Solidarity Among Colonial Subjects in Wartime Libya, 1940-1943

by *Livia Tagliacozzo*

Abstract

During World War II, Jews in Libya faced persecution and adversity. In response, Muslim individuals often became aides to the Jews, driven by economic reward, shared benefits, and genuine empathy. Examining the manner Jews and Muslims interacted in these circumstances sheds light on the complex relationship between the two communities, influenced by factors such as religious affiliation, connections to the regime, and personal interests. The fascist regime's differential policies towards the two communities over two decades also played a role in shaping this relationship, sometimes causing conflict between the communities, but also leading to a shared sense of opposition to the Italians following common experiences of persecution.

Introduction

Under Italy's colonial control of Libya, the daily lives of Jews and Muslims, as well as the persecution of the two communities, were deeply intertwined.[1] This connection, however, is seldom considered, even with the recent growth of interest in the repression of colonial subjects by an Italy driven by Fascist ideology, domestic and foreign politics, and economic and social interests.[2] This article examines the solidarity between Libyan Jews and Muslims during the Second

Research for this article was made possible through the support of the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and the Vidal Sassoon Center for the Study of Antisemitism at the Hebrew University.

[1] A 1936 general population census, conducted by the Istituto Generale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia and expanding upon the census of 1931, divided Libya's population into four categories: Italian nationals, foreign, assimilated and population of Libya. In addition to these also the indigenous cohabitants of the latter were registered in terms of religion, race, language, tribe etc. Some categories of people were to be considered *assimilati agli stranieri* (assimilated to the foreigners): Maltese and their descendants, Armenians, Indians; Muslims and Jews with foreign nationality who were born on foreign territory that were neither colonies nor protectorates; the stateless and non-indigenous and their descendants. To be instead considered as *assimilati ai metropolitani* (assimilated to the metropolitan citizens), were the Libyan Muslims and Jews holding Italian citizenship since the Ottoman Empire or following Royal Decrees and Italian subjects of the Aegean islands, belonging to any religion. The census also included Muslims and Jews of foreign nationality who were born in other colonies and moved to Libya, as well as Muslims and Jews who by birth or origin "belonged" to Libyan territory but were foreign subjects. The 1936 census highlights various aspects of the population, including territorial distribution, sex, age, civil status, occupation, religion, and race ("*araba, berbera, arabo-berbera, negra, razze varie dell'Africa Orientale, altre*"). Jews were included not as both a racial category and as a distinct religious group that was referred to as either *ebrei* or *israeliti*. The 1931 census specified that the "Jewish race" was omitted because Jews are already distinguished by religion and were therefore considered under the "others" category. Significantly, the 1931 census, which was not published until 1935, also mentions the decade-long decline, by 43,455 individuals of the Muslim population of Cyrenaica, without, unsurprisingly, disclosing the reasons for it. According to that same census, the Jewish community of Libya consisted of around 25,000 individuals, with over half living in Tripoli and the next largest concentration in Benghazi. According to the 1938 census, the resident population of Libya was 95% Muslim, 3.9% Jewish and 1.1% Coptic, meaning Eritrean *askaris* temporarily stationed in the colony. Istituto Generale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia, *VII Censimento Generale della Popolazione* (Roma: Tipografia Failli, 1935), 30; Istituto Generale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia, *VIII Censimento Generale della Popolazione* (Roma: Tipografia Failli, 1939).

[2] On Italian colonialism, see Giorgio Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano* (Turin: Loescher, 1973); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1986-1988); Angelo Del Boca, "La repressione in Libia," *Studi piacentini* 2 (1987): 31-44; and Nicola Labanca, ed., *Un nodo. Immagini e documenti sulla repressione coloniale italiana in Libia* (Manduria: Lacaita, 2002).

World War.[3] I argue that the specific policy of violence adopted by the regime in its *posto al sole* (place in the sun) sheds light on some aspects of the continuity of the fascist policy of violence in the colony, and the triangular relations these policies entailed. I will show how wartime acts of solidarity between the Muslim majority and the Jewish minority were informed by the two communities' experiences of coexistence and persecution and took the form of providing shelter, food, and security.

As Italy joined the Second World War in early June 1940, Libya's strategic position made it a major hotspot of belligerent activity. The war reshuffled the priorities of the Fascist regime in the colony and affected its handling of the local Jewish minority. Between 1940 and 1943, Libyan Jews turned into targets of radicalized antisemitic legislation, endured the physical attacks of settlers and Italian colonial personnel, and were subjected to forced labor and deportation to camps in the colony and abroad.[4] These anti-Jewish measures, along with the shadow of war and the increasing radicalization of Fascist rule between 1940 and 1943, affected relations between local Jews and Muslims.[5] Both groups faced similar challenges,

[3] The paucity of research in this area is highlighted by the increasing interest in the common experiences of Jews and Muslims in colonial environments as well as the growing overlap between studies of genocide, Shoah and colonialism. For examples, see Mehnaz Afridi, *Shoah Through Muslim Eyes* (Boston: Academic Publishing Press, 2006); Ethan Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel, eds., *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017); Ethan Katz, *The Burdens of Brotherhood* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Norman H. Gershman, *Besa: Muslims who saved Jews During World War II* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018). In addition, studies on the North African Campaign continue to raise questions over the contextualization of the dynamics of violence and memory, see: Nicola Labanca, David Reynolds, and Olivier Wieiorka, eds., *The Desert War 1940-1943* (Rome: Perrin, 2019).

[4] On the Jews of Libya during the Second World War, see Renzo De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo. Gli ebrei nella Libia contemporanea tra colonialismo, nazionalismo arabo e sionismo 1835–1975* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1978); Irit Abramski-Bligh, ed., *Pinkas ha-kehilot, Luv–Tunisya: Entsiklopedyah shel ha-yishuvim ha-yehudim le-min hivasdam ve-ad le-ahar shoat milhemet ha-olam ha-shniyah* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1997); Liliana Picciotto, "Gli ebrei in Libia sotto la dominazione italiana," in *Ebraismo e rapporti con le culture del Mediterraneo nei secoli XVIII–XX*, ed. Martino Contu (Florence: Giuntina, 2003), 79-106; Maurice M. Roumani, *The Jews of Libya: Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008); Rachel Simon, "It could have happened there: the Jews of Libya during the Second World War," *Africana Journal* 16 (1994): 391-422; Eric Salerno, *Uccideteli tutti. Libia 1943. Gli ebrei nel campo di concentramento fascista di Giado. Una storia italiana* (Milan: Saggiatore, 2007).

[5] On Jewish relations with Muslims during the Second World War, see Patrick Bernhard, "Behind the Battle Lines: Italian Atrocities and the Persecution of Arabs, Berbers, and Jews in North Africa

including economic hardship, political limitations, and violent attacks encouraged by a racist ideology.[6] In this context, the small Jewish population became increasingly dependent on the support of the Muslim majority. That support, however, was uncertain. Some local Muslims actively collaborated with Italian authorities or found other ways to take advantage of the situation, and many were simply passive observers or preoccupied with their own difficulties.[7]

This article examines the ways in which Muslims identified with Jews or collaborated with the Italians and explores the role of self-interest in Jewish-Muslim relations. These interactions are set against the backdrop of colonialism and the Fascist regime's official treatment of Jews and Muslims, both before and during the war, since these issues affected the way in which the communities related to one another.[8] Concentration camps, displacements, violence, and racism

---

during World War II," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 26, no. 3 (2012): 425-446; Irit Abramski-Bligh, "L'influence de la Seconde Guerre mondiale sur les relations judéo-arabes en Libye et en Tunisie," *Revue d'Histoire de la Shoah* 205 (2016): 317-353; Harvey Goldberg, "Itinerant Jewish Peddlers in Tripolitania at the End of the Ottoman Period and under Italian Rule," in *Jewish life in Muslim Libya. Rivals and relatives* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 68-81; Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost stories from the Holocaust's long reach into Arab lands* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

[6] Bernhard, "Behind the Battle Lines," 425-446.

[7] Both Muslims and Jews exhibited a wide spectrum of behaviors, including indifference. Relevant here is Rothberg's concept of the "implicated subject," which transcends the binary of active and passive and rejects the neat categorization into subjects, victims, bystanders and perpetrators, Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019). Rothberg pushes us to reflect on the role that individuals play in propagating the historical structures and legacies of violence. While his context is the pursuit of justice, his framework is helpful in considering the entanglements among different groups in racist and violent settings. In light of this rejection of black-and-white thinking, it is worth noting that despite this paper's focus on the help *received* by Jews, Jews also *provided* support, not just to one another but also to their Muslim neighbors.

[8] Although I speak of Muslims and Jews as two distinct groups, in reality they were neither isolated from one another nor internally cohesive. A complete picture would consider the manner in which elements such as socioeconomic standing or geographic location affected the relations between the two communities as well as the relations between each community and the colonial authorities. As it turns out, coming into contact with Italians created further splits within each community, neither of which was homogeneous at the outset. De Felice distinguishes between a minority of wealthy, Europeanized Jews, both foreign and Libyan-born, who felt an active concern over Italy's interventions, and a majority of traditional Jews who remained indifferent. Harvey Goldberg stresses the economic and cultural split that Italian colonization created among the Jews of Tripoli, Simone Bakchine-Dumont examines the relations between Italian and Tripolitanian Jews during

produced tremendous divisions among Libya's population during the Fascist *ventennio*, but they also forged significant links between Muslims and Jews and gave rise to concrete acts of support. To analyze these phenomena, this article considers Jews and Muslims within a single analytical framework and makes use of Jewish witness testimonies as well as official documents of the Italian regime.[9]

Shifting Fascist Policy: Jews as the Fifth Column of the Fourth Shore (1938-1943)

Three days after the March on Rome, Mussolini met with the Governor of Tripolitania, Giuseppe Volpi, to stress the urgency of the reconquest of Libya for Italy's political prestige and economic prosperity.[10] With the Pacification of Libya, the territory became a testing ground for Fascist Italy's policies of control, including deportation, internment, and most infamously the use of chemical gasses, dropped by air, on civilians.[11] By 1934, following twenty years of fighting

---

the colonial period, and Anna Baldinetti shows how Italian rule had a different impact on Muslim elites in Tripolitania than on the Sanusiyya of Cyrenaica.
Harvey Goldberg, "The Jewish community of Tripoli in relation to Italian Jewry and Italians in Tripoli," in *Les relations intercommunautaires juives en méditerranée occidentale. XIII^e-XX^e siècles,* ed. Institut d'études africaines (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1984), 79-89; Simone Bakchine-Dumont, "Les relations entre les Juifs italiens et les Juifs libyens pendant la période coloniale," in *Les relations intercommunautaires juives en méditerranée occidentale*, 90-98; Simone Bakchine-Dumont, "Les Relations Entre Juifs Italiens et Juifs Tripolitains de 1911 à 1924," *La Rassegna Mensile Di Israel* 49, no. 1/4 (1983): 298-311; Anna Baldinetti, "Italian colonial rule and muslim elites in Libya: a relationship of antagonism and collaboration," in *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: 'Ulama' in the Middle East* (Leiden-Boston: Brill:, 2009), 91-108. For a background on Jewish customs and traditions, see Mordechai Coen, *Gli Ebrei in Libia: Usi e Costumi* (Florence: Giuntina, 1994).

[9] Since few written sources are available, oral history is essential to any study of the experiences and perceptions of the Libyan Jewish population during periods of persecution. Oral sources are similarly critical for understanding the experiences of the Arab population during Italian rule, especially in non-urban areas, where illiteracy was widespread. Recognizing the value of these sources, archives in Europe, Libya, the United States and Israel have collected thousands of recordings regarding the Italian colonial period. For a discussion of the uses and challenges of Libyan oral history as a source for historians, see Eileen Ryan, "Essay on Sources: Memories of Resistance in Libyan Oral History," in *Religion as Resistance: Negotiating Authority in Italian Libya* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2018), 174-182.

[10] Giuseppe Volpi, *La Politica Coloniale del Fascismo* (Padova: CEDAM, 1937), 12.

[11] Italy is also infamous for being the first country to use airplanes for military purposes; the first occasion took place in Libya in 1911, under Corporal Carlo Piazza. In addition, Italy was responsible

against the anti-colonial resistance, the Italian regime declared Cyrenaica pacified. Italy achieved that outcome by following a "policy of prestige"[12]—which entailed the deportation of over 110,000 nomads and semi-nomads to sixteen concentration camps, as well as the death of 60,000-70,000 individuals and about 600,000 animals.[13] In the decade that followed the pacification, Italy changed its policy toward Muslims,[14] giving them access to special citizenship,[15] recruiting their youth into Italian military ranks,[16] and offering an ostensibly protectionist

for the first aerial bombardment, the launching of a record four bombs by Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti (b. 1882, Genova) at Ain Zahra on November 1, 1911. Thomas Hippler, *Bombing the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-2.

[12] As Giuseppe Volpi, Governor of Tripolitania explained, the Fascist policy of prestige was meant as a "government action that gives to the subject populations—clearly and unequivocally—not only the feeling of our military superiority, but also the conviction that we are determined to make use of this superiority, always and wherever necessary. [It was also meant to show] that we, in addition to military superiority, have also and above all a moral superiority that derives from the value and strength of our historical traditions and from the greatness of the civilizing process that Italy has fulfilled for centuries… as relentless to punish as to reward," Volpi, *La Politica Coloniale del Fascismo*, 13; Eileen Ryan, "Violence and the Politics of Prestige: The Fascist Turn in Colonial Libya," *Modern Italy* 20, no.2 (2015): 123-135.

[13] Estimates on the number of victims vary. See, Giorgio Rochat, "La Repressione della Resistenza in Cirenaica 1927-1931" in *Omar al-Mukhtar e la Riconquista Fascista della Libia* (Milan: Marzorati, 1981); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia. Dal Fascismo a Gheddafi* (Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 2010); Nicola Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia 1911-1931* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012); Ali Abudllatif Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya. Shar, A Hidden Colonial History* (London-New York Routledge, 2021).

[14] Italy's policy toward Muslims was influenced by its increasing mistrust of the British, and that policy, in turn, influenced Italy's position on Zionism. For more on the subject, see Renzo De Felice, "Il sionismo e la politica estera fascista," in *Storia degli ebrei Italiani sotto il fascismo vol. 1* (Turin: Mondadori, 1977), 194-220.

[15] Special citizenship could be extended because of Libya's inclusion in the Kingdom of Italy, as stated by Royal Decree No.70 of January 9, 1939: "Aggregazione delle Quattro Provincie Libiche al territorio del regno d'Italia e concessione ai Libici musulmani di una cittadinanza Italiana speciale con statuto personale e successorio musulmano," Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia No.28, February 3, 1939, 584.

[16] Muslim natives between the ages of 17 and 30 who had never served in the military were required to serve by the Governor General of Libya in the Libya Military Division. Ensuring that this service occurred was clearly not an easy feat. The colonial authorities lacked a registry of names, much of the target population led a nomadic lifestyle, and the territory in question was vast. Italian documents indicate that out of 8,000 men to be recruited only 6,000 actually showed up, and of these 1,400 were subsequently dismissed because of physical incapacity or family circumstances. Significantly, according to Italian reports, the recruitment that did occur was enabled by the cooperation of native tribal leaders. These cabila heads and mudir were encouraged by pro-Italian sentiment, by the Abyssinian experience of war, and, to a smaller extent, by the droughts that

policy within the colonial regime.[17] This last point was epitomized in 1937, when Benito Mussolini declared himself Protector of Islam (*Hāmī al-Islām*).[18]

Following the pacification, Libya's Jews were no longer a marginal issue. The regime began to see an inherent link between its policy toward Jews and its policy toward Arabs,[19] and what were once disinterested and infrequent interventions in Jewish affairs gave way to direct, hard-line interference.[20] This shift coincided with the deterioration of the government's relationship with the Jewish community, largely a result of the Sabbath Crisis, that erupted when the government mandated that all businesses open on Saturdays. Jews who refused to comply were publicly flogged, and the Chief Rabbi of Tripoli was expelled in 1935.[21] These ruptures also

---

damaged the local agriculture and the livelihood of the population. Colonial racism and hierarchical thinking permeate the reports. For instance, a report declares that indigenous Libyans are to be trained in order to fight other "colored armies" in a "perfectly European formation, even if formed by natives." The "particular nature, quality and character" of the native military personnel is deemed essential to the conduct of successful colonial warfare. Taddeo Orlando, "Relazione Semestrale Gennaio-Giugno 1936, Ordinamento ed Addestramento," July 7, 1936, Archivio Stato Maggiore Esercito, N-11, b. 4026, f. 11. Among the well-known Libyan divisions was the Ascari del Cielo, a paratrooper division formed in 1938 and made up of Libyan Berbers.

[17] Italian policy towards the Jews in Libya must be considered in relation to Badoglio's recognition that by the early 1930s, the Arab rebellion was fueled not by political antagonism but by economic suffering of the Cyrenaican population as a whole, and the Sanusi in particular; Badoglio concluded, as a result, that the Arabs should be treated with tolerance. So as not to arouse the Arabs' jealousy and displeasure, Jews were not to be favored. This more favorable policy towards the Muslim majority should itself be considered in relation to the shift in Fascist foreign policy as a whole, and in particular to the conquest of Ethiopia and the Declaration of the Empire in 1936.

[18] "Il Duce sulla Litoranea fino al Confine Tunisino," *Corriere della Sera*, March 20, 1937, 1.

[19] Both in 1916 and 1931, as the regime discussed changes in the Jewish community of Tripoli, foreign and domestic interests superseded colonial ones (Renzo De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land. Libya, 1835-1970*, trans. Judith Roumani [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985], 126-133). A January 1933 meeting between Mussolini and Ravenna illustrates how pacification affected the regime's attitude toward Jews in the colony. When Ravenna mentioned the need for the Union of Italian Jewish Communities to devote attention to the Jewish Community of Tripoli, the Duce replied that "the occupation of Tripolitania could not be considered to have taken place twenty years earlier; instead, considering the great war and the long period he had needed to dedicate to the reconquest of the colony, one could affirm it was only six years that Tripolitania fully belonged to Italy" (Felice Ravenna, "Udienza con S.E. Il Capo del Governo, January 17, 1933," Comunità Israelitiche Italiane Fino al 1933, Rapporti con lo Stato Italiano e con l'Ebraismo della Diaspora, Colonie, Archivio Storico dell'Unione delle Comunità Ebraiche Italiane, b. 43/30, f. 156/8-83/1, sf. 7.

[20] De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 117-119.

[21] The flogging was attended by Muslims, who were reported to be pleased that the Italians were inflicting violence on "*al-yahud al-kuffar* [the infidel Jews]." (Goldberg, *Jewish Life in Muslim*

coincided with the regime's ideological shift toward antisemitism and racism,[22] which found expression in the Racial Laws of 1938, targeting Jews in the peninsula as well as the colonies.[23] There ensued a reversal in the standing of Muslims and Jews.[24] Until the early to mid 1930s, the regime had characterized the Jewish minority as *italianizable,*[25] and accorded them preferential treatment and a degree of autonomy.[26] After that time, however, Jews gradually became the principal

Libya, 108). This fact is significant to any study of the relations between Jews and Muslims in Libya at the time.

[22] On Italian Fascist antisemitism, and in particular the changes which occurred in the aftermath of the Abyssinian war, see Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2017). For a comprehensive overview of the regime's racist ideology and its political repercussions, see Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (London-New York: Routledge, 2014).

[23] It is notable that on his 1937 visit to Libya, the Duce was enthusiastically welcomed by the Jewish communities of Benghazi, Barce and Tripoli and given precious gifts, including a menorah. During this visit Mussolini affirmed that his government would respect Jewish traditions. The Jewish community believed that the episode signaled a new era of peaceful coexistence among the colony's Italians, Jews, and Muslims (Vittorio Naim, "Le popolazioni ebraiche della Libia partecipano entusiaste alle trionfali accoglienze al Capo del Governo," *Israel*, March 25, 1937, 2-4). On the relationship between the Jewish community of Tripoli with Italians and Jews in Italy, see Goldberg, "The Jewish community of Tripoli in relation to Italian Jewry and Italians in Tripoli," 79-89.

[24] The reversal of position with regards to the Racial Laws had mainly a psychological impact; the economic repercussions were minor. While the dismissal of Jews might have benefited Muslims who could fill vacant posts, few had the economic means or education to carry out those jobs. Abramski-Bligh, "L'influence de la Seconde Guerre mondiale sur les relations judéo-arabes en Libye et en Tunisie."

[25] Thus, for instance, policies on the education of Libyan Jews, and especially of Libya's "modern" Jewish elites, was similar to the ones regarding Italian Jews. Members of the Jewish community, and especially the urban elites, attended Italian schools in large numbers as soon as those schools were established in the colony. Jewish attendance was high even before colonization: in 1907, Jews comprised 80% of the student population in Benghazi's two Italian schools. By contrast, the colonial approach to Muslim education during the *ventennio* was driven by assimilation, and therefore italianization and fascistization. The education of Jewish pupils and school attendance on the Sabbath created a rift with the fascist government, particularly after 1931, when the journal *Israel* accused the Italian government of discrimination towards Jews and the upholding of Muslim religious rights. De Felice, *Jews in An Arab Land*, 136-140 and 153-154; Luigi De Rosa and Gabriele De Rosa, *Storia del Banco di Roma*, vol.3 (Rome: Banca di Roma, 1982), 245.

[26] Here I refer to autonomy at the community's administrative level. The regime interfered in certain matters such as the 1921 engagement between a Jewish girl and a non-Jewish Italian, whose marriage was opposed by the Jewish community council and chief rabbi but approved by an Italian court. "Contro una sentenza della Corte d'Appello per la Libia," *Israel*, July 28, 1921; Mario Nunes Vais, "Regia Corte di Appello per la Libia in Tripoli, 23 June 1921"; Luigi Mercatelli, "Al Consiglio

targets of ideological and physical persecution, and with the introduction of the Racial Laws, their official standing dropped below that of Muslims.[27] Nonetheless, enforcement of the Racial Laws in Libya was lax.[28] Governor Italo Balbo persuaded Mussolini that a lenient policy made sense, arguing that Italians were economically dependent on Jews and that a worrisome sympathy was arising between the colonial minority and majority populations: "[T]he Arabs, the traditional enemies of the Jews," Balbo warned, "now show signs of feeling sorry for them."[29] In the previous decades of their brief colonial venture, Italians had already witnessed the effects of favoring one religious group over another, and they understood that a divide-and-rule approach would not necessarily achieve the desired submissiveness.[30] Solidarity between Jews and Muslims was therefore a reason for authorities to adapt the racist agenda to local needs. Still, Jews were perceived (and represented in propaganda) as economic rivals, profiteers, and political opponents, who did not uphold Italian interests and were actively antagonistic towards the regime.[31]

The distinct treatment of Jews and Muslims and their different status vis-à-vis the regime affected the groups' interactions with Italian functionaries and settlers, as well as their interactions with each other. New tensions arose during both the

---

della Comunità Israelitica Tripoli, 8 July 1921"; Attività del Consorzio delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane Fino al 1924, Rapporti con le Comunità ebraiche italiane all'estero, Tripolitania," Archivio Storico dell'Unione delle Comunità Ebraiche Italiane, b. 6, f. 21.

[27] Abramski-Bligh, "L'influence de la Seconde Guerre mondiale sur les relations judéo-arabes en Libye et en Tunisie."

[28] De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 169.

[29] Historians often characterize Balbo as a defender of Jews for three reasons: his close relation with Jewish individuals such as Ivo Levi and Renzo Ravenna; his famous 1934 speech in the Miramare Theater, where he silenced a group of Black Shirts who were shouting "Death to the Jews"; and his well-known correspondence with Mussolini, which I have just cited, that softened the application of Racial Laws in the colony. Nonetheless, as he acknowledges himself, as governor of Libya he forced Jewish shop owners to keep their shops open on Saturdays, and flogged those who refused, restricted the jurisdiction of rabbinical courts, and expelled Rabbi Castelbolognesi. Italo Balbo to Benito Mussolini, January 19, 1939, and Mussolini's reply by telegram on January 23, 1939, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, Direttive Politiche di Carattere Generale, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 21, f. 11, sf. 1.

[30] Another concern for the Italian regime would have been the rebelliousness of those Muslims who could imagine that the laws might eventually extend to them as well.

[31] This view of Jews predated 1938. For more on the subject, see Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy*, and Gene Bernardini, "The Origins and Development of Racial Anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy," *The Journal of Modern History* 49, no.3 (1977): 431-453.

Pacification and the Second World War. One example is the trial and subsequent acquittal of Eugenio Nahum, a Jew who confessed to spying and smuggling in collaboration with Arab rebels in 1923. The incident caused an uproar among Italian Fascists, as well as local Arabs. The latter perceived the acquittal as the regime's protection of the wealthy, and possibly as the regime's favorable treatment of Jews, given that Arabs facing similar accusations did not escape the death penalty.[32]

The tensions rose with the outbreak of the Second World War. One example appears in a report by the Questura di Polizia dell'Africa Italiana dated June 25th, 1940, just two weeks after Italy's entry into war. The report describes a discussion that took place in the office of Eduardo de Paz, an Italian Jewish lawyer. In addition to de Paz, the participants included Nello Toso, an "Aryan" Italian citizen, Scerif Duebi Omran, a Libyan Muslim, and Renato Labi, a Jewish resident of Tripoli who held British citizenship. Labi, commenting a speech by Mussolini, reportedly expressed his contempt, "*Vedrai che Mussolini lo piglierà in culo*" ["You will see that Mussolini will take it in the ass"] and warned Omran that he should not believe Mussolini only because he had given Italian citizenship to Arabs, since Italy and Germany had agreed to destroy all Jews and Arabs after the war. Toso might have been expected to object but apparently remained passive, probably because de Paz was his father-in-law, but Omran reported the incident to the Italian authorities and Labi was arrested. The case rested entirely on Omran's accusation and exemplifies the tensions that grew out of the war, the different standings of the Jewish and Muslim communities, and the police's reliance on a particular sort of testimony. The episode illustrates the friction between the Jewish and Muslim communities, but it also suggests, through Labi's warning about the agreement between Italy and Germany, that the two groups perceived that they shared a common fate.[33]

---

[32] "Nahum, Eugenio," pos.150/27, fasc. 127, Archivio Storico Ministero dell'Africa Italiana. Cited in De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 122.

[33] This event reportedly took place in the month of May, but was reported to the police in June. G. Bonfanti to the Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato, Tripoli, "Labi Renato fu Mosè e di Levy Miha nato a Bengasi il 10/10/1902 residente a Tripoli – impiegato privato – suddito inglese di razza ebraica – coniugato con prole. Riservato," June 25, 1940, Miscellanea: fascicoli processuali e affari diversi 1927-1942, Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato (1925-1945), Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 10; See also Archivio Stato Maggiore Esercito, F-19, b. 88, f. 49.

The war context exacerbated both antisemitic propaganda and the persecution of Jews in both the peninsula and Libya. Jews were pointed out for their belligerent activity, identified as a fifth column, and presented as a direct threat to the regime's hopes of creating a "new man." In a memo to the PNF inspector for Libya, Jews were described as a political menace that could be neutralized only through a decisive racial policy with extreme measures, such as putting Jews in concentration camps.[34] Jews were also seen as a threat because of their influence over the local economy, which meant, ironically, that the German Expeditionary force relied on them for provisions. The problem was swiftly addressed through political means.[35] The alliance with Nazi Germany and the Wehrmacht presence on Libyan soil also affected the Jews' fate.[36] Control over Libyan territory changed hands five times between 1940 and 1943, and Jewish support for the occupying British troops fueled and justified, in the eyes of the regime, additional persecutory measures.[37] Once they regained control, the Italians began identifying Jews and who had collaborated with the Allies whether by expressing support, joining the military, or providing their troops with goods or services such as translating or doing their laundry.[38] Jews suspected of these violations were registered and sometimes

[34] Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Archivio di Gabinetto, file 99/IX, fasc. "Varie-1941." Cited in De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 176.

[35] Ibid.

[36] For a discussion on the issue of the responsibility for the persecution of Jews see Jens Hoppe, "The Persecution of Jews in Libya Between 1938 and 1945. An Italian Affair? ," in *The Holocaust and North Africa*, eds. Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2019), 50-75.

[37] Jews were the targets of looting and violent attacks by Italian settlers, soldiers and fascists, but also the regime. While at times the justification for anti-Jewish acts were the same for settlers, soldiers, and the regime this was not always the case. Thus, at a cabinet meeting on February 7th, 1942, Galeazzo Ciano described the Jewish welcome of British troops after Italians had temporarily withdrawn. Jewish-British cooperation was also signaled by the presence of the Jewish Brigade and restoration of the synagogue and Jewish cemetery in Tobruk in 1941 and Derna in 1942. Other actions on the part of the British, such as schooling Jewish children, may have promoted the regime's concerns about a Jewish-British alliance. Picciotto, "Gli ebrei in Libia sotto la dominazione italiana," 102. Louis Rabinowitz, *Soldiers from Judea: Palestinian Jewish Units in the Middle East, 1941-1943* (New York: American Zionist Emergency Council, 1945), 67-69, cited in Norman A. Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 445-446.

[38] In one case, a Jew in Tripoli was accused of sending light signals to Allied planes at night and arrested. Apparently he was simply smoking outside so as not to disturb his family. Vittorio Halfon, "Tripoli – ricordo di guerra e dell'olocausto," in "L'Olocausto degli Ebrei in Libia," ed.

reported, and they often faced legal prosecution. It was not just officials of the regime who went after these alleged violators. Italian settlers and soldiers, as well as German soldiers, actively participated in the pursuit.[39]

When a tribunal was set up in Benghazi in May 1941 to prosecute Jews accused of collaborating with the enemy, one Jewish man who had been sentenced to death dodged his execution because of the second British invasion.[40] Others were not so lucky. Three other Benghazi Jews were executed in June 1942, and many others were sentenced to long imprisonment.[41] The Muslim community suffered the

---

Mati Gilad, *Livluv/Germogli* 2017, 44. Accessed January 17, 2023, https://www.livluv.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/%D7%9C%D7%91%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%91-%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%90%D7%94INT.pdf

[39] These attacks, justified in the eyes of the attackers because of the Jews' anti-Italian or pro-British sympathies, ranged from verbal assaults to physical attacks including beatings and attempts to run vehicles over the victims. This was the case for instance in Tripoli, in response to reports that Jews in Benghazi supported the Allies. Yet, it had not always been the case that violence towards Jews by settlers or Blackshirts and governmental interests coincided. In this respect the growing influence of the PNF in determining colonial policy should be considered. See the following: Riccardo Maraffa, "Genah Iusef fu Mosè Missaudi Labi, nato a Tripoli nel 1891 – Zuares Pintas di Rahmin e fu Zora Sciathun, nato a Tripoli nel 1906 – Barda Elia fu Hai e di Elisa Bugobza, nato a Bengasi il 9/4/1903-ebrei," Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Confidential, April 11 ,1942; see also Riccardo Maraffa, "Gabso Sarina (detta Angelina di Hacun e di Sabban Messauda nata a Tripoli nel 1914," April 13, 1942 ; Riccardo Maraffa, "Abib Abramo di Elia e di Habib Clementina nato a Bengasi, di anni 40 circa – condannato a morte," March 17, 1942; Riccardo Maraffa, "Libici che hanno seguito gli inglesi in ritirata," March 17, 1942; Riccardo Maraffa "Mohai Dadusc fu Beniamino e fu Rachele Beruh, di anni 42, nato a Bengasi, domiciliato a El Tama – ebreo-," April 11, 1942; Riccardo Maraffa, "Mohai Dadusc fu Beniamino e fu Rachele Beruh, di anni 42, nato a Bengasi -israelita.," April 28, 1942; Questura di Polizia Africa Italiana, "Verbale di denunzia in istato di arresto del musulmano Farag Afeda ben Abdulladi ben Aua, cabila Tuagir, nato a Derna, di anni 17, qui residente al campo sudanese, per i reati di prestazione di servizio nelle forze armate nemiche (art. 242 C.P.) e di favoreggiamento bellico (art. 2747 C.P.)," February 23, 1942; Riccardo Maraffa, "Labi Vittorio fu Mosè e di Levi Milka, nato a Bengasi il 3/8/1896 – ebreo suddito inglese," confidential, August 17, 1941; "Manifestazioni di antitalianità da parte di stranieri e libici in Bengasi durante l'occupazione nemica," confidential memorandum, July 30, 1941, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 16, sf. 9, ssf. 1.2-4.

[40] Riccardo Maraffa, "Abramo Abib di Elia e fu Habib Clementina, nato a Bengasi, di anni 40 circa – condannato a morte," confidential, Indigeni Processati e Condannati epr delitti commessi durante l'occupazione inglese, March 17, 1942, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, b. 16, f. 9, ssf. 1.2-4. De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 179. Cited in Hoppe, "The Persecution of Jews in Libya Between 1938 and 1945," 59.

[41] See footnote 40; And "Indigeni processati e condannati per delitti commessi durante l'occupazione inglese," Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 16, sf. 9, ssf. 1.2-4; and Riccardo Maraffa, "Esecuzione di

same fate, as dozens of Italian reports indicate.[42] Both Jews and Senussis[43] were accused of cooperating with Allied soldiers, or joining their ranks, as well as compromising Italian interests by destroying urban infrastructure, attacking Italian settlers, and plundering property.[44] Moreover, Jews and Muslims sometimes collaborated in anti-Italian and pro-British activities. The Jewish School of Via Marina in Benghazi was transformed into barracks for Senussi soldiers during the British occupation.[45] In another example, after the first Italian reconquest of Benghazi, Italian authorities seized a car that was driven by Mohamed Zarrù, a Muslim, and owned by Renato Halfon, a Jew. Italian authorities searched the car and found two hand grenades and a photo of British soldiers; Zarrù and Halfon were apparently collaborating against Italian interests.[46] In another instance Farag Afeda was arrested in Benghazi, and tried for being an informer for the British, joining the British police, and together with a

condanne a morte di ebrei," Promemoria per la Direzione Generale Affari Politici, July 25, 1942, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 16, f. 9, sf. 1.2-4.

[42] For example, Italian authorities used a photo published by the Greek newspaper *Estia* on March 10, 1941, in order to identify fifteen Jews (nine French, two British , three Libyan and one Italian), and thirteen Muslims who applauded the British troops in Piazza del Municipio in Benghazi, and three of the fifteen Jews were arrested. Riccardo Maraffa, "Manifestazioni di antitalianità da parte di stranieri e libici in Bengasi," Promemoria per il Gabinetto del Ministro e la Direzione Generale AA.PP, July 30, 1941, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 16, f. 9, sf. 1.2-4.; and various examples in Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato in Tripolitania (Libia), Miscellanea, Archivio Centrale di Stato, b. 11.

[43] Senussis who had escaped Italian persecution prior to the Second World War organized a defense force in collaboration with the British. See W. H. Kingsberry, "The Cyrenaica Defense Force," *The Royal United Services Institution Journal* 88, no. 551 (1943): 210-214.

[44] See the collections "Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato 1925-1945"; "Tribunale speciale per la difesa dello Stato in Tripolitania (Libia) 1927-1939"; and "Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato in Tripolitania (Libia)," Miscellanea, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 11.

[45] For examples of Jews who faced the Italian tribunal, see "Procedimento contro Daudi Vittorio," Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato in Tripolitania (Libia), Sentenze 1941-1945, Archivio degli Organi e delle Istituzioni del Regime Fascista, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 1. See also collections "Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato 1925-1945," "Tribunale speciale per la difesa dello Stato in Tripolitania (Libia) 1927-1939," and "Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato in Tripolitania (Libia)," Miscellanea, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 11.

[46] Letter sent from the Questura PAI of the Prefettura of Derna to the Reggimento Artiglieria celere Eugenio di Savoia, cited in a letter from the Secretary of the PNF to Attilio Teruzzi, September 21, 1941, Attilio Serena, "Caro Teruzzi, ritengo opportuno segnalarti," Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, N-11, b. 4026, f. 8.

Jewish colleague, apprehending an Italian soldier hiding at the house of another Jewish man, Vittorio Douani.[47]

Despite these occasional collaborations, the multiple occupations and changes of leadership provided a dynamic setting in which the growing tensions between Jews and Muslims could play out. In one incident, Mohamed Bumedian, a Muslim, was denounced to the British by his Jewish neighbor Abramo Arbib; according to Arbib, Bumedian was hiding two Italian soldiers in his house in Benghazi. The British arrested Bumedian as well as the two fugitives, one an Italian soldier and the other an Arab sergeant in the Italian army. The background to the incident was complicated, though. Arbib's wife had reportedly welcomed Senussi agents and British soldiers to their home; had disparaged Bumedian, Mussolini and Italy ("*cornuto ascari italiano devi crepare tu, la tua Italia e quel cornuto di Mussolini*." ["cuckold Italian ascari, you, your Italy and that cuckold of Mussolini"]).[48]

[47] It is noteworthy that it was a Jewish woman, Maria Sadon, who denounced Farag Afeda to the Italians, claiming he and a Jewish colleague had picked up the Italian soldier hiding in the house of Vittorio Duani, a Jew, and handed him over to the British. U. Mantineo, "Verbale di denunzia in istato di arresto del musulmano Farah Afedo ben Abdulladi ben Aua, cabila Tuagir, nato a Derna, di anni 17, qui residente al campo sudanese, per reati di prestazione di servizio nelle forze armate nemiche (art. 242 C.P.) e di favoreggiamento bellico (art. 2747 C.P.)," February 23, 1942, Indigeni Processati e Condannati per delitti commessi durante l'occupazione inglese, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 16, sf. 9, sf. 1.2-4.

[48] The case was considered especially grave in view of the offense to Mussolini. Arbib's wife had also reportedly changed her dog's name to "Mussolini," and once he died was reportedly heard chanting "Mussolini is dead" together with British soldiers. She would later deny all accusations: she defended herself claiming she only did the laundry for the British. It is important to note that Senussi and Jews are seen as acting together, collaborating against Italian interests. Genna Mario and Giacomo Agrigento to the Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato, "Denunzia di Abib Abramo, Gabso Angelina e Mimun Jacobbe per favoreggiamento bellico (art.247 C.P.); il Mimun e la Gabso per offesa all'onore del Capo del Governo (art. 282 C.P.) e la Gabso per disfattismo politico (art.265) e calunnia (art.368 C.P.)," Ufficio Speciale d'Istruzione di Polizia, May 17, 1941, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 16, f. 9, sf. 1.2-4; Alessio Talarico, "Sentenza nella causa contro Abib Abramo, Gabso Angelina, Mimun \Iacobbe," October 1, 1941, Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato in Libia (e territorio Egiziano) e Tribunale Straordinario di Guerra, Sentenze 1941-1945, Archivi degli Organi e delle Istituzioni Fasciste, Archivio Centrale di Stato, b. 1 ; Maraffa, "Denuncia al tribunale speciale per la difesa dello Stato ai cittadini libici Arbib Abramo, Gabso Angelina e Mimun Jacob," Promemoria per il Gabinetto dei del Ministro e per la Direzione Generale AA.PP, October 18, 1941, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale per gli Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, b. 16, f. 9, sf. 1.2-4; Maraffa, "Libici che hanno seguito gli inglesi in ritirata," Promemoria per il Gabinetto del Ministro e per la Direzione Generale AA.PP, March 17,

According to the Italian police report, Arbib's denunciation of Bumedian to the British authorities was an act of revenge for Bumedian's having hit Arbib's wife in the past. Once Italians returned to power, Bumedian, now with the upper hand, filed a report against Arbib with the Italian police, presumably in retaliation for what Arbib did to him under the British occupation. During the war, a dispute between neighbors could easily escalate into a matter of national prestige and security, with serious ramification for the individuals involved. The case also illustrates how different persecuted groups joined forces: Senussis, who had been oppressed by the regime a decade earlier, associated themselves with the Jews who collaborated with the British.

An additional source of tension was the everyday stress of war. The emotional burdens and, even more, the economic hardships, including food shortages, were felt by all sectors of society. Italian antisemitic propaganda blamed Jews for the war and portrayed them as a major threat to Muslims in North Africa and Palestine.[49] Some Muslims in Libya were convinced of this. Internalizing

1942, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, b. 16, f. 9, sf. 1.2-4; Maraffa, "Gabso Sarina (detta Angelina)," Promemoria per la Direzione Generale Affari Politici, April 13, 1942, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, b. 16, f. 9, sf. 1.2-4.

[49] See for example: "'La informazione R,' Ebrei e negri Americani dovrebbero...colonizzare l'Africa a favore degli Stati Uniti," *La Stampa* no.103 (Torino), February 5, 1943, 3. At the same time that it was spreading antisemitic propaganda, Italy had to counter anti-Italian propaganda appearing in Arabic-language pamphlets and newspapers, including Jewish-owned ones. Examples of how the Italian fascist regime and its actions in Libya were presented in the Arab press abound. The Arab anti-Italian press made parallels between the disappearing populations of Palestine, due to Zionist immigrants, and Libya, due to Italian settlers, and Libyan refugees in Palestine organized anti-Italian protests. On the other hand, pro-Italian propaganda used British actions in Palestine and leveraged Jewish Muslims tensions there, in order to garner support. See, for example, "Servizio Informazione-Spionaggio, Propaganda Araba anti-Italiana," Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 23, f. 13, sf. 1.2.

antisemitic tropes disseminated by Fascists through Radio Bari,[50] Radio Tripoli[51] and the printed media,[52] the Muslim community began to hold Jews responsible for the war and the resultant lack of food.[53] During the Allied occupation of Libya, the Italian media depicted the involvement of Palestinian Jews, who fought alongside the British, as additional evidence of an Anglo-Jewish conspiracy.[54] This propaganda aimed to arouse anti-Jewish animosity and punitive behavior within the Muslim population, as well as to encourage more Muslims to enlist in the Italian forces. The Italians were leveraging preexisting anxieties to drive a wedge between the communities—and to reap for themselves the benefits of the discord.

Finding Shelter from Airstrikes

One of the direct consequences of the war was the bombardment of Libyan cities by both Allied and Axis forces.[55] During the North African Campaign, over 16

[50] Radio Bari had been broadcasting in Arabic since 1934. On Radio Bari, see Arturo Marzano, *Onde fasciste. La propaganda araba di Radio Bari (1934-1943)*, (Rome: Carocci, 2015). On Fascist propaganda in Libya see: Manuela Williams, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad. Subversion in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, 1935-1940*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) ; Antonio Campana, "'Trasmette Radio Bari.' Politica e Propaganda Fascista alla Vigilia della Seconda Guerra Mondiale," *Eunomia. Storia e Politica Internazionali* 2 (2015): 247-294. On anti-Zionist propaganda disseminated by Radio Bari, see: Esmonde Robertson, "Race as a Factor in Mussolini's Policy in Africa and Europe," *Journal of Contemporary History* 23, no.1 (1988): 37-58, 47.

[51] Radio Tripoli was established in 1938 specifically as a vehicle for Fascist propaganda in the colonies. See Campana, "Trasmette Radio Bari," 278.

[52] Italian media fueled anti-Jewish sentiment by connecting racial antisemitism to political enmity and using Muslim figures such as Shakib Arslan to spread the notion that Jews were responsible for Muslim grievances both in Palestine and North Africa. Italian media also glorified Italy, Fascism, and Mussolini, even declaring him a "20th century Mahdi," while downplaying colonial rivals France and Britain and calling for support of the Axis. Campana, "Trasmette Radio Bari," 278.

[53] De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 183, and Hoppe "The Persecution of Jews in Libya Between 1938 and 1945. An Italian Affair?," 59.

[54] "Poliziotti Giudei Mandati in Libia dagli Inglesi," *La Stampa* no.103 (Turin), April 30, 1943, 4.

[55] Jews in labor camps were also victims of the bombardments. The labor camp of Buqbuq—which lacked a shelter—was bombed multiple times. It was targeted because of its strategic position on the Libyan-Egyptian border.

million tons of explosives were dropped.[56] Tripoli, the site of the port that was vital to Italian supplies, was bombed 41 times between 1940 and 1941, and Benghazi was targeted hundreds of times between 1940 and 1943.[57] The Jewish *hara* of Tripoli, located near Italian anti-aircraft batteries, the port, and the power station, suffered direct hits. Four synagogues were completely destroyed, others were damaged, and the cemetery was targeted repeatedly, its tombstones repurposed to build forts. Houses were reduced to ruins, and numerous residents were killed.[58] Many Jewish homes were destroyed in Benghazi too, and then they were looted.[59] The bombardments were doubly devastating for Jews, who not only suffered through the fear, destruction, and chaos, but were also made scapegoats for the situation. They endured an increasing number of attacks, the violence encouraged by the frequent power vacuums.[60]

Given the danger of staying in the city and the limited space in public shelters, where fascists sometimes taunted Jews and blocked their entry,[61] many Jews sought refuge in villages and towns on the outskirts of urban areas. In places such as Gharyan, Jaonis, Quwefia, Salawi, Sidi Khalifa, Tajura, and Zavia, Jews rented

---

[56] Federico Cresti, *Storia della Libia contemporanea*, (Rome: Carocci editore, 2018), 129.

[57] Conservative British Communiqués from 1941 claimed that the damage to Benghazi was restricted to the harbor, customs house, and military shops; civilian life was claimed to be continuing as usual since civilians were "hardly injured." Nonetheless, the heavy bombardments which took place in Benghazi and Tobruk destroyed their ports. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Debate in the House of Commons (Libyan Operations and Bombing of Germany), Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons Official Report, June 2, 1942.

[58] Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 28; Stillman, *Jews in Arab Lands*, 448; Abramo Herzl Reginiano, interview by the author, Bat Yam, 8 July, 2019 ; And Raffaele Luzon, interview by the author, via Zoom, November 7, 2019.

[59] Undated, signed copy, Central Zionist Archive, S 6/4582 cited in Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 450-51. Several Jewish witnesses provide accounts of wartime profiteering, as looting of Jewish property often followed the chaos caused by aerial bombardments: Miriam Levi, undated, born in Benghazi in 1927, regarding her experiences in Benghazi and Tunisia, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3558527; Liza (Suares) Naim, interview by Miriam Aviezer, November 19, 1998, born in Derna in 1934, regarding her experiences as a child in Derna and Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3565403.

[60] Notably two Jews, Huato Rubin and Nissim Duani, were killed after the first British retreat in April 1941 (Hoppe, "The Persecution of Jews in Libya Between 1938 and 1945," 59; Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 29).

[61] Effraim Sadan, interview by Dov Gedi, August 14, 2008, born in Benghazi in 1925, regarding his experiences in Benghazi and Giado, Giv'atayim, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/7338459.

houses from locals. Some stayed in Arab homes, rooms, and tents,[62] while others built shelters of their own.[63] This dependence of urban Jews on rural Muslims, and the latter's willingness to offer housing, have sometimes been interpreted as demonstrations of solidarity; the Muslims' responsiveness to the Jewish refugees has even been described as an act of righteousness. Nonetheless, the refuge extended to the Jews was in many cases based on an economic transaction.[64]

The heads of Jewish families who took refuge in towns and villages around Benghazi, Derna, Tripoli and Tobruk ordinarily went to the city to work during the daytime, and returned at night. Women and children were left behind in the Arab towns and villages, a practice indicating a sense of trust and security and being on good terms with their hosts. These positive feelings are also suggested by the movement of some families from one village to another during the war, in a repeated reliance on the friendly reception of local Arabs.

In most cases urban Jewish families paid rent to Arabs for their lodgings, but some were hosted free of charge, whether for just the first few nights or for the long term.[65] The Nahum family from Tripoli enjoyed free housing for two years in the town of Kussabat, 90 kilometers from Tripoli. In addition to giving them a room and plenty of food, which was originally meant for the black market, their host provided armed protection.[66] It appears, then, that the host understood the

---

[62] Hayun Hayun from Derna, for instance, remembers being hosted in the tent of a sheikh and emphasizes the hospitality and help received from Arabs, who assisted his sick brother. Hayun Hayun, interview by Yehudit Soloveichik, December 18, 1995, born in Derna in 1933, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3562536.

[63] Sion Nemni of the Jewish community of Tripoli raised substantial funds to aid homeless Jews who could not afford to rent houses. Sion Nemni, unpublished memoir, cited in De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 178.

[64] Satloff, *Among the Righteous*.

[65] Victor (Vittorio) Kenaf (Genah), interview by Shira Shoshana Carmon, October 13, 1996, born in Tunis in 1918, regarding his experiences in Libya, the British army and aliyah to Eretz Israel in 1943, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3564406, and "Testimony of Victor Kanaf," The Documentation Center of North African Jews During World War II, Ben Zvi Archive, f. 9960.

[66] From there, the Italian police took one of the men of the family to the labor camp of Sidi Azaz, which was located in the periphery of Homs, between Misurata and Tripoli. The camp was established in July 1942. Male Jewish laborers between the ages of 18 and 45 were employed mostly in railway and road construction. Of the 3,000 Jews who were brought to the camp, only 1,000 remained there, as most were freed because it was too challenging for the Italians to provide them

persecution the family was suffering and willingly put himself in the way of danger.[67] Abraham Cohen and his family rented an apartment from Arabs in the outskirts of Tripoli following their escape from Allied bombings. Cohen recalls the arrangement as more than a financial transaction. He recounts how his Muslim hosts welcomed his family "in an extraordinary way, the truth has to be told. They received us, they gave us water and food and whoever was missing things, they brought it to us. [They were] simply partners with all of this, together; what was ours and what was theirs was the same."[68] Testimonies such as this show how the common hardships brought the two communities in close contact and forged bonds between them.

Although Muslim hosts usually made a profit, they were also probably motivated by humanitarian concerns, shared grievances, and a sense of common distress. The challenges of war created such a sense of solidarity that the relationship between the two communities during this period has been described as "a honeymoon."[69] The harmony ended, however, when the religious integrity of the occupied space was seen to be threatened. A group of Jews from Misurata was pressured to leave the village of Zawiet el-Mahjub after they attempted to set up a synagogue.[70] Religious tensions often superseded friendly relations, economic incentive, and wartime solidarity.[71]

---

with food and water. Shmuel Spector and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*, vol.2 (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 1331.

[67] Herbert Samuel Arbib, "Guerra e Fuga," in "L'Olocausto degli Ebrei in Libia," ed. Mati Gilad, *Livluv/Germogli* 2017, 40. Accessed January 17, 2023, https://www.livluv.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/%D7%9C%D7%91%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%91-%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%90%D7%94INT.pdf

[68] Avraham Cohen, undated, born in Tripoli in 1918, on his experiences in Tripoli and Tunisia, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/ 3558528.

[69] Ibid.

[70] De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land*, 183.

[71] Religion was a source of tension prior to the war as well. Witnesses who were young boys at the time recall being beaten for no reason by Muslim youth on the streets of Tripoli and Benghazi. When adults looked into the incidents, however, the juvenile assailants justified their actions by claiming that the Jewish boys had insulted Muhammad. This basic narrative appears in a number of oral interviews as well as Italian documents of the period. For more on the subject, see Harvey Goldberg, "Jewish-Muslim Religious Rivalry in Tripolitania," in *Jewish Life in Muslim Libya*, 82-96.

In Benghazi, the chaos of bombardments and military conflict encouraged wartime profiteering and looting.[72] The Jews who fled Benghazi left their shops, homes, and synagogues vulnerable to pillage and destruction, as was the case after the Italian re-conquest of Cyrenaica in April 1941.[73] Some Arabs took advantage of the situation, joining the Italian *camicie nere*, soldiers and Fascists in the raids, but others helped Jews protect themselves and their property.[74] The Jews who benefited from this help usually belonged to the upper class, had business relations with Arabs, or lived in mixed neighborhoods.[75] Joseph Fadlun recounts that while the shops of his grandfather and uncle were pillaged, his father's shop was spared. His father owed his good fortune to Mustafa, a friend and neighbor shop-owner who wrote the word "*Arabo*" on the front of the father's store, a mark that apparently sufficed to dissuade looters. This was not an isolated case: "whoever had an Arab friend, [the friend would protect] his shop. He wrote on his shop

[72] Although here I emphasize the looting of Jewish property, all locals were targets. Widespread looting occurred during the second British occupation of Cyrenaica, when local Arabs questioned the Italian ability to maintain control and continue promoting their interests. Disillusioned Arabs joined Allied soldiers, who included Indians, Poles, New-Zealanders, Australians, and the Libyan Arab Force, in ransacking hundreds of homes belonging to Italian settlers. The effect on the latter group was dramatic. Italian settlers feared Arabs and Bedouins more than the British, and half of the Italian population fled the Jebel before the third British offensive. (Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia*, 315.)

[73] Jews who remained in the city recount remaining behind locked doors for days on end as they waited for the violence to subside. Joseph Fadlun, interview by Bina Kutner, January 9, 2007, Giv'atayim, born in Benghazi in 1933, on his experiences in Benghazi, Giado and Tripoli, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/6346354; Shlomo Abramovitch, *Ha-yoman ha-ganuz mi-machane ha-rikuz Giado. Sipur shel Shoah neelma be-Luv (mi-yoman shel Yosef Dadush)*, (Rishon LeZion: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2020), 171.

[74] Ibid; Jean Nism, interview by Sigal Amitai Holzmann, July 5, 2017, born in Tripoli in 1927, on his experiences in Benghazi and Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/13172552; Misa Barda, interview by Eliyahu Ben Harush, January 14, 1996, born in Benghazi in 1931, on her experiences in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3563786.

[75] A number of testimonies point to the difference in the treatment of Jews by Muslims of different social status. For example, see Rachel (Tshuva) Beni, interview by Dov Gedi, August 7, 2008, Jaffa, born in Benghazi in 1930, on her experiences as a child in Benghazi, various villages and a camp in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/7321975; see also Liliana Debasc, interview by the author, Rome, February 21, 2019, born in Tripoli in 1939, on her childhood in Tripoli; and Rossana Turi Albanozzo, interview by author, Rome, February 20, 2019, born in Tripoli in 1933, regarding her life in Tripoli.

'arabo,' and nobody touched it."[76] The pervasiveness of looting involved a combination of profiteering, religious and socio-economic rivalry, and encouragement by Italians.[77] On the contrary, protection of fellow residents and their property seems to have been initiated by individuals and driven by selflessness.

Heavy bombardments by the Allies also threatened Jews in forced labor camps.[78] In the labor camp of Buqbuq, located on the Egyptian-Libyan border, Arab Bedouin spies met with Jewish laborers;[79] the meeting points to the Bedouins' association with the Allies that supported and included Jews. During the meeting, Jews reportedly expressed their fear of the bombings, to which the Bedouins responded "*La tachafu"* ("Do not be afraid"). Immediately afterward, the bombing ceased, and the Jews were liberated by the British. Hearing of the incident, an Italian officer asserted that all Bedouins were double agents. The assertion highlights the complexity of the affiliations on the ground and the ways in which various communities were pitted against each other.[80]

[76] Joseph Fadlun, interview by Bina Kutner, January 9, 2007, Giv'atayim, born in Benghazi in 1933, on his experiences in Benghazi, Giado and Tripoli, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/6346354.

[77] Ibid.

[78] No monograph on the labor camps of Libya has yet been published. For an overview of the camps during the Second World War see: Jens Hoppe, "Giado," in Geoffrey P. Megargee, Joseph R. White, Mel Hecker, eds., *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933-1945*, Vol. III, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2018), 527-529.

[79] The camp of Buqbuq was established in August 1942, and most of the inmates were Tripolitanian Jewish men between the ages of 18 and 45. 350 Jewish laborers from the camp of Sidi Azaz were transferred to Buqbuq.

[80] Despite examples of solidarity within the camps, tensions also arose between the Jewish and Muslim laborers. When a dispute between groups of Jews and Muslims in the camp of Sidi Azaz escalated into stone-throwing, an Italian officer shot and killed a Jew. Moshe Hadad/Khadad, January 1, 1984, born in Tripoli in 1905, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3558534; and Rachamim Sidi Ben David, interview by Adina Ben Moshe, December 11, 1984, born in Tripoli in 1913, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/ 3562685.

Barter for Survival

The Jewish communities of eastern Libya endured particularly difficult conditions during the war. Cyrenaica was invaded twice by the British before the Italians' final retreat in February 1943, and after the British withdrew from the region in January 1942, Italy organized the concentration of Jews.[81] During the span of five months in the first half of 1942, around 2600 Cyrenaican Jews with Italian or Libyan citizenship were deported to the concentration camp of Giado, and around 3000 Jews from the region of Tripolitania were enlisted in forced labor.[82]

The use of concentration camps was not new. Two-thirds of Cyrenaica's nomadic and semi-nomadic population had been interned in such camps a decade earlier, when Italian authorities tried to put an end to the anti-colonial resistance. The internment of Bedouins cut them off from the resistance and halted their support for the *mujahedeen*. Additional benefits to the regime included the breaking down of the Bedouin lifestyle and the promotion of sedentarization, as well as the assertion of Italian authority through fear and indoctrination.[83] The historical background shows that the Fascist policies of violence and genocide,[84] which are

[81] This round-up was seen as a necessary retaliation for the Jews' support of the Allies. A letter dated February 7, 1942, from the Minister of Italian Africa Attilio Teruzzi to the Governor General of Libya Ettore Bastico, and the Army Chief of Staff Ugo Cavallero required that "All the Jews of Cyrenaica be evacuated to a concentration camp to be set up in the hinterland of Tripolitania." (Attilio Teruzzi to Ettore Bastico and Ugo Cavallero, "Per ordine Superiore," Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito [AUSSME], N-11, b. 4026).

[82] Approximately 47 of the Jews sent to Giado had Italian citizenship. Foreign Jews were also rounded up, held in camps in Libya and Italy and later turned over to Vichy and Nazi authorities. On British citizens deported to Italy, see Giordana Terracina, "The Deportation of Libyan Jews in the Concentration Camp of Civitella del Tronto and Confinement Town of Camerino," *Trauma and Memory* 4, no.3 (2016): 9-31.

[83] For more on this subject, see Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices: Power and Agency in Colonial and Postcolonial Libya* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya*.

[84] Here I discuss the Fascist regime's displacement of populations and use of concentration camps, but such tactics were used by the liberal regime as well, which had deported to the Italian peninsula individuals and families who were perceived as a threat to colonialism. For more on the subject, see Francesca Di Pasquale, "The 'Other' at Home: Deportation and Transportation of Libyans to Italy during the Colonial Era (1911-1943)," *International Review of Social History* 63, no.26 (2018): 211-231.

still too often ascribed to the Axis alliance or the German presence, were deeply rooted in the longstanding myth of the *Italiani brava gente*.[85]

The concentration camp of Giado, a former army base located on the Tunisian border south-west of Tripoli, was established after the second British retreat.[86] Italians sent Jewish families to Giado beginning in March 1942, with the last large transport leaving Benghazi on June 25th, 1942.[87] Convoys of trucks filled with men, women and children traveled for days to reach the desert camp, where inmates were held for up to fourteen months in appalling conditions that resulted from Italian mismanagement. During World War II, Giado had the highest death rate among the North African concentration camps.[88] Of the 2600 Jews interned there, over 560 died of disease, starvation, and hard labor. Survivors had to await liberation by the British, which took place in January 1943.[89]

The Italian authorities provided little food to the Jews in Giado and the other labor camps, including Buqbuq and Sidi Azaz. In Buqbuq, the daily ration included a loaf of bread and broth with pasta,[90] hardly enough in the dry environment, especially because water was supplied irregularly.[91] The scant rations in Giado consisted of a few grams of rice, oil, sugar, and coffee made of barley.[92] The biggest problem though, was the scarcity of water and the Italian inability to supply it.[93]

---

[85] On the historic memory of colonialism in Italy, see: Angelo Del Boca, "Il Colonialismo Italiano tra miti, rimozioni, negazioni e inadempienze," *Italia Contemporanea* 212 (1998): 589-603.

[86] Testimony of Benedetto Arbib cited in Salerno, *Uccideteli tutti*, 119.

[87] Questura PAI "Due israeliti sono stati avviati in Tripolitania, essendo stato autorizzato tale trasferimento," August 1942, and Comitato di Ricerche Deportati Ebrei, 1964, Yad Vashem Italy Collection 0.31/JM/3383.

[88] Satloff, *Among the Righteous*, 44.

[89] Due to overcrowding in the camp, some Jews were transferred to nearby places, including Gharyan, Yefren and Triginna. Hoppe, "Giado," 528.

[90] Ibid., 89.

[91] "Buqbuq," in Jeffrey P. Magargee, Joseph R.White, and Mel Hecker, eds., *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos,* 1933-1945, vol. 3 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 527.

[92] Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 35.

[93] This issue affected both access to safe drinking water and clean water for hygiene. The poor water conditions were one of the causes that led to a typhus epidemic in Giado in December 1942.

Italians were aware that the rations were insufficient:[94] functionaries openly stated that their goal was to starve the Jews to death.[95] Nonetheless, for a brief period of time, relatives of internees in Sidi Azaz were allowed to send or bring provisions,[96] and forced laborers with money could buy foods such as onions, barley, dates and meat from Arabs in the surrounding villages.[97] Italians allowed some Jews to leave Giado for purchases on a weekly basis, and other inmates took advantage of their labor assignments beyond the barbed wire fence to stop at villages and exchange money, goods, or services for a meal.[98] Others, especially children, sneaked out of the camp to bring back some food.[99] These surreptitious dealings ended when the camp commander allowed Arabs to sell their goods in the camp.[100]

Giado survivors emphasize the importance of bartering that took place at the fence between local Bedouins and Jewish inmates. The goods that Bedouins received, such as diamonds, gold, and clothing, had little or no value within the camp; the food that the Bedouins provided, by contrast, could mean the difference between life and death. Handing over jewelry, golden coins,[101] and wedding gifts in exchange for food was the only way to survive.[102]

---

[94] Salerno, *Uccideteli tutti*, 141.

[95] Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 35.

[96] Salerno, *Uccideteli tutti*, 88.

[97] Nisim Bekhor Mahlouf, interview by Dalia Maoz, March 7, 2010, born in Libya in 1920, on his experiences in Sidi Azaz and World War II, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/8776776.

[98] Some who ventured out to a village near Giado exchanged money or goods for milk and food. Others offered their services, such as sewing clothes.

[99] For examples of children who did so, see Yaakov Khaion, interview by Ronit Wilder, July 12, 1995, born in Benghazi in 1934, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3562777; Amos Naim, interview by Miriam Aviezer, July 21, 1998, born in Benghazi in 1928, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3741592; Eliyahu Fadoln (Fadlun), interview by Dov Gedi, January 8, 2008, born in Benghazi in 1931, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/6963445. Women also sneaked out of the camp for food. See Moshe Mighish, born in Cyrene / Shahhat in 1926, on life under Italian rule and his experiences in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/7392149 and USC Shoah Foundation Archive, no.10595-13.

[100] Amos Naim, interview by Miriam Aviezer, July 21, 1998, born in Benghazi in 1928, on his experiences in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3741592.

[101] "Haim Arbiv," Yad Vashem Torchlighters, 2020. Accessed January 17, 2023, https://www.yadvashem.org/remembrance/archive/torchlighters/arbiv.html.

[102] Rachel (Teshuva) Levi, interview by Sigal Holzmann, September 11, 2006, born in Benghazi in 1925, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/5880765.

When the transactions were forbidden, buyers and sellers incurred significant risk unless the Italian supervisors or the Arab watchmen deliberately or unintentionally ignored the proceedings. Giado survivor Jean Nissim describes the situation: "whoever brought from the Arabs [would] put himself in danger...it was absolutely forbidden... it was a danger, really a danger. If you did such a thing you took responsibility for yourself. They [Italians] did not allow us to do such a thing."[103] One man who was caught exchanging a golden belt for a watermelon was hit by the camp's guards.[104] Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that Jews were willing to risk repercussions; what is less obvious is the willingness of Arab sellers to put themselves in danger. A survivor recalls: "they were also afraid because they were forbidden from doing it, so it was through signals and under the fence. It's possible they spoke to the elders or gave signals or that the guards looked the other way."[105] An Arab guard's simple act of turning away could be crucial to the possibility of bartering across the barbed wire.[106] This complicity, especially against the background of Italians' ruthlessness, explains why survivors of Giado characterize the Arab guards as gentler than their Italian counterparts.[107] The relationship between local Arabs and Jewish internees was clearly not one between equals; aside from the different status of Jews and Arabs on the colonial regime's racial scale, there was the obvious fact that one group was confined and the other was free. But the Arab population of Cyrenaica had endured its own displacement and imprisonment in previous decades, and to some degree, the experience must have encouraged them to provide support for the current victims of the same fate.

Some Arabs, however, felt little empathy. When the convoy to Giado passed through villages and cities, Jews had a chance for last-minute purchases or a final

[103] Jean Nissim, interview by Sigal Amitai Holzmann, July 5, 2017, born in Tripoli in 1928, on his experiences in Benghazi and in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/13172552.
[104] Hana Ben Oz, interview by the author, born in Benghazi 1938, on her life in Benghazi and Giado, Ramat Gan, 2 February, 2020.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Italian guards could also be corrupted, and would look away. Yaakov Khaion, interview by Ronit Wilder, July 12, 1995, born in Benghazi in 1934, on his experiences in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3562777.
[107] Yehuda Chachmon, interview by Adina Ben Shemesh, undated, born in Benghazi in 1932, on his experiences in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3562945.

meal in freedom.[108] In at least one case, Arabs threw rotten tomatoes at Jews who passed through their town.[109] Giado survivor Eliyahu Fadlon recalls that Arabs who lived nearby exhibited hostility and threw stones at the prisoners.[110]
There was no uniformity, then, in the Muslim attitude, but the Jews who were interned in Giado, Sidi Azaz, Buerat el Hsun, and Tajoura,[111] camps where bartering occurred, relied heavily on their Arab neighbors. Without these exchanges, the Jews could not have sustained themselves on the meager rations provided by the Italians.[112] Significantly, Jews could ensure their survival in this way only because of the Italians' disregard, tacit approval, or corruption, as well as the willingness of Zaptié guards to turn a blind eye.[113]

Muslim Men in Italian Uniforms

It is hard to determine the exact number of *mutalinin* literally, "those who 'went Italian.'" Muslims from both modest and high-ranking families from Tripolitania and Cyrenaica collaborated with the colonial regime.[114] Some were motivated by personal interest and ambitions, but other factors included Italian coercion and ingrained colonial control structures.[115] Muslims became soldiers, *carabinieri*, and policemen, and these roles led to encounters with members of the Jewish

[108] Abramovitch, *Ha-yoman ha-ganuz*, 174-175.
[109] Jean Nissim, interview by Sigal Amitai Holzmann, July 5, 2017, born in Tripoli in 1928, on his experiences in Benghazi and in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/13172552.
[110] Eliyahu Fadoln (Fadlun), interview by Dov Gedi, January 8, 2008, born in Benghazi in 1931, on his experiences as a child in Benghazi and Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/6963445.
[111] Jews in these camps were allowed to purchase food from villages surrounding the camps.
[112] Abramovitch, *Ha-yoman ha-ganuz*, 175. Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 35; Simon, "It Could Have Happened," 411.
[113] Abramovitch, *Ha-yoman ha-ganuz*, 177.
[114] As Ahmida stresses, the tribal makeup of Libyan society played an essential role in the decision of individual tribes to collaborate or resist. There were also "waverers," or tribes who did not take a stance for or against the Italian occupation. Some tribes that fought alongside Italians and enjoyed the associated profits did so for reasons that had little to do with Italy: these tribes saw their collaboration as a way to retaliate against their tribal enemies, whom they considered a greater threat to their interests than the colonizing forces. Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices*, 30.
[115] Ibid., 27-30.

community during the Second World War II. Within the colonial ranks, Muslims both contributed to anti-Jewish persecution and alleviated Jewish suffering.

Italians had enlisted Libyan Muslims in the military since the liberal period and efforts to retain these soldiers persisted throughout the *ventennio*.[116] The eruption of the Second World War intensified recruitment efforts, whose success owed much to the droughts that affected the livelihood of Bedouins in eastern Libya.[117] A classified Italian letter of 1941 shows the colonial interests that underlay this recruitment effort.[118] The letter describes the natives as "disoriented," labels them as either traitorous or indifferent, and proposes a carrot-and-stick solution. The carrot would consist of generous distribution of food to the majority population,[119] along with an increase in pay for military recruits, and the stick would include the "disciplining" of Muslims who had deserted the army during the Italian retreat of 1941. Deserters were indeed rounded up and sent to Tripolitania for more military training,[120] and after the first British retreat, a larger number of Libyan natives were recruited into the Italian army, the PAI and the Carabinieri, as well as hired as laborers, and their pay was increased.[121]

As members of the Italian forces, Muslim men were involved in the deportation of Jews to Giado and the supervision of Jewish prisoners in that camp as well as others. Through these assignments, the Italian colonial authorities tried to create a rift between the two communities.[122] Nonetheless, Jews found the presence of Muslims somewhat helpful, since Arab guards were apparently less strict than

---

[116] After Graziani was promoted to vice-governor, he expelled Libyan battalions as well as bands of irregular soldiers, whom he did not consider trustworthy. Angelo del Boca, *Italiani brava gente?* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 2019), 181.

[117] Taddeo Orlando, "Relazione Semestrale (Gennaio-Giugno 1936). Ordinamento ed Addestramento," Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, f. N-11,b. 4026, f. 11.

[118] Already in previous decades the Italian army had hired Eritrean troops and local Arabs, particularly from Tripolitania, in an effort to quell the anti-colonial resistance in Eastern Libya. Letter from Badoglio to Rodolfo Graziani, "Governo della Tripolitania e della Cirenaica Il Governatore," July 16, 1930, Fondo Rodolfo Graziani, Documentazione 1903-1955, Archivi di Famiglie e di Persone, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 8.

[119] During World War II, the General Commander of Armed Forces in Libya visited the colonial forces in the Sahara region and distributed food to Muslims there.

[120] Ibid. Letter dated April 22, 1941, sent from A. Ferrara to Meregazzi.

[121] Ibid.

[122] This divide-and-rule policy and colonial violence intertwined with the development of racism and antisemitism, were determining factors in the definition of the New Italian.

their Italian counterparts. Arab guards not only turned a blind eye to the dealings at the barbed-wire fences but also avoided using violence against the prisoners.[123] Giado survivor Yehuda Chachmon remembers that the Arabs under Italian command maintained good relations with Jews, unlike the Italian guards that would use torture or "make trouble."[124] The same perception was shared by Bedouins. Said Yousef Absa, who joined the ranks of the Italian PAI, asserts that while Italians were mean, Arab members of the PAI and askaris tried to make the internment less burdensome for the Jews.[125]

Significantly, no Arabs from Cyrenaica volunteered to fight in Nazi Arab units; instead, they fought German and Italian forces alongside the Allies. Bedouins helped transport supplies across the Libyan-Egyptian border and carried out guerrilla warfare. Indeed, the Senoussis, unlike the secular nationalists of Tripolitania, fought on the same side as Jews during the war—a fact that was recognized by the British authorities following their takeover and that determined the leadership of the future independent state of Libya.[126]

Sharing Peril and Opposition

The solidarity between Libyan Jews and Muslims during the Fascist period as a whole and the Second World War in particular has received less attention than the worsening of the relationship between the two communities. The Italian occupation and its Fascist "parenthesis"[127] has been deemed a period of general well-being for the Jewish community of the colony, at least in comparison to later persecutions.[128] The prevailing narrative of Jewish-Muslim relations in Libya is

[123] Hana Ben Oz, interview by the author, on her life in Benghazi and Giado, February 2, 2020, Ramat Gan.

[124] Yehuda Chachmon, interview by Adina Ben Shemesh, undated, born in Benghazi in 1932, on his experiences in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3562945.

[125] Salerno, *Uccideteli tutti*, 146.

[126] Abramski-Bligh, "L'influence de la Seconde Guerre mondiale sur les relations judéo-arabes en Libye et en Tunisie," 332.

[127] The notion that Fascism was merely a "parenthesis" in Italian history has been a major stumbling block in Italy's reckoning with its past.

[128] This view is linked to nostalgia for life under Italian rule, which is frequently expressed in memories and testimonies by Jews in Israel, Italy and the US. Harvey E. Goldberg, "Jews in Libya

linear: antagonism that escalated with the Second World War and the British occupation of 1943, culminating in the anti-Jewish pogroms of 1945 and 1948 during the British Military Administration, and the final exodus of Jews in 1967.[129] Instead of seeing the final years of Italy's occupation as a prelude to the disintegration of amicable relations, I suggest that the period should be understood as a time when Jews and Muslims shared a variety of challenges that brought the communities closer together, despite the shifting political and legal frameworks that threatened each group differently. The war brought common concerns that contributed to a sense of camaraderie, and these concerns went beyond everyday difficulties such as food scarcity and lack of security.

Most fundamentally, the two groups were united in the goal of ridding Libya of Italians. The Italians themselves saw Jews and Senussis as partners of the British, and indeed individuals from both groups sided with the Allies, engaged in anti-Italian activity,[130] and worked together in the pillage of Italian properties and the destruction of Italian agricultural villages.[131] The common goal of Jews and Muslims, "that the Italians and Germans would lose,"[132] could outweigh pre-existing tensions between the two religious groups and even eclipse the inter-religious violence, that still occurred.

The war intensified the Italians' response to individuals and groups who were perceived as a threat to the regime, and both Jews and Muslims felt the effects. Italian efforts to eliminate espionage, along with the lack of local infrastructure, led to the expulsion of foreign citizens, Jews and Muslims alike.[133]Accusations of

during WWII and the 1945 Anti-Jewish Riots. Aspects of History and Memorial Making," unpublished.

[129] Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*; Maurice Roumani, "The Final Exodus of Libyan Jews in 1967," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 19, no. 3-4 (2007): 77-100.

[130] The Senussi, a Sufi order, were active in the fight against colonial expansion in the early 1900s. On Senussi resistance to Italians, see Edward Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949); Saima Raza, "Italian Colonization and Libyan Resistance to the Al-Sanusi of Cyrenaica (1911-1922)," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in Asia* 6, no.1 (2012): 87-120.

[131] Picciotto, "Gli ebrei in Libia sotto la dominazione italiana," 102.

[132] Moshe Mighish describes numerous acts of animosity between Jews and Arabs, including being exposed as a Jew to Germans by Arab coworkers. Nonetheless, he concludes that the aim of overthrowing Italians took precedence over any interest in inter-religious tensions.

[133] Muslim foreigners were mostly French subjects (*sudditi* or *protetti*). Jewish foreigners included refugees from Europe who were passing through Benghazi on their way to further destinations.

disloyalty to the regime were used to legitimize persecution. While Jews faced collective punishment, individual Arabs who supported the British were detained in camps.[134]

The main trend I have identified during this period, a time when Jews faced unprecedented persecution by the Fascist regime, is that ordinary Muslims provided significant assistance, particularly in non-urban areas, offering shelter during air raids, making food available in labor and concentration camps, and even helping some Jews escape their internment.[135] Muslims continued to help as Jews

---

After the Italian declaration of war, these refugees were also detained. Their ranks included many Germans as well as a group of 300 who were on their way to Thailand when they were arrested. The Italian authorities debated whether to send the group to Italy and subsequently to their original countries or to allow them to continue their journey. The case demonstrates the colony's lack of infrastructure and funds during the period: in their communications, the colonial authorities in Libya pointed out that they could neither afford to maintain the group nor cover the costs of their transport elsewhere. Meanwhile, authorities in Rome discouraged the transfer of foreign Jews to Italy because the peninsula lacked a system of camps where they could be detained. Despite these obstacles, Italian authorities began arranging for the internment of foreign Jews in Libya in 1941 and the eventual deportation of British subjects among them. The same year, negotiations began with France regarding the expulsion and transfer of French Jews from Libya. Finally, in February 1942, Minister of Italian Africa Attilio Teruzzi wrote to Governor General of Libya Bastico and Chief of Italian Supreme Command (the armed forces) Ugo Cavallero that all Jews in Cyrenaica were to be interned in a camp in Tripolitania. The message also specified that Jews of Tripolitania would be transferred at a later stage and the possibility of deporting all Jews to Italy had been considered but ultimately rejected for lack of infrastructure. "Internamento stranieri residenti in Libia," Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati, Archivio Generale (1870-1958), Massime, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 105, f. 16, sf. 1, ins. 23/1. Attilio Teruzzi to Ettore Bastico and Ugo Cavallero, "Per ordine Superiore," September 8, 1941, Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, N-11, b. 4026.

[134] Benghazi resident Abdalla ben Auad was interned on October 20, 1942, in Sidi Abdulkerim (Tagiura/Tajoura) for sympathizing with the British, and Ali Hassan Lunes, suspected of planning anti-Italian actions, was sent to the concentration camp of Zuetina in 1940. While some Arabs were detained in camps, others were sent to the *confino*, as was the case for Ali Ben Hamed, arrested on suspicion of spying in 1942. "Indigeni processati e condannati," Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, b. 16, f. 9, sf. 1.2-4; And Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Vol. II, Archivio Storico Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 180/44, f. 155.

[135] Zion Labi, a Tunisian citizen who lived in Tripoli, was interned at Buerat el-Hsun following the Italian declaration of war in June 1940. After spending three months at the camp, he was sent back to Tripoli, then brought back to the camp for a year. He was freed through the intervention of Shekh Bey Frebisha, but he was eventually deported to Civitella del Tronto and later Bergen-Belsen. Zion Lavi, undated, born in Tripoli in 1922, on his experiences in Civitella Del Tronto,

returned to the cities after the liberation of the camps. On their way to Tripoli from Sidi Azaz, freed Jewish laborers with no ability to pay were nonetheless given bread and dates by Arabs.[136] Urban Muslims offered food and employment and extended a warm welcome to their neighbors and business partners.[137] Jews were told that they had been missed during the period of hardship, and that their return was seen as a sign that calm was returning.[138]

It is notable that under the Italian regime both communities experienced the camps, but at different periods. The camp was not only the setting of a common experience of suffering, but also a space where the colonial divide-and-rule method was revealed. This strategy went beyond the attempt to isolate groups in order to minimize or eliminate the impact of those who opposed the Italian regime, as in the way Bedouin tribes were separated from anti-colonial fighters during the Pacification or Jews were excluded from society during the Second World War. The colonial regime was actively trying to manipulate the relations between Jews and Muslims. Thus, even the son of a Bedouin leader who had fought Italians in the 1920s and1930s and who might have himself been interned by the Fascists, could become a guard in Giado. This was the case of Said Yousef Absa, and it shows how different generations of colonized subjects, even within the same family, could change loyalties. As he shared his memories, Said Yousef Absa proudly gave a Roman salute, perhaps a sign that the history of the Fascists' brutal repression still demands our attention.[139]

In studies of Fascist repression, Jewish and Muslim victims rarely appear simultaneously. Jewish suffering of the period tends to be enveloped in Holocaust

---

Bergen-Belsen and camps in Germany, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3558538.

[136] Josef Dabash (Davash), interview by Moshe Shickler, August 9, 2000, born in Tripoli in 1923, on his experiences in forced labor camps in Libya, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/3764095.

[137] Josef Naim, born in Benghazi in 1928, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/7285647; Joseph Fadlun, interview by Bina Kutner, January 9, 2007, born in Benghazi in 1933, on his experiences in Benghazi, Giado and Tripoli, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/6346354.

[138] Rachel (Tshuva) Beni, interview August 7, 2008, born in Benghazi in 1930, on her experiences as a child in Benghazi, villages and a camp in Giado, Yad Vashem Testimonies Collection, Interview 0.3/7321975.

[139] Salerno, *Uccideteli tutti,* 145.

narratives, and the Jews of Libya are generally excluded from the European paradigm of Holocaust research. Muslim suffering, seen as part of the purview of colonial history, is generally omitted from Italian historical accounts. A careful look at the Jews' and Muslims' common experience of racial persecution, deportation, internment and forced labor may not only explain acts of solidarity between the two communities but also open up the possibility of dismantling paradigmatic memory politics. Instead of focusing on a hierarchy of suffering or a comparison between colonial repression and the Holocaust, we might see instead the complexities of the Jewish and Muslim experience under colonizers too often depicted as *brava gente*, and the racial paradigms and modes of violence which drove the fascist agenda.

Livia Tagliacozzo is writing her PhD at the Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under the supervision of Prof. Manuela Consonni and Prof. Ethan Katz. Her research deals with concentration camps set up in Libya during the fascist *ventennio*. She received a BA in the Multidisciplinary Program in the Humanities from Tel Aviv University and MA in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is the recipient of the President's Fellowship for Academic Excellence awarded by the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel School for Advanced Study in the Humanities, matched by the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism. Among her awards: the Doctoral Felix Posen Scholarship, the Corinaldi research grant from the European Forum, and a research award from the Ben Zvi Institute for the study of Jewish communities in the East.

Keywords: Libya, World War II, Forced Labor, Concentration Camp, Solidarity

How to quote this article:
Livia Tagliacozzo, "Solidarity Among Colonial Subjects in Wartime Libya, 1940-1943," in "Miscellanea," ed. Quest Editorial Staff, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 21, no. 2 (2022), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/13668