



CELEBRATING ERITREAN SOLDIERS AND ITALIAN IDENTITY *Anch'io per la tua bandiera: Il V battaglione ascari in missione sul fronte libico (1912)*. By Zaccaria. Ravenna, Italy: Giorgio Pozzi Editore, 2013. Pp. 263. €17, paperback (ISBN 978-88-96117-26-2).

GIACOMO MACOLA

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CELEBRATING ERITREAN SOLDIERS AND ITALIAN IDENTITY

Anch'io per la tua bandiera: Il V battaglione ascari in missione sul fronte libico (1912).

By Massimo Zaccaria.

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Key Words: Eritrea, Libya, colonial, military, identity.

Contemporary political debates about the experience of colonial troops – Dr. Massimo Zaccaria, of the University of Pavia, reminds us in his very stimulating book – are by no means new. Virtually every modern imperial power struggled to come to terms with the problems posed by the ambiguous social location occupied by locally recruited soldiers. The problems were never satisfactorily resolved and colonial askari (from the Arabic word for ‘soldier’) found themselves at the receiving end of conflicting policies and ideological impulses throughout the era of formal European rule. During the Fascist invasion

of Ethiopia, for instance, when Eritrean soldiers reached the outskirts of Addis Ababa earlier than their metropolitan counterparts Mussolini himself insisted that they be prevented from entering the defeated *Negus*' capital before the metropolitan troops, whom Fascist propaganda would present as the conflict's sole victors. In other circumstances, however, rather than being studiously excised from official propaganda, the figure of the 'martial [yet] loyal native soldier' could be foregrounded and broadcast as one of the precious few tangible symbols of the success of Europe's 'civilizing mission'. Thus, European discourse about African colonial troops has always been informed by what Zaccaria calls a tension between the 'logic of erasure' and that of 'celebration' (p. 13). It is with the latter dimension that this book is particularly concerned.

The Fifth battalion of the colonial troops in Eritrea was the first of many askari units to serve in the long-drawn-out Libyan campaign. Indeed, its formation at the beginning of 1912 can legitimately be seen as having ushered in the transformation of Eritrea into Italy's *colonia degli ascari*. Partly because of this, celebrations—as the book's first three substantive chapters ably demonstrate—punctuated the life of the 1,122-strong unit during its first year of existence. The tone for several later occasions was set on 1 February, when the Fifth battalion's embarkation at Massawa provided the opportunity for staging an imposing parade during which both Italian and local Coptic and Muslim authorities exhorted the departing askari to prove their mettle in combat and, by so doing, show themselves worthy of Italy's trust and benevolent rule. One week later, the battalion's arrival in Tripoli was greeted with rapture by Italian soldiers and civilians, who (unrealistically) expected the askari to help them win, not only the war, but also the Libyans' hearts and minds. One voice that went against the tide of enthusiasm was that of Giuseppe Bevione, the *La Stampa* correspondent who wondered whether the Italians in Tripoli ought not to have taken a leaf out of the English's book and refrained from upsetting colonial racial hierarchies by openly 'fraternizing with subject people' (p. 51).

Similar concerns resurfaced in July, when the Fifth battalion was rewarded for its distinguished contribution to the Libyan campaign with a bonus trip to Italy. The peoples of Naples and Rome, the two cities visited by the Fifth, mobbed the askari at every opportunity and generally exhibited all the symptoms of what a caustic *Il Messaggero* journalist called 'acute askarophilia' (p. 96). Repeated displays of mass enthusiasm (an estimated 200,000 people witnessed the askari's departure from Naples on 26 July) reveal the extent to which colonial aspirations permeated Italian society. They, also however, threatened to sabotage the regimented liturgy of such formal ceremonies as royal salutes and visits to patriotic monuments and other national symbols. In 'exhibiting' and glorifying the askari, official discourse aimed at celebrating Italy's colonial mission *without* eliminating what army officer Roberto Barbeta termed the 'unbridgeable gap' between the 'man of colour' and his 'white dominator' (p. 97). Yet, concerned authorities and elite commentators observed, such considerations were seemingly foreign to the common people, whose delirious embrace of the askari was viewed as being inconsistent with the dignity that behoved a 'colonizing race'. What the celebrations surrounding the askari illuminated, then, was the existence of contrasting notions about how best to live up to the country's alleged colonial vocation. The playing out of these contradictory motives is also examined in the fourth chapter of the book, devoted to the return of the Fifth in Eritrea in August, and in its three concluding chapters. Adopting a thematic—as opposed to

chronological – perspective, chapters Five, Six, and Seven focus, respectively, on the relationships between askaris and writing, the politics of clothing the askaris, and the ways in which perceptions of the askaris in both Eritrea and Italy were colored by gender concerns and the pervading fear of miscegenation.

Given the extent to which it draws on iconographic sources and media representations, and because of the emphasis it places on the role of the colonies in the construction of Italian identity and popular culture, *Anch'io per la tua bandiera* speaks to some of the most important insights of the so-called 'new imperial historiography', whose coming to fruition in Italian Africanist circles this excellently researched and profusely illustrated volume epitomizes.

GIACOMO MACOLA
University of Kent

REVISITING THE MYTHOLOGY OF AFRIKANER IDENTITY

The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History.

By Elizabeth van Heyningen.

Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2013. Pp. xvii + 391. \$28.75; R 255,36, hardback (ISBN 978-1-4314-0542-8). doi:10.1017/S0021853713000613

Key Words: South Africa, health, labour, violence, warfare.

This is a path-breaking discussion of the camps of the Anglo-Boer (or South African War) of 1899–1902, focusing particularly on their medical record. Within South Africa's contested history these concentration camps have provoked the most passionate and rancorous debate, where testimony on the sufferings of Afrikaner women and children under the allegedly brutal treatment by the British is constantly refreshed in popular memory.

The author takes a closely focused view, assuming that the reader is informed about the wider context in which the camps operated – a political divide between the two Afrikaner republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State and the British territories of the Cape and Natal which had led to military conflict between the distinctive commando organisation of the Afrikaners and the conventional armed force of the British. Perhaps the readership is conceived of as South African, because there is also a need for consistent (rather than occasional) translation of Afrikaans words and quotations. These two features are regrettable because this is an important historiographical contribution which merits an international readership.

War involved the burning of Boer farms by British forces, resulting in the expedient formation of camps for displaced, destitute Afrikaners and Africans. In this *ad hoc* creation, disputes between external military and civilian authorities, as well as internally between superintendents and medical officers, occurred as each attempted to achieve bureaucratic efficiency, sanitary hygiene, or financial economy. Despite constant tensions over expenditures, in reality the camps cost a trivial 1.73 per cent of the vast British war