

**The Italian Communist Party in Somalia  
between colonial legacies and party pedagogy**

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Questo articolo tenta di analizzare alcuni quesiti storiografici concernenti il rapporto tra comunismo italiano e colonialismo, sollevati dalla presenza di una sezione del Partito Comunista Italiano (Pci) sorta a Mogadiscio nel 1942. Innanzitutto, si contestualizza la nascita di questa sezione nella Somalia occupata dalle forze britanniche, focalizzandosi sui rapporti con l'amministrazione militare e con la comunità italiana. Ci si sofferma poi sull'attività dei comunisti di Mogadiscio e sui rapporti con il Pci, rispetto a cui la sezione sembrerebbe essere sorta in sostanziale autonomia. Se ciò conferma una notevole circolazione di idee e pratiche del movimento comunista al di là dei network della Terza internazionale, allo stesso tempo risulta un elemento atipico nel contesto politico di questi anni. L'articolo identifica poi il reclutamento di militanti attuato nei campi di prigionia inglesi da parte della sezione come una peculiare declinazione del "partito nuovo" togliattiano. Infine, ci si sofferma sull'atteggiamento paternalista e colonialista alla base dell'esclusione dei somali dall'orizzonte politico della sezione.

**Parole chiave:** Partito Comunista Italiano, Partito Nuovo, Somalia, Colonialismo italiano, Mogadiscio, Terza internazionale

This article addresses a number of historiographical questions about the relationship between Italian communism and colonialism. It does so by analysing the presence of a section of the Italian Communist Party in Mogadishu in 1942. After describing its origins and relations with the military administration and the Italian community in British-occupied Somalia, the article examines the activities of the communists in Mogadishu and their relationship with the party, from which the local section seems to have been quite autonomous. While this confirms that the ideas and practices of the communist movement circulated well beyond the networks of the Third International, it is also an atypical element in the political context of those years. The article then identifies the section's recruitment of militants in British prison camps as a peculiar variation of the Togliattian 'new party', before concluding with a discussion of the paternalist and colonialist attitudes underlying the exclusion of Somalis from the section's political horizon.

**Key words:** Italian Communist Party, new party, Somalia, Italian colonialism, Mogadishu, Third International

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## Introduction

The British occupation of Somalia and the rest of the Horn of Africa in 1941 put an end to the brief imperial experience of the Fascist regime, but it did not mean the end of the Italian presence in these places. Contrary to what happened in Ethiopia, where the immediate restoration of Haile Selassie's empire led to a more rapid erosion of the influence and size of the Italian community, Eritrea and Somalia were governed by the British Military Administration (hereafter BMA); for at least a decade, various Italian party sections emerged, while a substantial public opinion developed.<sup>1</sup> Somalia, in particular, was marked by more structured political experiences, capable of uniting and mobilising parts of the Italian community that were scattered throughout the territories of the former empire. This article aims to shed light on one of these political experiences, the Mogadishu section of the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, hereafter PCI), founded in 1942 by a group of workers cooperating with the occupation forces, and to analyse a number of issues related to its work in Somalia.

To date, historiography on Italian colonialism has only sporadically studied the post-war occupation of Somalia before the Italian trusteeship. Some publications have placed the issue mainly within the diplomatic discussions that preceded the ratification of the 1947 Peace Treaty, thus focusing on the historical-diplomatic dimension.<sup>2</sup> Among the studies dealing with this transitional phase, which has received far less attention than the dark period of the empire and the Italian "return" in 1950, it is worth mentioning a work by Angelo Del Boca, a recent contribution by Annalisa Urbano and Antonio Varsori on the Mogadishu massacre and two articles by Giampaolo Calchi Novati.<sup>3</sup> Despite the different focus and perspectives, these texts manage to merge the intricate diplomatic events that determined the fate of the former Italian colony with the dynamics and actors that characterised this territory between 1941 and 1950. An analysis of the historiography of the decade of British occupation

<sup>1</sup> References can be found in Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale. La caduta dell'impero*, Milan, Mondadori, 2014; Antonio Varsori, Annalisa Urbano, *Mogadiscio 1948. Un eccidio di italiani tra decolonizzazione e guerra fredda*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2019; Antonia Bullotta, *La Somalia sotto due bandiere*, Milan, Garzanti, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the classic study by Gianluigi Rossi, *L'Africa italiana verso l'indipendenza (1941-1949)*, Milan, Giuffrè, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> A. Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, cit.; A. Varsori, A. Urbano, *Mogadiscio 1948*, cit.; Giampaolo Calchi Novati, *Gli incidenti di Mogadiscio del gennaio 1948: rapporti italo-inglesi e nazionalismo somalo*, "Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente", n. 3/4, 1980, pp. 327-356; Giampaolo Calchi Novati, *Una rilettura degli incidenti di Mogadiscio del gennaio 1948 e il difficile rapporto fra somali e italiani*, "Studi Piacentini", n. 1, 1994, pp. 223-234. See also Annalisa Urbano, "That is why we have troubles": *The pro-Italia's challenge to nationalism in British-occupied Somalia*, "The Journal of African History", n. 3, 2016.

thus allows us to address questions that shift the focus away from international relations and towards the nature of the relationship between the three communities that coexisted in Somalia at the time: those of the British, the Italians and the Somalis. In this article, I will focus on the ambiguous position of the Italians as former colonisers, the Somalis' degree of political self-determination and the extent to which the British exercised their dominance over these components.

Studying the birth of a communist section in Mogadishu, mostly composed of workers who had emigrated to the empire and former military personnel, enables me to bring into dialogue two fields of historiographical research that generally do not communicate very well: the study of colonialism and that of communism, especially Italian communism. Within the latter strand, the recent works of Pons and Studer have highlighted the global dimension of communism, which they argue is characterised by a circulation of people and ideas capable of forming a network reaching far beyond the narrow circle of sections of the Third International. The existence of a communist movement governed by the USSR but with points of reference all over the world remained a constant feature from the foundation of the Comintern until 1991.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, scholars have also sought to study the case of the Italian party from this perspective; as a study by Borruso and a recent work by Siracusano on the relationship between the PCI and the decolonisation movements in Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate, between the two wars and after the Second World War, the Italian communists managed to weave a dense network of international relations with very different actors.<sup>5</sup> Borruso emphasised that the PCI, in the context of African decolonisation, assumed a role of liaison with the anti-colonial struggle thanks to its “third” position, which contributed to supporting the ‘African paths to socialism’, but that it also became a reference point for the liberation movements themselves.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the observation that European communists had to confront themselves with non-European realities and the impact of the communist message on places where Marxist thought had never penetrated open up new avenues of investigation.

Based on these historiographical premises, we can raise a number of questions about the Italian communists' intervention in Somalia, which I will try to answer in this article. How did the party's transformations in Italy translate

<sup>4</sup> Among the many studies on communism in a global perspective, it is worth mentioning Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*, London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015; Silvio Pons, *La rivoluzione globale. Storia del comunismo internazionale 1917-1991*, Turin, Einaudi, 2012; S. Pons, *I comunisti italiani e gli altri. Visioni e legami internazionali nel mondo del Novecento*, Turin, Einaudi, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Paolo Borruso, *Il PCI e l'Africa indipendente: apogeo e crisi di un'utopia socialista (1956-1989)*, Florence, Le Monnier, 2009; Gabriele Siracusano, “Pronto per la Rivoluzione!”. *I comunisti italiani e francesi in Africa centro-occidentale (1958-1968)*, Rome, Carocci, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> P. Borruso, *Il PCI e l'Africa indipendente*, cit., p. 9.

into the context of Somalia during the transition? Who did the PCI section in Mogadishu address? And what spaces for political manoeuvre did its members carve out for themselves in occupied Somalia? First, I argue that the recruitment of militants held in the British prison camps by the Mogadishu communists is a peculiar declination of the ‘new party’, a definition that — among its various implications — reflects the PCI’s evolution from a clandestine vanguard party to a mass party. In fact, two aspects of the new party line of Italian communism emerge in the section’s policy and activity in the camps: a pedagogical function and mass recruitment. Second, despite the proportionally high numbers of militants that the communists managed to welcome in their ranks, one part of colonial society remained excluded from their discourse and political action: the Somali population. Starting from this absence, I will reflect on the exclusionary dynamics that characterised the history of the Mogadishu section and, in particular, how the application of racism in a communist discourse can shed light on the deep contradictions of an ideological-cultural framework that was fundamentally Eurocentric, despite its internationalist premises. In addition to existing scholarship, I will draw on archival sources held at the Fondazione Gramsci di Roma — in particular the papers produced by the section, gathered in the ‘Pci, sezione di Mogadiscio’, ‘Mosca’ and ‘mf 312’ collections — and the National Archives in London, including the ‘War Office 230’ and ‘Foreign Office 371’ series, which mainly contain correspondence and reports by ministerial and military officials. Although these sources provide a clear picture, we must bear in mind the particular needs and perspectives of the actors who produced them; just as the leadership of the Mogadishu section tried to put its activities in the best possible light in order to legitimise itself before the party in Italy, especially in the reports sent to the PCI administration,<sup>7</sup> the British authorities tended to soften the complexity of relations and political nuances within the Italian community. Moreover, in the British papers of the late 1940s (i.e. in the midst of the Cold War), it is not uncommon to find a concern about communist influence that sometimes seems disproportionate to the actual situation.<sup>8</sup>

The first part of the article focuses on the historical-political context of Somalia during the BMA, emphasising the relationship between the Italian community and the new occupiers. Next, I will analyse the activity of the Mogadishu section, especially its relationship with other Italian political forma-

<sup>7</sup> For example, Aldebrando Melelli, secretary of the Mogadishu section, pompously praised its activity: ‘[T]he section [...] has served, in the face of the collapse of so many illusions and myths, as a driving force of the best energies and succeeded in making thousands and thousands of Italians meditate on the most serious problems that, as events unfolded, were posed to Italians at home.’ Melelli’s report on the political activity of the Mogadishu section, November 1946, in Fondazione Istituto Gramsci (FIG), Rome, Archivio del Partito Comunista Italiano (APC), Sezione esteri, mf 115, 476/483.

<sup>8</sup> See Effie Pedaliu, *Italy, Britain and the Origins of the Cold War*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

tions and the contacts with the PCI in Italy and its political culture. Assuming that the changes affecting the PCI after the Second World War influenced the section, I then interpret the recruitment of the Prisoners of War in the British camps as a kind of translation of the PCI's new political line into the context of occupied East Africa. To conclude, I will highlight the limitations and contradictions inherent in the actions of the communists in Mogadishu, especially the total exclusion of the Somali population as a political referent and the presence of paternalism and racism in their political discourse.

### **Public opinion building in the years of the BMA**

On 25 February 1941, Commonwealth troops entered Mogadishu and put an end to Italian rule in Somalia. The BMA established a regime of military occupation, with the explicit and immediate purpose of ensuring order, starting a peace process and drawing on the resources of the territory to support the Allied war effort. For almost a decade of occupation, the lack of soldiers and means did not allow the BMA to go much beyond a semi-permanent state of exception. The promises to emancipate the Somali population after the end of Fascist rule were fulfilled to a much lesser extent than expected,<sup>9</sup> while the exponential rise in prices took its toll on local communities, preventing a substantial recovery of the economy.

Nonetheless, or perhaps precisely because of its limited reach, the BMA never sought to hinder the formation of public opinion among both Italians and Somalis. In particular, the British welcomed with some sympathy the emergence of Somali nationalism, mainly represented by the Somali Youth League (hereafter SYL). The League's main programme was to unite all the Somali-speaking regions of the Horn of Africa into a 'Greater Somalia',<sup>10</sup> an ambitious project involving the unification of Italian Somalia, British Somaliland, Djibouti and the Ogaden region, controlled by Ethiopia. This political design was supported by the former administrative division of Italian East Africa, in which all "Somalias" — including Ogaden — were united under a single governorate. Although it presented considerable political difficulties, especially in terms of its relationship with the Ethiopian Empire, the idea of a 'Greater Somalia' could count on the support of the British, to the point that in 1946 Foreign Minister Bevin called for its establishment during a conference prior to the ratification of the Peace Treaty.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Annalisa Urbano, *Between occupation and liberation: Italian Somalia under British rule, 1941-1945*, in Ashley Jackson, Yasmin Khan, Gajendra Singh (eds.), *An Imperial World at War. The British Empire, 1939*, London-New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> Antonio M. Morone, *L'ultima colonia. Come l'Italia è tornata in Africa 1950-1960*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2011, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Cedric Barnes, *The Somali Youth League, Ethiopian Somalis and the Greater Somalia Idea, c. 1946-48*, "Journal of Eastern African Studies", 2007, n. 2, pp. 278-280.



In any case, the political activism that emerged as a result of the British occupation not only concerned the Somali population. Already by mid-1941, the Italia Libera movement was born with the aim of defascistising the Italian community. Founded by a former civil servant, Italia Libera claimed as early as January 1942 to have about five hundred Italians among its ranks, mainly office workers and members of the urban middle class.<sup>12</sup> However, it was not until the fall of Fascism that political formations truly proliferated. In a letter to the Office of the Intelligence and Security in Mogadishu, a BMA official stated that the majority of Italians had welcomed the collapse of the regime ‘with undisguised joy’.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the relatively painless end of Fascism reassured many of those waiting to be repatriated, which could therefore take place in a safe context for their families.<sup>14</sup> Yet, this feeling of serenity soon made way for great concern about the uncertainty of the political situation, which was destined to evolve in a far from peaceful manner.

While the deep political divisions within the Italian community did not diminish after 25 July 1943, the most fervent pro-Fascists temporarily retreated: on the one hand, many of them feared forced repatriation to Italy by the British authorities; on the other hand, the fall of Mussolini increased hostility towards Fascist elements and fostered the development of a genuine anti-fascist public opinion. In the months following the armistice, protests within the British administration began to spread regarding the continued presence of ex-Fascists and Fascists in “institutions of public interest” and the BMA’s tolerance of demonstrations of solidarity with the late regime. The new anti-fascist groups did not limit themselves to demanding that the authorities take a harder line against the exponents of the Fascist regime, but began to protest against the staggering increase in prices and to call for an overall improvement in living and working conditions. In general, demands began to emerge for a ‘more enlightened’ attitude towards the Italians, who had moved from the status of enemies to that of co-belligerents.<sup>15</sup> Apart from Italia Libera, which had since increased its support, the protagonist of these political demands was the Mogadishu section of the PCI.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Major General Chief Political Officer to the Minister of State, Cairo, 5 January 1942, in The National Archives [TNA], London, War Office [WO] 230/61. Somalia, relations with the Italians; political reports and social matters; the employment of Italian seamen.

<sup>13</sup> G. Hartman, Ag.G.S.O.III(I), British Military Administration, to Office of the Intelligence and Security, Mogadishu, Somalia, 24 August 1943, in TNA, WO 230/7. Somalia, administrative policy (1941 Feb.-1943 Sept.).

<sup>14</sup> G. Hartman to Office of the Intelligence and Security, 24 August 1943, in TNA, WO 230/7.

<sup>15</sup> Extract from Somalia Intelligence Summary No. 4 for period ending 12 Dec 43, 13 December 1943, in TNA, WO 230/61.

<sup>16</sup> In a historiographical context, this political formation and its birth are mentioned in A. Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, cit., p. 1113; A. Varsori, A. Urbano, *Mogadiscio 1948*, cit. pp. 12-13; P. Borruso, *Il PCI e l’Africa indipendente*, cit., p. 37.

## PCI, Mogadishu section

Created just over a year after the establishment of the BMA, the PCI in Mogadishu was an atypical political formation, with unusual features for a communist section. This is how Aldebrando Melelli, one of the founding members of the section together with Antonino Velonà, describes its genesis in a letter to Togliatti in March 1953:

I was in Somalia for work when the war broke out, and in 1941 I was taken prisoner by the British troops who occupied that territory. Freed on parole together with some friends because they were ‘collaborators’, we started a political movement that soon (July 1942) led to the establishment of a party section.<sup>17</sup>

However concise, Melelli’s words reveal some relevant aspects for understanding the composition and activity of this political formation. First of all, the original nucleus contained neither figures with a background in political groups opposing the regime nor militants of the Communist Party. Melelli was a carpenter and Velonà an interpreter; far from representing the existential trajectories of communists in the years of clandestine activity, which were characterised — to quote Studer — by the absorption of ‘all or part of their lives to a distinctively total political commitment’,<sup>18</sup> they are rather typical examples of Italian colonists who emigrated to the empire for purely work-related reasons. Looking at a sample of about three hundred of the more than three thousand personal files of section members, which mention personal data, profession, educational qualification, information on their political past, marital status and languages known, we can trace these characteristics in the majority of the militants.<sup>19</sup> While this cross-section describes a scenario that is in contrast to what Höbel calls a party of ‘transnational cadres fully embedded in the networks under the Comintern’,<sup>20</sup> it is also consistent with the composition of colonial society, in which the urban and rural proletariat was poorly represented.<sup>21</sup>

A second aspect that emerges from Melelli’s letter, and which is confirmed by the papers produced by the PCI section in Somalia and the BMA documentation, is the apparent autonomy with which this political formation was created. The vast historiography on international communism in the years

<sup>17</sup> Melelli to Togliatti, March 1953, in FIG, APC, Sezione esteri, mf 408, 3013, singoli – M, Melelli Aldebrando.

<sup>18</sup> B. Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Personal files from 3501 to 3800, in FIG, APC, Fondo Mosca, mf 372, 706 and 707, pac. 60.

<sup>20</sup> There is a vast historiography on the first 20 years of the PCI, initially called the Partito comunista d’Italia. For this reference to the ‘party of cadres’ as opposed to the ‘mass party’ of the post-war period, see — among others — Alexander Höbel, *I rivoluzionari di professione*, in Silvio Pons (ed.), *Il comunismo italiano nella storia del Novecento*, Rome, Viella, 2021, p. 60.

<sup>21</sup> E. Ertola, *In terra d’Africa*, cit., pp. 55-58.

of the Comintern, as well as the works on the clandestine PCI,<sup>22</sup> describe a broad network in which the relationship between the national and international central offices and the militant cells was regulated by a range of officials and peripheral delegates who acted according to the principles of democratic centralism.<sup>23</sup> There was generally very little room for spontaneous initiatives unless they had been approved by the party leadership, and in any case, they should remain close to the practice of a communist movement that — as pointed out by Pons — found its distinctive trait in the rigid discipline centred on ‘subordination to the decisions of the International’ and ‘unconditional support for Soviet Russia’.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the creation of the Mogadishu section appears to be rather atypical; not only did its founding members have no previous ties to the Partito comunista d’Italia or the Comintern, but it was even set up without instructions from the Italian party’s central offices.

It is not easy to explain this autonomy. The great isolation of the empire’s former territories during the British occupation undoubtedly favoured unexpected political and social developments, of which the section’s formation was probably an outcome. On the other hand, the Italians in Somalia could count on the dissemination of information through the BMA’s newspaper, the *Somalia Courier*, which guaranteed a constant update on war-time events. We could therefore hypothesise that a part of the Italian community, disappointed by the collapse of Fascism’s imperial ambitions and trapped in a situation of socio-economic precariousness, was influenced by the Soviet successes against the German war machine and embraced communism in the wake of the Red Army epic.

Whatever the circumstances that led to its birth, the section immediately expressed its position and political objectives. In the programme drafted on 25 July 1942, we read the following:

The communist section of Mogadishu, interpreter of the collaborative legislation that has been established between the Russia of the Soviets (Headquarters of the Third Communist International) and the Allied powers, associates itself with the aforementioned powers to fight until the complete dissociation of the Axis, namely: Nazism, Fascism and Japanese feudalism, confident that it will thus contribute to the advent of an era of more equal justice and freedom, immune to egocentric and racial principles.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> On the case of Bologna, see E. Pontieri, *Piccole sovversioni quotidiane. Microstoria di una periferia bolognese nel regime fascista*, Rome, Viella, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Some of the most recent works include Paolo Capuzzo, Anne Garland Mahler (eds.), *The Comintern and the Global South: Global Designs/Local Encounters*, London-New York, Routledge, 2022; Silvio Pons, Stephen A. Smith (eds.), *The Cambridge history of Communism, vol. 1 – World Revolution and Socialism in One Country 1917-1941*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017; B. Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*; Stephen A. Smith (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> S. Pons, *La rivoluzione globale*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Programme of the Partito comunista italiano (Sezione della Terza internazionale Comunista), in FIG, Pci, sezione di Mogadiscio (1942-1951), s. 1 – organismi dirigenti (14 luglio



Hence, consistent with the international scenario that was unfolding, the section opted for collaboration with the BMA. However, it is not clear how exactly the PCI in Mogadishu and the military administration initially cooperated. Although some militants — including Velonà — were employed by the BMA and thus effectively cooperated, it was not until 1944 that any real initiatives were taken in this direction. Minutes of the executive committee meeting of 16 June tell us that the latter approved the proposal to ‘submit a collective application for enlistment to the British authorities’, in line with the ‘policy that, in Italy, our party is carrying out aimed at the liberation of the country from the Germans and the Fascists’.<sup>26</sup> Despite the reference to the PCI and the National Liberation Committee (Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale, hereafter CLN), the decision to support the Allies’ war effort did not respond to any instructions from Italy, but only to an interpretation of the party’s policy based on press sources or other indirect communication channels.

The communists’ proposal was met with a rather cold, if not hostile, response from the British authorities. After receiving the list of candidates for conscription, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan replied that it would be unwise to proceed with enrolment, since many were already doing useful work for the Allied cause as employees of the BMA.<sup>27</sup> The position of Brigadier Wickham was far less conciliatory. In a letter to Colonel Jameson of the East Africa Command in Nairobi, Wickham complained about the ‘almost hysterical’ insistence of the communists to fight alongside the Allies. Moreover, according to the brigadier, most of the volunteers on the list turned out to be unfit for arms due to their age and lack of training.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless of the unfortunate outcome of this proposal for collective enrolment, the PCI considered itself — at least until the end of the conflict — an ally of the British administration, which opportunistically tolerated its activities.<sup>29</sup> And yet, support for the BMA was never free from criticism and always characterised by a dialectic aimed at achieving the widest possible hegemony within the Italian community. Hence, for example, the protests for a more decisive defascistisation of the institutions, which were — according to the section — ‘still led by people known for their Fascist past’.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the section

1942 - 9 gennaio 1949), fasc. 1 – Costituzione della sezione di Mogadiscio (14 luglio 1942 - 25 luglio).

<sup>26</sup> Minutes of ordinary meeting, 16 June 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 4 – Verbali del Comitato esecutivo (9 dicembre 1943 - 27 settembre 1948).

<sup>27</sup> Duncan to the political secretary of the PCI’s section in Mogadishu, 22 August 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5 – carteggio (26 maggio 1943 - 4 gennaio 1951), fasc. 11 – “Relazioni con le Autorità Britanniche” (26 maggio 1943 - 18 gennaio 1949).

<sup>28</sup> Wickham to Jameson, East Africa Command, Nairobi, 29 August 1944, in TNA, WO 230/61.

<sup>29</sup> A. Varsori, A. Urbano, *Mogadiscio 1948*, cit., pp. 12-13.

<sup>30</sup> Section administration to the Chief administrator of Somalia, 4 December 1943, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 11.

frequently called for fairer treatment of the working classes by the authorities in order to underline its consistency with a classist approach to the political struggle, despite the ongoing cooperation.<sup>31</sup>

Although the British administration was one of its main interlocutors, the PCI sought to expand its influence above all among the Italians and gain the consensus of the anti-fascist elements in the community. This is how the intention ‘to favour by all means the separatist movement of the revolutionary groups (republicans and socialists) of the “Italia Libera” association’ should be read.<sup>32</sup> Despite the low esteem in which the communists — along with the British — held this political formation, Italia Libera represented a potential recruitment base for militants. The presence in the association of different political sensibilities — apart from a more or less consistent group of opportunists — that could not express themselves in a consistent way allowed the PCI to gain consensus among the more left-wing exponents, who found a more organised structure with clearer political aims in the communist section. The framing of the more radical members of Italia Libera was necessary for the creation of a real trade union organisation, to be called *Unione proletaria* — one of the first political objectives expressed by the communists. However, this organisation never actually saw the light of day and it is likely that Meelli’s talks with the exponents of anti-fascism in the former colony were unsuccessful, perhaps also because of the continued presence of a pro-Fascist core among the Italian workers.<sup>33</sup>

Although the trade union organisation did not materialise, the PCI nevertheless managed to pursue intense political activity through the promotion of initiatives and by spawning bodies parallel to the section. Firstly, the so-called *Soccorso Rosso* was set up in March 1944. This welfare institute was designed to collect and distribute funds for comrades in difficulty, following the model of International Red Aid, the homonymous organisation of the Third International. A library was also set up, which in addition to collecting various kinds of texts was to host the ‘professional ten minutes’, weekly meetings in which militants could voluntarily illustrate the rudiments of their trade, to then carry out practical tests in the ‘technical corner’. But the most ambitious initiative was perhaps the creation of an *Istituto di Cultura Proletaria*, meant to provide the workers of the former colony with various degrees of education, from elementary to the ‘highest forms’.<sup>34</sup> The section set out to involve as many suitable people as possible in the teaching, inviting lawyers, doctors and engineers to collaborate in this project.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes of extraordinary meeting, 9 December 1943, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Minutes of extraordinary meeting, 9 December 1943, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Luigi Candreva, *Comunisti e colonialismo italiano. Dalla guerra d’Etiopia all’indipendenza della Libia (1935-1951)*, PhD thesis in Storia contemporanea, Università degli studi di Roma “Tor Vergata”, 2015, unpublished, p. 282.

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of ordinary meeting, 1 November 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 4.

Although the Istituto di Cultura Proletaria was officially founded in November 1944, it is difficult to assess the extent to which it pursued the aims at the basis of its creation and whether was actually successful among Italian workers.<sup>35</sup> What does seem to be relevant, though is the pedagogical and, in general, political education intentions that emerge from this and other initiatives of the section. On the same wavelength, in fact, periodic meetings were set up, called the ‘Wednesday meetings’, where the militants — under the guidance of the secretary — could discuss the most diverse political issues.<sup>36</sup> Despite the fact that these meetings usually degenerated into doctrinal disputes, the minutes of these meetings nevertheless reveal a rather lively debate that — if it did not produce particularly original or heterodox demands and positions — provided an opportunity for the section’s various souls to exchange views.

### Interacting with the PCI in Italy

One of the main problems the communists had to face, other than insufficient funds and means and the strong presence of a hostile component within the community, was the almost complete lack — at least in the early days — of direct contact with the party in Italy. While it is true that the militants could follow national and international developments in the *Somalia Courier* and, from 1944, had sporadic access to the communist press, the fact that only ‘one newspaper every 15 days [was] made available to 100 people’,<sup>37</sup> as reported by a discouraged Melelli, negatively affected the task of carrying out any propaganda activities that were consistent — as the section hoped — with the PCI line in Italy.

The reason for this difficulty lay essentially in the interruption of communication between Italy and the former colonies following the British occupation, which continued at least until the second half of 1944; at the end of June, Melelli sent a letter to the section assembly in which he resigned as secretary owing to the lack of means and political indications from the party’s central office, and asked for permission to withdraw from political activity for a minimum of six months.<sup>38</sup> Yet, in August 1944, the reactivation of postal communications with the Allied-controlled regions of Italy finally allowed the communists in Mogadishu to contact the PCI. In fact, at the ordinary meeting of the executive committee on 28 August 1944, it was decided to inform the party leadership of the formation of a communist group in Somalia

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of ordinary meeting, 19 November 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Wednesday meetings 1945 – February, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 6 – proselitismo (5 marzo 1945 - 24 agosto 1946).

<sup>37</sup> Minutes of extraordinary assembly, 24 March 1945, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Melelli to the assembly dated 28 November 1944, to the CC and to the CE, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 2.

and to ‘briefly illustrate the past and present activities of the section’.<sup>39</sup> On 21 September 1944, Melelli — whose resignation had in the meantime been rejected — thus wrote the following letter to the party leadership:

We undertake the welcome duty of informing the comrades of the leadership that on the initiative of some long-standing comrades and the benevolence of the occupying authorities, it was possible to set up an organisation on 25 July 1942, which we have decided to call the ‘Mogadishu section of the PCI’. With the re-establishment of normal communications, we will give you an extensive account of what has been done in the name of the party in this remote corner of Italy.<sup>40</sup>

In its reply, the party leadership expressed encouragement for the group’s initiative and, as we will see further ahead, made various appreciations of the political line that Melelli had described.<sup>41</sup> However, judging from a subsequent letter sent by the section, the party’s missive never seems to have reached the communists in Mogadishu.<sup>42</sup> In fact, it took more than two years before they received instructions from the PCI, through a letter from Pietro Secchia dated 15 March 1947. In addition to informing them about the party’s activities and successes in Italy, ‘which currently has 2,200,000 members and enjoys a growing influence among the Italian people’, the communist leader sent various propaganda materials — which were unfortunately not received — as an attachment, with the aim of updating the section on the PCI’s political line, especially in terms of the attitude to be taken towards the former Fascists and the structure and orientation to be given to the ‘new party’. While inviting the communists in Mogadishu to continue their activities and intensify their efforts, Secchia indeed judged, based on a card sent to him by a comrade from Lecce, the positions of the section to be outdated and no longer corresponding to the national and international situation.<sup>43</sup> From the second half of the 1940s, therefore, occasional communications were established that allowed the section to be updated on the PCI’s programmatic positions. The most used channel was the sending of printed material by couriers who, at irregular intervals, travelled on steamships between Somalia and Italy. In this way, for example, Vittorio Leoncini — who succeeded Melelli as section secretary — sent a letter in November 1947 in which he thanked the party leadership for sending 400 copies of *Vie Nuove*, ‘which the comrades read with enthusiasm and spread among their friends at work’.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Minutes of ordinary meeting, 31 August 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Melelli to the PCI leadership, 21 September 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 12.

<sup>41</sup> PCI leadership to the Mogadishu section, 18 November 1944, in FIG, APC, Fondo Mosca, mf 312.

<sup>42</sup> L. Candreva, *Comunisti e colonialismo italiano*, cit., p. 292.

<sup>43</sup> Secchia to the PCI Mogadishu section, 15 March 1947, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Leoncini to the PCI leadership, 8 November 1947, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 12.



Although contacts were established rather late and remained sporadic, by the end of 1944, the section had learnt of the political changes taking place within the PCI, probably through the “Somalia Courier” or “Fronte Unito”, a newspaper published by Italian anti-fascists in Egypt and also circulated in the former colonies. In fact, during the executive committee’s ordinary meeting of 19 November 1944, it was proposed to publish ‘the report of the meeting of the Communist and Socialist Parties that took place in Rome on 8 August 1944’ in a pamphlet.<sup>45</sup> Hence, if in 1947 Secchia informed the Mogadishu group of the birth of the so-called ‘new party’, the section had clearly already become aware of the PCI’s new direction, at least in general terms. Indeed, the political initiatives proposed in the assemblies and in the publications reveal an attempt to interpret what Martinelli defines as the dual meaning of the ‘new party’: ‘the material structure and programme that the unification between socialists and communists after the Resistance should have taken’ and the overcoming of the ‘ideological-formal model’ of the national section of the Comintern.<sup>46</sup> From this point of view, it is relevant that in the letter of 29 September 1944, which informed the party of the section’s creation, it is stressed that ‘the initial small nucleus is now a flourishing section that enjoys a regular membership [...] and has achieved the union of the anti-fascist forces by promoting the UNA (Unione Nazionale Antifascista)’.<sup>47</sup> If at first, in the context of post-war Somalia, the union of anti-fascist forces mainly translated into a policy of collaboration with the Unione democratica (a local section of Christian Democracy), the focus later shifted to the newly formed Socialist group, with which the section sought a close understanding that should eventually have led to the formation of a united group. In addition, a motion of the executive committee made even more explicit the need for practical and political cooperation with the socialists, along the lines of the Italian model.<sup>48</sup> In the following years, the role of privileged interlocutor that the socialists took on seemed to be confirmed both in the declarations of the communist leaders and through the sharing of initiatives and political spaces.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Minutes of ordinary meeting, 19 November 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Renzo Martinelli, *Il Partito nuovo e la preparazione del V Congresso. Appunti sulla rifondazione del Pci*, “Studi Storici”, n. 1, 1990, p. 47. Among the many works on the new party and the change of line and structure after the *svolta di Salerno*, see also Donald Sassoon, *Togliatti e il partito di massa. Il PCI dal 1944 al 1964*, Rome, Castelveccchi, 2014; Alessandro De Angelis, *I comunisti e il partito. Dal “partito nuovo” alla svolta dell’89*, Rome, Carocci, 2002; Paolo Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, vol. 5, *La resistenza, Togliatti e il partito nuovo*, Turin, Einaudi, 1975.

<sup>47</sup> Melelli to the PCI leadership, 21 November 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Minutes of extraordinary assembly, 7 October 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Minutes of fifth extraordinary assembly “luglio 1946” 3 August 1946, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 2; Leoncini to the PCI leadership, 8 November 1947, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 12.



However, while the Socialist Party represented the communists' primary referent and political ally, in strategic terms the party had wider horizons deeply rooted in the experience of anti-fascist unity. It is therefore possible to consider the new party as a project in the making, whose structural and immediate realisation primarily involved the socialists but whose long-term aim was, so to speak, more ecumenical. In fact, even in the specific case of the Mogadishu section, it is probably no coincidence that, at least until 1946 and the escalation of tensions between the blocs, an understanding was sought between all the anti-fascist political forces, first within the National Anti-Fascist Union (Unione Nazionale Antifascista, hereafter UNA) and then within the CLN, of which a section was also formed in Somalia precisely on the communists' initiative.

The search for continuity with the Resistance experience through the unity of anti-fascist forces and the failed prospect of a merger with the socialists were, however, only some of the aspects that characterised the new type of party that the PCI attempted to build in the post-war years and which the section under consideration here tried to implement in the occupied territories of the former empire, decline. Although an iron discipline closely linked to the principle of democratic centralism undoubtedly reflected continuity with the party of cadres of the years of clandestine activity, crucial aspects linked to earlier times were its pedagogical function and the mass and national dimension. As demonstrated by the works of Lussana, among others, already in the 1920s communist leaders were attending the Soviet schools of the Comintern for the theoretical and practical training of 'professional revolutionaries'. Furthermore, the Italian party had been characterised by the strong pedagogical thrust of the reflections of party secretary Antonio Gramsci from the beginning.<sup>50</sup> Forced to follow the rigid rules of conspiracy and with the entire leadership in prison or exile, it was not until the Second World War that the Italian communists managed to emerge from the dimension of a small vanguard party, in which the recipients of the 'party pedagogy' were first and foremost the cadres and, only in second place and with makeshift means, the rank-and-file militants. Thanks to its leading position in the Resistance and the end of the war, the PCI would later play a leading role in the process of democratic reconstruction, which was accompanied by a profound change in the communists' theoretical and strategic horizons. The conception of a mass national party that would 'act,' in Spagnolo's words, 'as a hinge between State and society',<sup>51</sup> and for which Gramsci's reflection was one of the main references, is also connected to Togliatti's elaboration of the *Lectures on Fascism*

<sup>50</sup> Fiamma Lussana, *A scuola di comunismo. Emigrati italiani nelle scuole del Comintern*, "Studi Storici", n. 4, 2005, pp. 967-1031.

<sup>51</sup> Carlo Spagnolo, *Il partito di massa*, in Silvio Pons (ed.), *Il comunismo italiano nella storia del Novecento*, Rome, Viella, 2021, p. 129.

and the communist secretary's reflection on the role and composition of the middle classes. In the project for the new party, the working class fulfilled its national function through the formation of a new social bloc, in which hegemony was achieved by making the question of the middle classes and peasants a central issue.<sup>52</sup>

The pedagogical function — which became a fundamental strategic element in the formation of this new social bloc, in the system of alliances and in the party's new identity and mass dimension — found multiple forms of expression in Italy, from the publication of a huge number of newspapers, pamphlets and books for militants to the creation of a dense network of party schools that proposed different training for all levels, from national leaders to rank-and-file militants.<sup>53</sup> As I have mentioned earlier, the communists in Mogadishu also tried, albeit on a small scale, to take a similar path through the creation of the Istituto di Cultura Proletaria, the 'Wednesday meetings', the publication of numerous pamphlets and press releases. It is also quite significant that during the general assembly of 5 January 1946, Melelli said that '[t]he educational task we set ourselves four years ago will not stop, nor will the work of preparing our comrades who will soon be called upon to contribute their faith, activity and love to the great work of national reconstruction'.<sup>54</sup> The fulfilment of the militants' 'educational task', subjected to the introjection of an ethos with Jesuit traits,<sup>55</sup> in which the responsibility in the face of the challenges of national reconstruction came to resemble a moral mission, is difficult not to inscribe within that authoritarian-like pedagogical conception of politics that was one of the characteristic features of Togliatti's new party. Perhaps the most important initiative in this sense was the section's intense recruitment activity in the British prison camps, where the party's pedagogical function went hand in hand with what can be considered a mass dimension for the occupied territories of the Horn of Africa.

## Prisoners of War, communist cells and mass recruitment

The collapse of the Fascist empire in East Africa and the establishment of the British occupation regime was followed by the arrest and deportation

<sup>52</sup> A. De Angelis, *I comunisti e il partito*, cit, pp. 71-74, 82; on the question of opening up to the middle classes, see Palmiro Togliatti, *Ceti medi ed Emilia Rossa*, in Palmiro Togliatti, *La politica nel pensiero e nell'azione. Scritti e discorsi 1917-1964*, Milan, Bompiani, 2014, pp. 1671-1744.

<sup>53</sup> Daniela Betti, *Il partito editore. Libri e lettori nella politica culturale del Pci 1945-1953*, "Italia contemporanea", n. 2, 1989, pp. 53-74; Anna Tonelli, *A scuola di politica. Il modello comunista di Frattocchie (1944-1993)*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2017, pp. 12-13.

<sup>54</sup> Minutes of the general assembly, extraordinary session of 5 January 1946, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Mauro Boarelli, *La fabbrica del passato. Autobiografie di militanti comunisti (1945-1956)*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2007, p. 62.

of approximately seventy thousand Italian soldiers and civilians, who were interned in various concentration camps across the British possessions.<sup>56</sup> In addition to the separation between Prisoners of War and internees, as happened in the Ugandan camps, prisoner officers were generally divided from troop soldiers; in the case of East Africa, the former were held in the camps of Eldoret and Londiani, the latter in Burguret, Gil Gil, Naivasha, Ndarugu, Nakuru, Naniuki, Ginja and Mitubiri.<sup>57</sup> According to Red Cross reports, the living conditions in the camps were generally good, both in terms of hygiene and sanitation and the prisoners' relationship with the British. However, the situation of the internees improved considerably after 8 September, when the majority of Italian officers — led by General Nasi — decided to collaborate with the Allies. From the beginning of 1944, many were freed and sent to fight in the ranks of the British army, while others were employed in the colonial administration; some were simply repatriated.<sup>58</sup> The liberation of the camps continued throughout 1945 and 1946, when all internment facilities were permanently closed.

Despite the high command's decision to collaborate, the tensions and divisions between the prisoners — already evident before the armistice — worsened in the following months. Ugo Pini, who was in charge of discipline in the Burguret camp for a year, states that 'the Italians, in the prisoner camps, roughly made up three groups: most were Fascists; many were lost and uncertain souls; a few were anti-fascists. Those in the middle stood with the former in public. They only dared to approach the latter in private'.<sup>59</sup> The contrast between a Fascist majority and an anti-fascist minority also recurred in the documentation on Prisoners of War in East Africa produced by the Mogadishu section, which testifies to the extremely difficult conditions of the regime's opponents, harassed by the Fascists under the indifferent gaze of the British, who considered the issue as an internal settling of accounts within the Italian community.<sup>60</sup> An undated letter (probably from 1945), signed by the 'Sezione del Comitato Nazionale di liberazione tra i prigionieri di guerra del Kenia', refers in particular to the establishment, in April 1942, of 'Fascist action squads' on the initiative of senior Italian officers. 'Such squads,' the document reads, 'performed violent and terrorist attacks in the camps, of moral and physical aggression. They beat up and stabbed anti-fascist soldiers and

<sup>56</sup> Isabella Soi, *I deportati italiani nella British East Africa*, in Bianca Maria Carcangiu, Tekeste Negash (eds.), *L'Africa orientale italiana nel dibattito storico contemporaneo*, Rome, Carocci, 2008, p. 88.

<sup>57</sup> I. Soi, *I deportati italiani*, cit., p. 89; A. Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, cit., pp. 1144-1145.

<sup>58</sup> I. Soi, *I deportati italiani*, cit. pp. 90-95; Flavio Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani 1940-1945*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1986, pp. 304-306.

<sup>59</sup> A. Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, cit., pp. 1144-1145.

<sup>60</sup> F. Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani*, cit., p. 302.

civilians.’<sup>61</sup> The activity of these squads, confirmed also by Conti,<sup>62</sup> did not cease with the fall of Mussolini and the armistice, but continued — again according to the authors of the letter — well after the beginning of the co-belligerency. In fact, in 1944, the Italian high command suppressed the anti-fascist newspaper “Il Piave”, probably produced by the CLN itself, and radio transmissions in Italian from Nairobi.<sup>63</sup>

Looking beyond the military high command and the deep political tensions between prisoners, what is particularly relevant is the existence of an organised group of anti-fascists within the British prison camps, which became part of a large network spread throughout East Africa, and of which the Mogadishu section was an essential part. An anonymous report of March 1946, probably sent to the PCI administration, testifies to the presence of communist cells among the internees in Kenya, the genesis of which is summarised as follows:

The organisation and political preparation began as early as 1942, after the defeat of the Italian forces. Starting in the first months, the communists laid the foundations of a movement that could only develop later, when it was possible to establish contacts with Mogadishu, where a section of the PCI had meanwhile been set up.<sup>64</sup>

In Uganda, the military internees organised themselves into a section. The minutes of their meetings tell us that the group was formed on 20 March 1944 and that it was transformed from a ‘Communist Cell’ into ‘a Communist Group, in accordance with the official nature that the Communist Party assumed in liberated Italy’.<sup>65</sup>

The communists in Mogadishu were not unfamiliar with the political ferment that had developed among the Italian prisoners; starting in the last months of 1944, they set up a subsection with the aim of establishing relations with the prison camps, spreading propaganda and recruiting internees.<sup>66</sup> The four main centres where the section’s activities were concentrated were Nairobi, Eldoret, Hargheisa and the sorting centre in Nyeri, which — in turn — controlled a number of smaller camps to which the communists in Mogadishu sent delegates, creating a network that could guarantee the effectiveness of the recruitment work. This task of liaison was entrusted to men of

<sup>61</sup> Sezione del Comitato Nazionale di Liberazione tra i Prigionieri di Guerra del Kenya al Comitato Centrale Nazionale di Liberazione, n.d. (1945?), in FIG, APC, Fondo Mosca, pac. 36 I, mf 294.

<sup>62</sup> F. Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani*, cit., p. 302.

<sup>63</sup> Sezione del Comitato Nazionale di Liberazione tra i Prigionieri di Guerra del Kenya al Comitato Centrale Nazionale di Liberazione, n.d. (1945?), in FIG, APC, Fondo Mosca, pac. 36 I, mf 294.

<sup>64</sup> N.a., *Coi prigionieri italiani nel Kenia*, March 1946, in FIG, APC, mf 312.

<sup>65</sup> PCI minutes, camp group n° 6 – Uganda (Italiani evacuati dall’Etiopia), in FIG, APC, mf 312, pac. 39.

<sup>66</sup> Minutes of ordinary meeting, 19 November 1944, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 1, fasc. 4.

proven reliability, 14 of whom have been identified through a section report; they include two former majors in the Royal Army, Euclide Francioni and medical officer Antimo d'Alessandro, who left detailed information on his activities. The section also sent typewriters and all available propaganda material to the larger centres, so that it could be redistributed among the militants in the smaller camps. According to a report sent by Melelli to the PCI leadership, thanks to this capillary organisation, thousands of copies of pamphlets produced by the section were printed and circulated among the prisoners.<sup>67</sup>

A good example of the concrete functioning of the network established by the communists in Mogadishu is provided by a report sent by d'Alessandro to the PCI administration in March 1946, in which he summarises his work as a section delegate in Nairobi as follows:

On his departure to the concentration camp, the writer was appointed by the party as a delegate for Kenya with broad powers.

I lived camp life for about two years and my work was guided by two main principles; the first was to create independent cells in each camp and all under my direct control; the second was to choose, among the masses, elements of proven communist faith but who had such intellectual capacity that they could be relied upon to hold positions of trust and seriousness [...].

Within a few months, I sent the Mogadishu office many hundreds of registration forms, including for many officers.

Reliable accomplices and militants placed in strategic positions were needed to keep such an organisational apparatus going and to maintain as stable a contact as possible with the section. If, in fact, the British authorities guaranteed a certain degree of political freedom, propaganda and the large-scale circulation of communist material inside and outside the camps were not well seen by the police, who often hindered the initiatives of the communist cells and delegates; on the other hand, the latter also had to face the much more violent and fierce hostility of the Fascist prisoners. In order to evade the controls, Major d'Alessandro therefore set up a cell within a manoeuvre unit of some three hundred Italian soldiers, who allowed the transport of propaganda material and enabled communication with Mogadishu.<sup>68</sup>

However, it was not only thanks to the delegates' work that the section managed to extend its influence to virtually all prison camps. The establishment of cells in all the main centres also allowed it to co-ordinate existing

<sup>67</sup> Melelli's Report on the political activity of the Mogadishu section, November 1946, in FIG, APC, Sezione esteri, mf 115, 476/483, Somalia; Relazione del Pci Mogadiscio alla segreteria del Pci sull'attività politica della Sezione di Mogadiscio, novembre 1946, in FIG, APC, mf 312.

<sup>68</sup> D'Alessandro to the PCI administration, Rome, 12 March 1946. Subject: Relazione politica a sfondo panoramico della situazione del Partito Comunista in Somalia e nel Kenia, tra i militari italiani prigionieri – detenuti dagli inglesi, in FIG, APC, mf 312.



groups, with which the Mogadishu communists had previously failed to make contact. This was the case with the aforementioned Ugandan section, which had Camp No. 6 in Entebbe as its headquarters. When the camp was closed in December 1945 and all the Italians were transferred to the Nyeri sorting centre in Kenya, the Ugandan communists immediately got in touch with the group of Mogadishu delegates; the leaders of the two groups agreed that they would merge into a single political formation within the Somali section.<sup>69</sup>

D'Alessandro's letter also reveals the great difficulties encountered in the training and placement of the recruits, up to the point that the delegate stated that 'the most difficult work, however, was the scholastic work, in the educational sense, since I found an unstructured mass of hotheads who called themselves communists, but who did not know, in the end, what communism really was'. The building of political consciousness and the emphasis on 'discipline, order, a sense of duty, work and honesty' to 'inculcate in everyone that sense of proper moral and party discipline',<sup>70</sup> as described by d'Alessandro, bear a significant thematic and methodological resemblance to the practices of party schools in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>71</sup> Overall, between 1945 and the closure of the internment facilities, this system enabled the Mogadishu section to gain over two thousand new members, the vast majority of whom were soldiers who had never had anything to do with the party but who — as Ugo Pini argues — 'had come to communism via a moral rather than a political process; that is, they had come to politics through morality and to morality through repentance and intimate reflection'.<sup>72</sup>

If we consider that there were between 25,000 and 27,000 Italian prisoners in British camps in Africa,<sup>73</sup> these elements help to trace the contours of a communist network in East Africa, in which the hegemony of the Mogadishu section was exercised not only through the dissemination of propaganda material and the training of militants following the dictates of a political pedagogy, but also thanks to what can be defined as mass recruitment, which reached its peak in the period 1945-1946. At the same time, the experience of the communist sections and cells in the internment camps highlights the characteristics of a transitional phase from a clandestine party of cadres to a mass party and the surprising spread and expansive capacity of the communist message between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the post-war period. The huge logistical difficulties, the lack of means and the scarcity of commu-

<sup>69</sup> PCI minutes, camp group n° 6 – Uganda (Italiani evacuati dall'Etiopia), in FIG, APC, mf 312, pac. 39.

<sup>70</sup> d'Alessandro to the PCI leadership, 12 March 1946, in FIG, APC, mf 312.

<sup>71</sup> A. Tonelli, *A scuola di politica*, cit., pp. X-XII.

<sup>72</sup> Pini to the PCI leadership, 21 June 1945, in FIG, APC, mf 312.

<sup>73</sup> d'Alessandro to the PCI administration, 12 March 1946, in FIG, APC, mf 312; these data are confirmed by the personal files, which reveal an extraordinary growth in membership after 1945.

nications not only did not prevent the spread of communist propaganda capable of gaining significant consensus, but they also did not hinder a real attempt to “translate” the changes taking place in Italian communism in those years.

### **The relationship with the Somali population**

If the activities of the Mogadishu section, its delegates and the cells in the camps had a large-scale educational function, presenting themselves as a truly democratic school to cope with the difficult reintegration of the Italians into society and the challenges posed by the nation’s reconstruction, two other issues can give a more accurate picture of the experience of the Italian communists in Somalia during the British occupation. First, the communists’ action seems to have been focused on the needs of the party in Italy; even where there was a commitment to the social and urban reality of the city, the constant increase in repatriations and the shrinking of the Italian community in Somalia made it difficult to develop political plans that went beyond the here and now. In appearance, the gaze was always and above all on Italy. Secondly, and probably in connection with the previous issue, the Somali population was absent from the communists’ discourse. In fact, the section’s activities focused exclusively on the Italian community, without paying any attention to the political changes that were affecting the territory beyond the narrow circle of the former colonists.

Among the many reasons for this lack of interest in Somalis, even in the face of the emergence of an increasingly influential nationalist movement, two elements stand out: I have already made some reference to the first, which concerns the precariousness linked to the uncertainty of the fate of the former colony and of the Italians in particular. The end of hostilities and the opening of talks to draw up the Peace Treaty had, in fact, marked the beginning of a long negotiation between the Allies and Italy on the fate of the former Italian colonial possessions, with the British initially in a position of resolute opposition to any form of return to the sovereignty of the former colonisers.<sup>74</sup> Under these conditions, with no guarantees on the near future and faced with the growing hostility of a BMA determined to weaken the influence of the Italians through more or less forced repatriations, the Mogadishu section could hardly have made the efforts and found the means to develop a structured political activity capable of involving the Somali population. Furthermore, it appears that the nationalists of SYL — by far the most important Somali political

<sup>74</sup> A. Varsori, A. Urbano, *Mogadiscio 1948*, cit., p. 4; Elena Aga Rossi, *Il futuro delle colonie Italiane nella politica inglese e americana durante la Seconda guerra mondiale*, in *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana*, vol. 2, Rome, Ministero per i Beni culturali e ambientali e Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1996, pp. 782-783.

formation — rejected offers of collaboration from the PCI.<sup>75</sup> In reality, the main factor seems to have been a general attitude of paternalism and mistrust of Somalis, who were seen as essentially primitive and in need of civilisation more than politicisation.

Among the documents produced by the section, the one that reflects this aspect perhaps the most is the memorandum drafted for the Commissione d'inchiesta quadripartita, which visited Somalia in early January 1948 to evaluate the most suitable political solution for the territory. One of the few documents to consider the Somali population, it not only contains stereotypes and prejudices that would later become characteristic topoi of the myth of the 'good Italian',<sup>76</sup> but also a number of arguments aimed at justifying the potential assignment of a trustee mandate to Italy as a possibility of moral redemption after 20 years of Fascist dictatorship and colonialism. Hence, while the communists in Mogadishu claimed formal adherence to the anti-colonial principles of the UN and supported the self-government and sovereignty of all the peoples hitherto forced to live under the yoke of colonial oppression, the same section was decidedly in favour of adopting the trusteeship system, a sort of evolution of the mandated model of the League of Nations, which provided for the administration of a former colonial territory by one or more powers for a set period.<sup>77</sup> Although the trusteeship was conceived as a step towards overcoming the colonial system, as Aga Rossi argues, it suffered from a substantial lack of concreteness,<sup>78</sup> and its premises — the territory's administration by a great power in order to enable the population to meet the requirements for self-government — revealed a not-too-implicitly paternalistic perspective.<sup>79</sup> From this point of view, when the communists in Mogadishu claimed that their memorandum aimed at identifying the most suitable nation to administer the Somalis, so as to 'evolve the natives within a given number of years from the state of regression in which they find themselves to the minimum of progress necessary to govern themselves in a democratic and progressive sense',<sup>80</sup> they do not seem to deviate too much from the spirit of trusteeship.

Reviewing the various potential candidates for the administration of Somalia, the memorandum understandably devotes particular attention to Great

<sup>75</sup> Security Service paper on *Communist influence in the African continent*, in TNA, Foreign Office [FO] 371/73741, Communist influence in Africa. Code 60, file 1015 (papers 2406 - 4493).

<sup>76</sup> A vast literature exists on the myth of the "good Italian". See, among others, Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani brava gente?*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2005 and David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano*, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1994. See also Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della Seconda guerra mondiale*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> A. Varsori, A. Urbano, *Mogadiscio 1948*, cit., p. 52.

<sup>78</sup> E. Aga Rossi, *Il futuro delle colonie Italiane*, cit., p. 776.

<sup>79</sup> A.M. Morone, *L'ultima colonia*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> Memoriale della Sezione alla Commissione d'inchiesta per l'assegnazione fiduciaria dell'ex Colonia Fascista della Somalia, January 1948, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 18 – L'amministrazione fiduciaria italiana in Somalia. Appunti per il compagno Scoccimarro (7 gennaio 1948 - 9 gennaio 1950).

Britain, whose management of the territory during the occupation is harshly criticised. While it is true that the communists initially saw themselves as allies of the BMA, the end of the war and the change in the international scenario significantly affected relations between the section and the British. In addition, the British were extremely hostile towards Italy, and the dispute over the former colonies was a fundamental part of this hostility.<sup>81</sup> According to the communists, the absolute inadequacy of the British as a trustee power resided primarily in the fact that ‘the greatest number of oppressed and exploited peoples under the old colonial system have, for centuries, been administered by this Great Imperial Power’.<sup>82</sup>

This state of affairs was to be imitated in Somalia by the Italian Fascists, who ‘did not want to be inferior to the British; indeed, they wanted to surpass them in cruelty’. If Fascism therefore represented, from the communists’ point of view, a sort of “quantum leap” in the exercise of colonial violence, it is worth noting that the British were delegitimised both through the concrete administrative modalities applied in Somalia and, above all, the very history of Great Britain and its empire; the latter constituted a precedent in which Fascist colonialism could be inscribed with substantial continuity. It is no surprise that the officials of the BMA — having betrayed the Somalis’ hopes of independence after the British occupation — associated themselves ‘with all the greatest bigwigs of the deprecated Fascist regime and, together, [would continue] as before, worse than before’, hindering ‘every action of the Communist Party tending to enlighten and evolve the retrograde minds of the Somalis’.<sup>83</sup> The communists were, then, in the vanguard of a civilising mission of which they would be the true custodians as opposed to the Fascist colonialists and the British occupiers. From this perspective, the Mogadishu section not only pursued what is presented as a true educational and pedagogical function towards the colonial masses, but by virtue of this it was also the interpreter of the best “progressive” traditions of the Italian people. This position was not distant from the one that dominated among the republican ruling class; as Morone points out, if the latter recognised ‘faults in the failure of the pre-war colonial project, these were to be attributed to Fascism and not to the civilising mission that Italy was once again taking on’.<sup>84</sup>

Regardless of the almost complete absence of documentary evidence of initiatives by the section that involved the Somali population, this and the

<sup>81</sup> A. Varsori, A. Urbano, *Mogadiscio 1948*, cit., p. 53. See also E. Pedaliu, *Italy, Britain and the Origins*, cit.

<sup>82</sup> Memoriale della Sezione alla Commissione d’inchiesta per l’assegnazione fiduciaria dell’ex Colonia Fascista della Somalia, January 1948, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 18.

<sup>83</sup> Memoriale della Sezione alla Commissione d’inchiesta per l’assegnazione fiduciaria dell’ex Colonia Fascista della Somalia, January 1948, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 18.

<sup>84</sup> Antonio M. Morone (ed.), *La fine del colonialismo italiano. Politica, società, memorie*, Florence, Le Monnier, 2018, pp. 7-8.



following passages of the memorandum reveal that the process of including the Communist Party into a progressive political-cultural strand of Italian history may not be in contradiction to a colonial mentality.<sup>85</sup> ‘The majority of the Italian people,’ the document continues, ‘was always endowed with generous democratic and progressive ideas, but never had on its side the material means of struggle with which to overthrow the reactionary and retrograde minority.’ The traits of a fundamentally “good” people opposed to a repressive elite thus emerged. Defeated and reduced to passivity for 20 years by reactionary forces, the Italians allegedly regained an active role and fought in the last period of the war, when the moment of liberation from Fascism came. Thanks to the Resistance, the Italian people would have reaffirmed the democratic and ‘progressive’ ideas that had always distinguished it, demonstrating ‘that the 20 years of Fascist brigandage was nothing more than a very brief, albeit disastrous, parenthesis in the brilliant, thousand-year Italian history’.<sup>86</sup> The Resistance experience thus took on the value of a civil and moral redemption, which provided many, including — it would seem — the communists in Mogadishu, with ‘the feeling that the blackboard of history had been wiped clean’.<sup>87</sup>

If, on the one hand, the communists in Mogadishu explicitly affirmed their anti-colonial position, on the other hand, their attitude towards Somalis and the trusteeship mandate brought to light a racist cultural framework that — although not surprising in post-war Italian and postcolonial society — stood out in the context of communist political discourse. At an international level, this problem had already occupied a relevant place at the Comintern congresses, where in the 1920s polemics were raised against the ‘white chauvinism’ that still characterised the political action of some militants.<sup>88</sup> A

<sup>85</sup> Think, for example, of the constant references to the Risorgimento — in particular to Garibaldi and the Garibaldini — in party publicity and propaganda. See, among others, Palmiro Togliatti, *Una conferenza su Garibaldi*, in P. Togliatti, *La politica nel pensiero e nell’azione*, pp. 1238-1357. On the relationship that Togliatti’s discourse established between the PCI and the rebellious and anarchist tradition of the Italian popular masses, on the one hand, and the materialist philosophical strand of Bruno, Vico, Spaventa and Labriola, on the other, see Franco Andreucci, *Falce e Martello. Identità e linguaggi dei comunisti italiani fra stalinismo e guerra fredda*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2005, pp. 63-65; 74.

<sup>86</sup> Memoriale della Sezione alla Commissione d’inchiesta per l’assegnazione fiduciaria dell’ex Colonia Fascista della Somalia, January 1948, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 18.

<sup>87</sup> Gaia Giuliani, Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e Nero. Storia dell’identità razziale degli italiani*, Florence, Le Monnier, 2013, pp. 98-99.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, the accusation of a complacent attitude towards French imperialism levelled by the Communist Federation of Tunisia at the white-dominated Algerian section of Sidi Bel Abbès in 1922 Mustapha Kraiem, *Le Parti Communiste Tunisien pendant le période coloniale*, Tunis, Institut Supérieur d’Histoire du Mouvement National, 1997, p. 113. On racist attitudes towards colonial populations by members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), see Marika Sherwood, *The Comintern, The CPGB, Colonies and Black Britons, 1920-1938*, “Science & Society”, n. 2, 1996, pp. 137-163.



new kind of party was thus emerging that marginalised the colonial masses, whose cultural distance prevented their incorporation into the horizon of the Mogadishu section and their consideration as political subjects. However, the memorandum ends by stating that the Somalis would be given the chance to emancipate themselves from their backward condition and join the ranks of civilised nations thanks to the assistance of a ‘New, Democratic, Peaceful and Labouring Italy’, which the PCI was helping to build — clearly the most suitable power to obtain the trusteeship mandate.<sup>89</sup> The rhetoric of development also returned in the communists’ discourse, following a long and difficult path (again a pedagogical one, but at the level — so to speak — of literacy) that could make the Somali population suitable for the “club” of civilised nations. Hence, if Italy, given its glorious tradition and civilisation, was destined to take on the white man’s burden of civilising the Somalis, this same mission was also a prize, a reward for having defeated Fascism and having washed its shame from its history.<sup>90</sup>

Although it was difficult for the communists in Mogadishu to imagine a political understanding or any form of collaboration with the Somalis, there were a few exceptions that — although isolated — had a certain relevance. In an interview with Urbano, for example, the former Somali nationalist activist Abdulkadir Ali Boolay stated that Yassin Haji Osman, the young and charismatic leader of the SYL, had been influenced by communist activity, so much so that he managed to get hold of Marxist readings through Francesco Pivetti, a coachbuilder from Modena who was registered with the section.<sup>91</sup> A letter dated February 1949, sent by the section’s executive committee to the PCI leadership, then reports that comrade Francesco Marini was repatriated for ‘communist propaganda among the indigenous population’.<sup>92</sup> In addition to these episodes, British documents provide further indications of sporadic contacts between Italian communists and Somali nationalists. A lengthy Foreign Office report on the spread of communism in Africa states that communist propaganda is making little progress among the indigenous people of Somalia, with the exception of a small circle in Mogadishu; the report makes reference to SYL secretary Abdullahi Issa, Lewis Salele, Hassan Elmi and Mohammed Ahmed Octavio, who in January 1950 even delivered a speech at a SYL assembly in which he called for its transformation into a communist organisation.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Memoriale della Sezione alla Commissione d’inchiesta per l’assegnazione fiduciaria dell’ex Colonia Fascista della Somalia, gennaio 1948, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 18.

<sup>90</sup> January della Sezione alla Commissione d’inchiesta per l’assegnazione fiduciaria dell’ex Colonia Fascista della Somalia, January 1948, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 18.

<sup>91</sup> A. Varsori, A. Urbano, *Mogadiscio 1948*, cit., pp. 16; 94.

<sup>92</sup> Pappalardo to the PCI leadership, 21 February 1949, in FIG, Pci Mogadiscio, s. 5, fasc. 12.

<sup>93</sup> Despatch from Mr. Gamble to Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 27 January 1950, in FO 371/80898. Communist activity in Somalia. Code JT file 10117 (1950), information regarding Mohamed Ahmed Ottavio’s speech.

It is not clear to what extent these exponents of Somali nationalism were truly influenced by Italian communists and not, rather, by the propaganda disseminated by the Soviet embassy in Addis Ababa or by the contacts that a leader like Abdullahi Issa is suspected to have had with communist figures in England.<sup>94</sup> What is certain is that these few isolated episodes of communist influence on the SYL alarmed the British authorities much more than ten years of the section's activities aimed at the Italian community. While it is true that the discourse and, more generally, the contacts or references to communism by SYL members concern the period between 1947 and 1950, when — in a Cold War climate — the obsession with the spread of communism in Africa permeated the Foreign Office,<sup>95</sup> it is nevertheless significant to note the perception of a real danger in the possible collaboration between communists and the SYL. The tactical, even before the strategic, potential of this possible understanding was not — and perhaps could not have been — grasped by the Mogadishu section, which was decidedly more focused on the needs of the Italian community and party than it was on the political and social demands of a subaltern population that the communists probably did not have the means or the will to understand.

## Conclusion

The history of the PCI section in Mogadishu offers a unique perspective from which to examine the social and political conditions of the Italians in Somalia during the BMA years. Firstly, my analysis has revealed a rather ambiguous relationship with the British, oscillating between peaceful coexistence and growing hostility, mainly linked to the occupiers' attempts to delegitimise a community that potentially threatened the aspirations that the British Empire still nurtured on the Horn of Africa. Secondly, I have shed light on the relations between the various Italian parties that implemented political projects and alliances developed at home in a context of occupation.

The Mogadishu section is, moreover, an emblematic and unique case in the panorama of the global communist movement. In the East African territories and British concentration camps, the Italian communists were in fact able to build a real network of former colonists and prisoners; these were regular members who communicated with each other, whose activities converged around common strategies and objectives, and who considered the Mogadishu section's directives as their main point of reference. Their experience testifies not only to an extraordinary organisational effort but also, and above all,

<sup>94</sup> *Report of communism in ex-Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia*, in TNA, FO 1110/246. Africa, spread of Communism (1949).

<sup>95</sup> A.M. Morone, *L'ultima colonia*, cit., pp. 16-17.

to the expansive capacity of communism during the Comintern years, which was consecrated by the USSR's war-time successes. However, this network also reflects a structural limit inherited from the Third International, namely the inability or, at least, the huge difficulty in effectively adapting its tools of analysis to political-cultural contexts other than Europe and the USSR; the approach towards the Somali population can be considered a reflection of this limit. At the same time, the almost complete autonomy from the USSR and the Italian Communist Party with which this network was built and then dismantled makes the experience of the PCI section in Mogadishu a very special case in the history of international communism.

Finally, the section's history offers historiographical insights not only into the communist movement; the militants' activities, communication and goals also shed light on the internal dynamics of postcolonial society in transitional Somalia. The structural presence of racism, which affected more or less all social and political components, as well as the civilising ambitions of the communists themselves tell a story in which the end of Fascism and the military defeat allowed a colonial mentality to take root in the new Italy: a mentality that was destined to flourish under the guise of the anti-fascist republic born of the Resistance.

*Translated by Andrea Hajek*