, and things, like soap, water and razor blades, to maintain. Grooming marks a man as a soldier at all times, in the field and in the home. The connection between male shaving and military action appears across historical contexts. In their use, these razor blades are global, but in their design, these razor blades are local. Razor blades cleave the nexus of the Fascist military empire and material culture, ultimately showing how Italian industry infused daily life in the East African colonies.

Steel, like rice and rabbits, was an autarkic product that Fascist Italy attempted to push into hyper-production, with the goal of reducing the need for trade partners abroad. By the late 1930s, economic historian Martin Blinkhorn notes, the IRI and other government agencies 'controlled over four-fifths of Italy's shipping and shipbuilding, three-quarters of its pig iron production and almost half that of steel'.[11] The Pact of Steel forged the military alliance of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany on 22 May 1939. Benito Mussolini coined the name of the Axis in reference to Italo-Germanic industry ties. The Pact of Steel framed industrial collaboration, specifically arms production, as the first step towards Axis military coordination. As a metaphor, steel signified unbreakable bonds and implacable strength. As a metal, steel formed the guns and aeroplanes that became the new technologies of World War II. With its silver shine, it evoked the success of parallel Fascist industries in mining and metal industry. Aluminium, for instance, is another silver metal that marked the period's Futurist aesthetics of speed and dynamism. These aesthetics were not only found at the Tripoli car races and in Italo Balbo's aeronautical acrobatics, but also in the home. The iconic Bialetti coffee pot was born in 1933. Soon, Milanese housewives considered their countertops incomplete without a Moka. And of course, steel composed the steel razor blades used by the Italian army.

What objects cannot do, alone, is answer questions related to reception. Did these razors and their packaging influence the conversations that occurred in army barracks bathrooms? What did soldiers think when they ripped open the packets, decorated with a clean-shaven East African man beside a *tucúl* hut? Two East African cities, Eritrea's Asmara and Ethiopia's Adua (Adwa), are etched into the steel. Did those words prompt bathroom discussions about Italy's defeat by the Ethiopian forces at the Battle of Adwa, and the nation's success in shaping Asmara as the new capital of Eritrea, as soldiers prepared for the day ahead? We cannot say for certain. Different documents, like diaries and letters, are required to answer questions about reception like these. But if we shift the scale of analysis from individuals to industry, we can answer questions about reception in a broad way, by looking at the razor blade's materials. Steel production, distribution and disposal are all related industries. Fascist propaganda like Luce newsreels and posters saturated the public sphere, reaching the young and old, women and men. Tailored propaganda travelled across thresholds, from the public to the private sphere. At *sagre* (food festivals), women were given recipe pamphlets that prodded them to cook with autarkic ingredients like rice. For *la befana fascista* (a Fascisized version of the Epiphany) little girls received Piccola Italiana dolls, their right arms raised in the Roman salute. Razor blades stamped with colonial imagery also fall into this pernicious category of propaganda: interactive objects that augmented daily rhythms, making them part of the dictatorship. They were gifts with strings attached, pulling young men of fighting age into the Fascist orbit. I invite historians and other scholars to seek out everyday objects, to turn them over in their hands, and to ponder their meanings and their

trajectories. Examining object trajectories helps us to perceive the intimacies of everyday life, to ask questions about the relationship between public and private life, and to write history in a way that is compelling, comprehensible and memorable.

Notes

1 Little wonder then that Americanists have successfully engaged a broader public in the histories of war and slavery by asking about the things they carried—guns, germs and steel—and what went in a cotton sack.

2 Ann Stoler has noted that intimate imperialism often shows up in the bathroom, with soap and grooming to maintain whiteness. This commentary explores another way the colonial intimate shows up in the bathroom—through reduced hair.

3 Asmara possessed a number of soap factories by the mid-1930s. See Angelo Gnarini, *Guida commerciale dell'Eritrea* (*The Eritrean Businessman's Guide*) (Artetecnica, 1935).

4 Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History* (Greenwood, 2006), p. 142.

5 The modern Italian steel industry dates to the 1880s, making it part of the industrial boom that converted so many factories and plants that would later take on new economic imperatives with the inter-war dictatorship. More steel meant that the railways could expand, and industrial concerns could update their machinery. Ironworks across the industrial north, in Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont and Tuscany, converted from the old blas furnace model to the cheaper electric arc furnaces. These furnaces used an electrical current to melt scrap metal (often pig iron, or reduced iron) and produce molten steel. At the time, it was a relatively new technology, a cheaper and more productive replacement for Italian blast furnace technology used since the fourteenth century. This method relied on a more complex recipe of heated iron oxides, limestone and coke (cooked coal) to produce pig iron. In 1884, the Italian state partnered with industry to build the nation's largest steel mill in the Umbrian town of Terni. During the years leading up to World War I, the liberal Italian state built more and better coke furnaces to produce cast iron, with sites in Portoferraio, Piombino and Bagnoli.

6 Giuseppe Finaldi traces the imperialist push of the late 1800s as an extension of military exploits of the Risorgimento; see Giuseppe Finaldi, *Italian National Identity and the Scramble for Africa, 1870–1900 (*Peter Lang, 2009).

7 See Bahru Zewede, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991*, 2nd edn (James Curry, 2016).

8 See Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1974).

9 Ilva, the Latin term for Elba, was born in Genoa on 1 February 1905. It was the child of Genoese financiers—the Siderurgica di Savona group and Acciaierie di Terni and its subsidiary Ligure Metallurgica—supported by th political and financial backing of the Italian state. Indeed, laws were rewritten in order to make this marriage happen. Economist and future Italian Prime Minister Francesco Saverio Nitti drafted a new 1904 law for development in Naples to make the construction of the Bagnoli steel plant possible. While the new limited company's initial capital share capital was 12 million lire, the Elba group joined soon after, raising shares to 20 million lire.

10 The IRI also controlled mid-size companies, like Acciaierie di Cornigliano (SAIC), and smaller steelworks, like Terni Acciai Speciali and Dalmine.

11 Martin Blinkhorn, *Mussolini and Fascist Italy* (Routledge, 1994), pp. 34–35.

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