

Late Nineteenth- Century Italy in Africa

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*The Livraghi Affair and the
Waning of Civilizing Aspirations*

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Editorial Notes.....	viii
On transliterations.....	viii
On newspaper names	ix
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
Chapter Two	5
“Official Murders” and the Initial Public Uproar	
“Horrible revelations”	6
Corazzini and his aims	8
Livraghi’s accusations and “confessions”	12
The rhetoric of scandal.....	16
The rhetoric of skepticism	19
The Chamber reaction.....	24
The competing colonial policies	35
Chapter Three	37
The Scandal’s Origins	
The press pursuit of el-Akkad.....	38
Italian journalism and colonial reportage.....	42
The call to “civilize Africa”	59
Chapter Four.....	89
The Press and the Waning of Civilizing Aspirations	
The treaty impasse: the “Ethiopian joke”	89
Famine reportage: Belcredi and the “field of hunger”	97
General Baldissera: “rectitude personified”	106
Fall 1891 and the changed debate: “iron repression”	117

Chapter Five	123
The Scandal Un-Made: The Trials and the Final Debate	
The corruption trial's collapse	125
The murder trial's admissions.....	132
The investigating commission's rebuke.....	143
The Chamber as the last resort.....	147
 Chapter Six	 156
Civilizing Aspirations Abandoned: Martini's <i>Nell'Africa italiana</i>	
 Epilogue.....	 164
 Bibliography	 167
 Index	 174

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 2-1: Napoleone Corazzini.....	10
Figure 2-2: Lieutenant Dario Livraghi	13
Figure 2-3: Scenes of Livraghi's arrest from the cover of <i>Il Secolo</i> <i>Illustrato</i>	15
Figure 2-4: Prime minister Antonio Starabba di Rudinì.....	26
Figure 2-5: The royal investigating commission and staff	34
Figure 3-1: Engraver's rendering of Arab merchant Mussa-el-Accad <i>(sic, el-Akkad)</i>	39
Figure 3-2: Africa correspondent and his caravan.....	53
Figure 3-3: Abyssinian ambassador Makonnen.....	83
Figure 3-4: Abyssinian interpreter Josief	84
Figure 3-5: The Abyssinian imperial couple	85
Figure 3-6: Hand-drawn newspaper map of northeastern Africa along the Red Sea showing Italy's area of interest	88
Figure 4-1: Engraver's rendering of General Antonio Baldissera	107
Figure 4-2: Italian diplomat Pietro Antonelli	112
Figure 4-3: Engraver's rendering of the Italian fort at Keren	114
Figures 5-1A and 5-1B: Skyline views of Massaua.....	124

EDITORIAL NOTES

On transliterations

I have spelled indigenous proper nouns in the text in accordance with the primary source, when quoting, or otherwise in accordance with what seems to have been common Italian public usage of the time. Such usage was not uniform. For example, in 1891 Ferdinando Martini, vice-president of the Livraghi affair's investigating commission, noted that there were at least seven ways to spell the name of the Red Sea port of Massaua. He also insisted on spelling "Africa" as "Affrica" because he thought most Italians pronounced the continent's name that way even when they spelled it with a single "f" (see note 4, page 7). Further, the spelling of foreign names often made use of the letter "k," otherwise rarely found in Italian writing. Thus the name of the wealthy Arab merchant of Massaua was spelled variously "el-Acad," "el-Akad" or "el-Accad," but often "el-Akkad." Similarly most sources spelled the name of the Ethiopian emperor "Menelik," though some sources wrote "Menelich," and the place of Gordon's last stand in the Sudan as "Kartum" or some variant beginning with the letter "k."

The variety of spellings in part reflected attempts to transliterate the words and sounds of indigenous non-Roman characters into those of Roman characters, a process which contemporary Italians (e.g., Martini) recognized was problematic. Today the choice of Roman-character spellings of indigenous proper nouns may convey contested political and historiographic implications. In this book I use common Italian spellings of indigenous proper nouns as found in the sources, since the book investigates Italian perceptions and the primary sources are therefore necessarily Italian. However, I indicate in the text some of the alternative spellings in parentheses.

On newspaper names

I have taken newspaper names from their mastheads, which may or may not use an initial definite article. Thus, for example, *Corriere della Sera*, *Giornale di Sicilia* and *Gazzetta di Venezia*, but *Il Popolo Romano*, *Il Diritto* and *La Tribuna*. Also the alphabetization of the Bibliography and Index recognizes an initial definite article where it appears in a newspaper's masthead.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

*We have gone [into Africa]
to replace a barbarian and savage way of life,
at least where possible, with a humane and civil way of life;
to create security where nothing but terror reigns;
to promote work, where there is only a faint idea of it [:]
to spread fruitful and bountiful activities, where idleness rules*

Semplice [pseud.], "L'Italia in Africa,"
Corriere della Sera (Milan), February 16-17, 1888.

"Civilizing Africa"—bringing European institutions and society to Africa—was a common rationale for nineteenth-century European expansions into that continent. However, in March 1891 a news correspondent accused officials in Italy's Red Sea colony of having ordered, without trial, the secret and brutal killing of certain indigenous notables. A scandal erupted because the news contradicted civilizing expectations, portraying Italians rather than Africans as the barbarians. The press drove a debate over the accusations, but the debate ultimately led to an unanticipated reversal of public attitude: acceptance of the killings, because most Italians no longer considered European standards applicable to Africans. Historians have read the 1891 affair as an inconsequential, essentially minor event in the run-up to the 1896 battle of Adua (Adwa), Italy's defeat by African forces that some have called an event of world-historical consequence. Yet the Livraghi affair re-shaped the Italian outlook on colonialism in ways that opened the door to the later Italo-Abyssinian conflict and an event like Adua. The year 1891 was pivotal in this regard, and the pivot was the Livraghi affair. The affair was so important to contemporary Italians that it occupied public attention for

ten months, and influenced attitudes and colonial policy for decades. It prompted an enduring change in public attitude toward colonialism without which there might have been no Adua.

To explain the affair's unanticipated outcome historians have offered a backstage, conspiratorial scenario with hidden manipulation by military and political elites. Given the nation-wide and extended public debate provoked by the scandal, however, the conventional reading offers at best a truncated and thus distorted view. In contrast, my reading places the public debate at center stage. In that debate newspapers and correspondents were protagonists as much as any generals or politicians. The press both ignited the scandal and led it to its ultimate extinction. It sent correspondents to the colony, or hired travelers, colonial officials or soldiers as part-time reporters. They captured public imagination by their dispatches. The book follows individual correspondents and their papers through the affair. It shows how they fashioned Italian imaginings of African conditions, Italian self-perceptions and attitudes toward colonialism, and ultimately public acceptance of the scandal's admitted killings.

Focusing on the public debate brings to light the evolution in Italian attitudes toward the idea of civilizing Africa, an idea sometimes called the "civilizing mission." Initially, most Italians saw the bringing of civilized European society, including the rule of law, to a barbarian, lawless Africa as a project that reconciled Italy's presence there with its highest national ideals. It also presented a cause that might unify Italians, north and south, and heal divisions that had plagued the creation of the new Italy. As of early 1891 most literate Italians—those likely to read newspapers and to follow the public debate aroused by the scandal—professed in the abstract a commitment to the rule of law, though it had never been strenuously tested in an African context. They supported the existing constitutional parliamentary regime and considered themselves "liberal" in the broad sense of the word. Their liberalism (as does ours today) supposed the rule of law.¹ The Italian constitution guaranteed freedom from arrest or trial

¹ The term "liberal" as used in its broadest sense in late nineteenth-century Italy embraced all those who were "protagonists of the *Risorgimento* and members of the post-unification political class." Gian Carlo Jocteau, "Liberali," in *Dizionario storico dell'Italia unita*, ed. Bruno Bongiovanni and Nicola Tranfaglia (Rome: Laterza, 1996), 545-55, 546. The main political elements excluded from the term

except as provided by law, and equality before the law. Italians perceived such freedom and equality to be the essence of the rule of law, and considered the rule of law to be at the center of civilized society. The public appeal of civilizing Africa had risen and fallen in Italy before, but as of early 1891 it was near its peak. At that time Italians had hopes for peace, not war, with Abyssinia. Civilizing Africa was a more robust and accepted idea then than we now generally recognize. However, events were about to change that.

For ten months after the press accusations appeared, Italians engaged in a nation-wide public debate, capped by criminal trials and a royal investigation. The arguments focused on whether there should be two legal standards, one for Italians and another for Africans, and whether colonial disregard for the law could be reconciled with the rule of law at home. Colonialists repeatedly co-opted anti-colonial arguments and used them to argue for a harsher colonialism divested of civilizing aspirations. Reportage on three topics turned out to be most influential in shifting the public outlook: a sudden Italo-Abyssinian diplomatic impasse, an ongoing Africa famine, and the public persona of a colonial commander.

In December the move from abstract principle to contextualized application ended in broad public acceptance of the brutal killings, now officially admitted and defended as having been necessary for colonial security. Events had convinced most literate Italians that Africa was too different to be the subject of a civilizing effort. The indigenous peoples were not civilizable. For the most part Italians viewed them as promise-breakers, deceitful, anarchic, unteachable, and in any case destined to vanish because of famine and vendetta. However repugnant the view may be today, many contemporaries argued that these characteristics made Africa a lawless territory to which the rule of law could not be applied. They used such arguments in turn to justify repressive actions abroad that they conceded would have been punished if done at home. In reaching this conclusion, they publicly repudiated the original notion of bringing European civilization to Africa for the benefit of Africans. Civilizing

were socialists and Vatican-loyal Catholics. For the connection between liberalism and the rule of law, see John A. Davis, *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1988), 1-5.

rhetoric continued to be used at times in colonial discussion but the object and purpose of civilizing efforts had changed. Italy was in Africa simply for itself, despite constitutional guarantees and the initially benevolent civilizing intentions of many. My argument is that the affair signaled this turn in Italian thinking.

The book is about Italian history, but it is also much more than that. The debate over the issues has a present-day ring despite the passage of more than a century. It confronted Italians with questions of law, legal process, national identity and security whose progeny in different and varying contexts are disputed globally today. It suggests the question of whether there are recent parallels to the idea of a civilizing mission. It queries the influence of the press in public policy-making. It counters the widespread misimpression that today's issues regarding the rule of law are new. It is also another reminder that even open public debate does not necessarily lead to a right result.

CHAPTER TWO

“OFFICIAL MURDERS” AND THE INITIAL PUBLIC UPROAR

*Can anyone talk of anything else than the African terror? ...
The flag raised by us on those [Red Sea] shores
has to be really, and not as a lie, a flag of civilized society.*

R. Bonfadini, “L’incubo” [“The Nightmare”],
Corriere della Sera (Milan), March 10-11, 1891.

“THE DOINGS OF THE NATIVE POLICE IN AFRICA: Murders and extortion committed by Lieutenant Livraghi—A gang of robbers given responsibility to bring in civilized society.” This double-columned headline appeared on the front page of the widely circulated Rome daily newspaper, *La Tribuna*, on March 4, 1891. It accompanied a dispatch from Napoleone Corazzini, the paper’s Africa correspondent in Eritrea, Italy’s Red Sea colony. The correspondent accused Dario Livraghi, a Carabinieri lieutenant assigned to the colonial police, of trumping up charges of treason against various “*indigeni*”¹ notables and then having them arrested and secretly executed, usually without trial. Corazzini described the killings as “official murders,” part of a colonial reign of extortion and perjury.

Corazzini’s revelations forced Italians to re-examine basic assumptions and to face questions that Italy as a relative newcomer to colonialism had not previously had to confront so directly. The Italian constitution expressly shielded “inhabitants” against arrest or trial “except in cases

¹ In Italian sources of the time the term *indigeni* referred collectively and without distinction to the various Christian, Muslim and other peoples whom Italians encountered in northeastern Africa. Where the sources make more specific references, those are used in the text.

provided for and according to the forms prescribed by law.” Another provision granted “equality before the law.” In the 1860s both the army and parliament had overridden such legal protections during a brutal war against “banditry” in the Italian south. The political unity of the new Italy had seemed threatened then by a mixture of revolution, civil war and anarchy, and the army had taken especially severe measures, eventually endorsed by parliament, including banning groups of three or more people from gathering in the countryside and summary executions of suspected resisters.² Although in 1891 Italians may have hoped that such era was past, the scandal presented similar questions about constitutional guarantees and enculturation, but this time in a new colonial context.

For whose benefit was Italy “bringing civilization” to Africa, and what was the role of force? Did Italy’s constitutional protections of the rule of law and equality before the law apply in Africa and to Africans? What did the “rule of law” mean along an immense, violent and nebulous colonial frontier where it was difficult to enforce any law? What did “equality before the law” mean where varying and sometimes brutal indigenous customs of justice already existed? In the final reckoning, were liberal legal guarantees and colonialism compatible? Italians had skimmed over these questions until confronted—only six years after sending troops into Africa—with a concrete instance and context requiring answers.

“Horrible revelations”

Corazzini began his March 4 dispatch from Africa with these words: “I write to you under the impact of horrible revelations relating to the internal

² Italy had used 100,000 troops, suppressed an uprising in Palermo, and repeatedly declared states of siege. Despite unassuming references to “banditry,” “[m]ore lives were lost in this grim war than in all the military campaigns of the Risorgimento.” Christopher Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism 1870-1925* (London: Methuen & Co., 1967), 26. For the constitutional provisions, see S. M. Lindsay and Leo S. Rowe, “Constitution of the Kingdom of Italy, Translated and Supplied with an Historical Introduction and Notes,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Supp. November, 1894), 1-44, 30 (Arts. 24, 26). The most detailed history of southern *brigantaggio* appears still to be Franco Molfese, *Storia del brigantaggio dopo l’Unità* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964), but for a more current rendition see Salvatore Lupo, *History of the Mafia*, forwrd. and trans. Anthony Shugaar (New York: Columbia U. Press, 2009).

civil administration of the colony, which are such as would provoke disgust and fear in the least scrupulous functionary in the worst of governments.” He followed with a chilling and melodramatic description of the killing of a wealthy Abyssinian merchant named Getheon.³ The correspondent related that Getheon had been arrested at Massaua (Massowa),⁴ Italy’s colonial port on the Red Sea, and imprisoned on espionage and treason charges pursuant to Livraghi’s orders. A search of Getheon’s house discovered a large sum of cash which Livraghi claimed as prize money, contending that the sum represented funds meant for obtaining arms and ammunition for use by rebel tribes. Awaiting trial in December 1889, Getheon disappeared from the colonial prison. According to Corazzini, Livraghi recognized that the proof of Getheon’s crimes was flimsy and therefore decided to have him killed. Indigenous police dragged Getheon out of prison in the middle of the night, took him some distance away from Massaua, and then shot him twice. Not dead after two shots, the merchant was finished off with stones and clubs. Livraghi witnessed the killing from horseback and then dismounted to verify that Getheon was in fact dead. The body was thrown into a grave, and Livraghi helped to conceal the grave by smoothing out the earth.

Another brutal killing involved Osman, a Muslim chief. He was arrested in a town outside of Massaua on Livraghi’s orders, also on charges of espionage and treason. Delivered to the Massaua police, Osman disappeared. Colonial authorities told his family that he had been deported to Italy. However, Corazzini claimed that the same police commanded by Lieutenant Livraghi led Osman one night through the countryside. At some point Livraghi ordered a halt and directed that a grave be dug. He told Osman that the grave was for him. Osman threw himself on the ground pleading for mercy, but Livraghi made him stand up and then, “laughing spasmodically,” shot him twice. Remounting his horse, Livraghi

³ Corazzini’s dispatch referred to the merchant as “Ajub Getehon” but later press discussion settled on the spelling as “Getheon.”

⁴ In 1891 Ferdinando Martini, a deputy and vice-president of the scandal’s investigating commission, noted that there were at least seven ways to spell “Massaua,” and he insisted on spelling “Africa” as “Affrica.” *Nell’Africa italiana: Impressioni e ricordi*, 9th ed. (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1925; orig. pub. 1891), 24 and editor’s note preceeding page one. For further discussion see the note “On transliterations,” viii above.

smoked a cigarette while his squad threw the body into the grave and covered it over. Corazzini suggested that the body was buried “perhaps while its heart was still beating.” Livraghi then trampled on the grave site with his horse.

Corazzini and his aims

Corazzini identified in total seven secret killings of *indigeni* notables, including those of Getheon and Osman, carried out in 1889 and into 1890 by “the indigenous police” acting under Livraghi’s orders and with the connivance of Eteocle Cagnassi, a colonial official then in charge of indigenous affairs. The correspondent portrayed the killings as cases of brazen colonial corruption and lawlessness, and he wrote in a way calculated to shock and arouse the public. Yet he did not simply report the lurid details. In his account he attacked the corruption and lawlessness in three ways. First, he both appealed to, and challenged, Italy’s pretensions of bringing civilization (*civiltà*) to Africa. He emphasized with italics and three exclamation points that these killings had been carried out, not by some criminal gang, but by police forces entrusted with “*public security (!!!)*.” He called the colonial police “brigands.” He exclaimed that “if these are the means and this is the kind of men with which we claim to bring civilization to barbarian countries, I understand the rebellion aimed at chasing us away.” Italians previously had read in the press of tribal chiefs’ summarily ordering horrible deaths and punishments, such as mutilations and beheadings, which most Italians found barbaric and viewed as common among the *indigeni*.⁵ The affair’s killings as described by Corazzini—especially the clubbing to death—seemed no different: Italians appeared to be acting like Africans. Corazzini presented the rule of law as foundational to civilized society and challenged Italy to live up to its

⁵ Shortly after the 1887 Dogali defeat the colonial commander ransomed Italian captives by delivering anti-Abyssinian chiefs into Abyssinian hands. The press reported that the chiefs were variously mutilated and beheaded, which caused an uproar in Italy. Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale: I. Dall’Unità alla marcia su Roma* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001, sftcvt), 262-63; Chiesi and Norsa, 47-48; “Informazioni: Il governo non sa nulla!” *La Tribuna* (Rome), March 22, 1887. See also Martini, *Nell’Affrica*, 11, describing as indigenous practice mutilations as punishments for crimes.

civilizing claims or to give up its boasting. Bringing civilized society to Africa was still a worthy goal, but the rule of law had to be restored.

Second, he argued that the colonial command’s extraordinary state-of-war powers were at the root of the lawlessness which he reported. In 1887, following its colonial defeat at Dogali, Italy had declared a colonial state-of-war. Corazzini contended that the sweeping declaration had nullified the rule of law in the colony by abandoning “thousands of people (white or black, as they may be, it makes no difference) to every type of tyranny without appeal.” He claimed to have uncovered a systemic problem, not simply individual crimes, so his solutions were systemic. He called for a civilian rather than military administration of the colony, and for the revocation of the war declaration, which he condemned as “illegal.” The label “illegal” was audacious and not needed to support his accusations, but it gave his dispatch additional notoriety and must have appealed to the left’s parliamentary radicals.

Third, Corazzini presented himself as the outraged but truthful reporter. He maintained that he had “the most irrefutable of proofs” and had learned the eye-witness details of the killings from “persons worthy of every trust.” With respect to the killing of Osman, Corazzini himself assumed “all the responsibility” for the details reported. Among some readers he may have boosted his credibility by seeming openly to defy the risk of a libel suit or duel challenge, but Livraghi at that moment was a fugitive and the ex-colonial official Cagnassi was already under arrest. The correspondent’s main risks stemmed from his argument that ultimate responsibility for the crimes lay higher in the colonial establishment. He mitigated those risks by exempting Generals Antonio Baldissera and Baldassarre Orero, the two successive colonial commanders during the relevant period, from knowledge of the misdeeds.

However, Corazzini’s views on colonialism and the rule of law were more complex, contradictory and shifting than appeared from his March 4 dispatch. He was no anti-colonialist. His public persona presented an unstable mixture of colonial bravado and moral idealism. He did not call for colonial withdrawal and disagreed with his employer’s (*La Tribuna*’s) increasingly anti-colonial stance. In 1889 the correspondent and his paper had publicly exposed their disagreement when he had supported Italy’s westward expansion of the colony by the uncontested occupation of Asmara



Figure 2-1: Napoleone Corazzini. From the Fondo Camperio, Biblioteca Comunale Villasanta, image 1536, with permission.

and Keren. *La Tribuna* had spoken then of the correspondent's "africanismo."⁶ Further, in 1890 Corazzini suggested that a certain rebellious chief, if caught, should be shot first and permission sought afterwards. He also came close to recommending in print the shooting of hostages given by local chiefs as security for their fidelity. These comments reflected frustration with European moral and legal sensibilities when it came to punishing rebellious *indigeni*. However, on another occasion Corazzini had emphasized that military judges in colonial cases "must send [the accused] to hell for crimes which they committed, not for

⁶ Corazzini, "Africanismo," *La Tribuna* (Rome), April 15, 1889.

those which they did not commit,” and in his scandal-breaking March 4 dispatch he called for the restoration of the rule of law in the colony.⁷

Literate Italians already knew Corazzini as a gentleman novelist, playwright, news correspondent and experienced duelist (Figure 2-1). Tuscan born in 1840, he had written for *La Tribuna* in 1886 as a serialized novelist, and in late 1888 had been hired by the Rome paper to become the successor to its well-known Africa correspondent, Giacomo Gobbi Belcredi. Corazzini had worked previously as a foreign correspondent for at least three other papers, including as Africa correspondent for *Corriere di Napoli*. By the time of the March dispatch he was a veteran on his fourth Africa tour and at the summit of his journalistic career. Like other veteran correspondents, he was acknowledged in print for all his material and took public responsibility for it. Some of his journalistic colleagues thought him vain and self-important. An 1886 government report characterized him as politically opportunistic. His columns were opinionated and given to melodrama, and it seems clear from them that he greatly enjoyed public attention. *La Tribuna* was known for its extensive publishing of the latest colonial news, and other papers noted its Africa dispatches. Corazzini’s role as Africa correspondent for *La Tribuna* placed him at the center of colonial debate, and his scandal accusations intensified the public attention that he received.⁸

Corazzini’s March 4 dispatch was a reporter’s coup. He wrote it in a way to claim a place in the limelight. He knew his audience and wrote to

⁷ Corazzini, “Corriere d’Africa: La ribellione di Ligg Ilma—Cronaca varia,” *ibid.*, May 5, 1890 (shoot first). Corazzini, “Corriere d’Africa: Note retrospettive,” *ibid.*, May 26, 1890 (hostages). Corazzini, “Dal continente nero: Quel che c’è di nuovo—La prigionia del D’Avico—Il processo Cagnassi—Adgo Ambessa,” *ibid.*, February 22, 1891 (judges).

⁸ Announcement, “*Il delitto di via Mouffetard* di N. Corazzini,” *ibid.*, August 7, 1886 (serialization of novel). Corazzini, “In cammino,” *ibid.*, December 25, 1888 (successor to Belcredi). Silvano Montaldo, “Affarismo e massoneria nella colonia italiana d’Eritrea alla fine dell’Ottocento,” *Storia e problemi contemporanei* 21 (April, 1998): 25-64, 35-36 (fourth tour). Gustavo Chiesi and Giulio Norsa, *Otto mesi d’Africa*, pref. by Dario Papa (Milan: Carlo Aliprandi, 1888), 302-304 (vanity). A confidential government inquiry around 1886 concluded that Corazzini had very little credit among journalists because he lacked “character,” having worked for a variety of papers with diverse political views. Valerio Castronovo, “Per la storia della stampa italiana (1870-1890),” *Nuova Rivista Storica* XLVII (1963), 102-58, 133-34.

its preconceptions. The dispatch presupposed and aimed to exploit a public expectation that Italy was bringing civilization to Africa, and that such civilization included the rule of law. Without such public expectation Corazzini's words would have fallen on deaf ears. Yet his argument and credibility were also quickly bolstered by additional accusations and admissions through the press from a surprising source—Livraghi. The lieutenant's revelations overshadowed even Corazzini's.

Livraghi's accusations and "confessions"

Dario Livraghi's photographed portrait (Figure 2-2) shows a handsome Carabinieri lieutenant, but little more is known of his background beyond his place and year of birth (Lodi, Lombardy, 1860), and his joining the Carabinieri and eventual assignment to colonial duty, for which he was decorated in late 1889.⁹ The year before that, the colonial commander, General Baldissera, had given him the task of tracking down anyone who had betrayed Italian-led indigenous troops in their recent defeat at Saganeiti. In February 1890 the Italian press carried the news that two *indigeni* notables had been arrested, promptly tried for treason, convicted and sentenced to death. Livraghi led the arrests. One of the condemned was Hassan Mussa el-Akkad ("el-Akkad"), the wealthiest merchant in the colony, and the other was Hamed, a Muslim chief and early Italian ally. Most of the press expressed satisfaction, but chief minister Francesco Crispi, who once had met el-Akkad, stayed the executions and confidentially authorized an investigation. The result had been the October 1890 arrests of Livraghi and Cagnassi. The military prosecutor at Massaua charged them with abuse of office and extortion, centering on allegedly false evidence that they had provided in the el-Akkad and Hamed trials. Shortly after his arrest Livraghi managed to escape and went into hiding in Switzerland.

⁹ *La Tribuna Illustrata* (Rome), March 22, 1891, 183; *Gazzetta Ufficiale* (Rome), November 8, 1889, 3805 (decorated).



Figure 2-2: Lieutenant Dario Livraghi. *L'Illustrazione Italiana* (Milan), March 15, 1891, 166.

The Milan newspaper *Il Secolo* was Italy's largest and friendly to parliamentary radicals. On March 5, the day after publication of Corazzini's dispatch in Rome, it began publishing excerpts of a long memorandum (the “*Memoriale*”) which it had received a month earlier by mail from Livraghi in Switzerland. The fugitive portrayed himself as a victim of colonial intrigue, and alleged that any crimes attributable to him had been ordered by unnamed superiors. Swelling the scandal further, he asserted that entire mercenary bands whose loyalty was suspect had been secretly disarmed and slaughtered by Italian-commanded indigenous forces that performed police duty in and around Massaua, and he put the number killed at more than eight hundred. *Il Secolo* devoted its front page for three successive days to printing large portions of the *Memoriale* with the omission of names and personal identifying details of some of those involved. On the first day it also reprinted a substantial portion of Corazzini's dispatch, and it ran its headline in capital letters across its entire front page: “THE MURDERS IN AFRICA—800 DEAD?”¹⁰

¹⁰ “Gli assassini in Africa—800 morti,” *Il Secolo* (Milan), March 5-6, 1891; “Gli assassini d’Africa,” *ibid.*, March 6-7, 1891; and “L’inchiesta sull’Africa—La fucilazione delle bande,” *ibid.*, March 7-8, 1891.

In its initial three days of reportage *Il Secolo* echoed the themes sounded by Corazzini. It highlighted the contrast between an undertaking to bring civilization to Africa and the brutish colonial violence now being reported, and it mocked: “Is this the civilized society [*civiltà*] that we have brought there?”¹¹ The paper noted that both Corazzini and Livraghi had asserted that responsibility for the alleged murders lay higher in the colonial administration, and it pushed for an investigation of colonial superiors. Finally, *Il Secolo* addressed the question of reliability. It claimed to have thought Livraghi’s *Memoriale* to be unbelievable and self-serving when first received, and had declined to print it. Once Corazzini’s charges appeared, however, the newspaper had felt obligated to help bring the truth before the public. At the same time, the paper expressly and repeatedly disclaimed any responsibility for the truth of either Corazzini’s or Livraghi’s accusations.

However, the evidence of colonial killings continued to build. On March 6, only two days after Corazzini’s charges had appeared, *Il Secolo* published excerpts of a new letter from Livraghi in Switzerland. The fugitive wrote that “the very grave facts narrated by the Massaua correspondent [Corazzini] to *La Tribuna* are for the most part true. Only the details of them are exaggerated, it being false that I cynically assisted in the torture of so many unfortunates.” *La Tribuna* characterized this letter and the *Memoriale* as Livraghi’s “confessions,” though they seemed calculated rather than spontaneous statements. Meanwhile Massaua correspondents for other Rome newspapers sent back brief telegraphed dispatches confirming elements of Corazzini’s description of events as well as of Livraghi’s assertion of the elimination of entire mercenary bands.¹²

¹¹ “Gli assassini in Africa—800 morti?,” *ibid.*, March 5-6, 1891. *La Tribuna* expressed the same mockery in an editorial accompanying Corazzini’s dispatch, “Le nuove piaghe africana,” *La Tribuna* (Rome), March 4, 1891.

¹² “Gli assassini d’Africa,” *Il Secolo* (Milan), March 6-7, 1891 (letter). “Gli eccidii africani: Una nuova lettera di Livraghi,” *La Tribuna* (Rome), March 7, 1891 (“confessions”). “I fatti di Massaua,” *Il Popolo Romano* (Rome), March 5, 1891; “Il processo di Massaua,” *Il Diritto* (Rome), March 6, 1891 (other reports).



Figure 2-3: Scenes of Livraghi's arrest. Cover, *Il Secolo Illustrato della Domenica* (Milan), March 15, 1891, 81.

The lieutenant's guilt seemed further confirmed on March 10 as Italian newspapers reported his arrest by Swiss police to face extradition to Italy. He was found in Lugano, hiding in his nightshirt in the cellar of his lodging, and several papers reported that his words upon capture were, "I am ruined." The words were taken as another confession. Here was high melodrama, and Milan's *Corriere della Sera* in two lengthy articles in the

same issue reported interviews with everyone from Livraghi's landlady and neighbors to the arresting police officials.¹³ A Milan weekly presented on its cover an engraver's imagination of scenes of the arrest, including that of a desperate Livraghi attempting to bar his door against the police (Figure 2-3).

By then the accusations fell into two main clusters. First were those concerning the individual murders described in Corazzini's original dispatch, which Livraghi in his latest letter to *Il Secolo* had said were "for the most part true." Second were those accusations in Livraghi's *Memoriale* concerning the slaughter of entire mercenary bands suspected of disloyalty. Livraghi claimed that there had been at least eight hundred band members killed; within a few days the number rose in press reports to a thousand.¹⁴

The rhetoric of scandal

Newspapers across Italy reported the burgeoning scandal, and what other papers and parliament were saying about it.¹⁵ The press discussion was a national one. The dissonance between Italy's civilizing pretensions and the lawless brutality of the reported killings became a recurring theme. The sense of scandal was reflected in the use of a euphemism to refer to the killings: *sopprimere*, a word both innocuous and menacing, meaning to abolish, annul or suppress, but in the Livraghi affair also meaning to slaughter or massacre. Corazzini's account implied that the term was in common use in the colony to refer to the kind of killings he was describing.¹⁶ There had been colonial executions reported before, but they

¹³ "L'arresto del tenente Livraghi a Lugano," *Corriere della Sera* (Milan), March 10-11, 1891; and "Il soggiorno e l'arresto del Livraghi a Lugano," *ibid.*

¹⁴ "Gli scandali africani: Arresto del tenente Livraghi a Lugano—Nuove gravi rivelazioni," *Caffaro* (Genoa), March 10, 1891, noting reports that the "suppressions" had amounted to a thousand.

¹⁵ The killings stirred sufficient scandal to be noted on the front page of even foreign newspapers as distant as Muncie, Indiana. "Looks Like It Needs Investigation," *The Muncie Daily Herald* (Muncie, IN), March 9, 1891.

¹⁶ For a contemporary acknowledgement of the euphemism, see "Gravi denuncie," *La Nazione* (Florence), March 6, 1891, and "Arresto del tenente Livraghi a Lugano—Nuove gravi rivelazioni," *Caffaro* (Genoa), March 10, 1891.

had been done openly and ostensibly in compliance with law and regulations.

Within days of the publication of the dispatch, the scandal generated a common rhetoric of national “honor” and “light” which was used by newspapers of all political stripes.¹⁷ No one parsed the concept of national honor with any precision, but references to it implicitly compared Italian behavior and character to that of other European nations. Virtually all agreed that the colonial reports had stained the national honor. Charges of uncivilized conduct by Italian colonial officials belied the claim of civilized society at home. The adverse reflection on the metropole is what made the colonial killings especially newsworthy at home. The scandal was never simply about remote colonial events; it was about the home country’s self-perception.

There was broad agreement across the political spectrum that the killings as now described in the press were abhorrent. Some papers reprinted Corazzini’s entire dispatch and Livraghi’s *Memoriale* and letter as they became available. From Bologna came the report that the dispatch had been made into a special supplement for a local newspaper, with sales of thousands of copies.¹⁸ Milan’s *Il Secolo* urged that the way to cleanse

¹⁷ See, e.g., “Le atrocità africane,” *La Tribuna* (Rome), March 8, 1891; “Gravi denuncie,” *La Nazione* (Florence), March 6, 1891; “Il processo di Massaua,” *Il Diritto* (Rome), March 5, 1891; “La stampa e lo scandalo africano,” *ibid.*, March 9, 1891; “L’affari Livraghi,” *Corriere di Napoli* (Naples), March 5-6, 1891; “Sia fatta la luce!,” *Il Piccolo* (Naples), March 10-11, 1891; “Il tenente dei Carabinieri Livraghi e la banda di malfattori,” *Giornale di Sicilia* (Palermo), March 6-7, 1891; “Polizia africana,” *Corriere delle Puglie* (Bari), March 6, 1891; “Gli orribili fatti d’Africa: Ottocento assassinati?,” *ibid.*, March 8, 1891; “Il Memoriale di Livraghi,” *ibid.*, March 11, 1891; “Vergogne africane,” *Caffaro* (Genoa), March 6, 1891.

¹⁸ Reprints of Livraghi’s writings in addition to reprints by *Il Secolo*: “Civilizzatori e civilizzati: Infame inaudite commesse dal tenente Livraghi a Massaua—Quattro ricchi indigeni assassinate,” *Il Piccolo* (Naples), March 4-5, 1891; “Gli assassinii di Massaua: L’altra campana—Il racconto del tenente Livraghi,” *ibid.*, March 6-7, 1891; “Gli assassinii di Massaua,” *ibid.*, March 7-8, 1891; and “Un Dogali a rovescio: 800 indigeni truciati—Il prezzo del sangue,” *ibid.*, March 8-9, 1891. “Il tenente dei Carabinieri Livraghi e la banda di malfattori,” *Giornale di Sicilia* (Palermo), March 6-7, 1891; “Le stragi di Massaua—800 morti!!,” *ibid.*, March 7-8, 1891. “Gli orrori di Massaua,” *La Tribuna* (Rome), March 9, 1891 (Bologna supplement).

the national honor was to punish those who had committed the crimes. Genoa's *Caffaro* wondered, why stay in Africa, if only to carry out more robbery and murder? The Vatican-loyal *L'Osservatore Romano* quickly considered the accusations confirmed, though allowing for some exaggeration. It took the scandal as an occasion to remind its readers of the differences between the "civilized society" being brought to Africa by the secular Italian state through "robbery, slaughter and blood" and that which the Church proposed to introduce through the use of Catholic missionaries.¹⁹

All papers called for "light" to expose the truth. As early as March 5 *La Tribuna* demanded an official inquiry, and other papers on the left quickly joined in that demand. Demands for "light" contrasted with a rhetoric of mysterious, shadowy, black Africa, and implicitly evoked explanations that would satisfy the rational mind. Such light was something that civilized European society was supposed to bring to Africa, and an inquiry commission of intelligent, civilized European men was a proper way to bring light to the shrouded origins and causes of the colonial killings.²⁰

"Light" also contrasted with "The Nightmare," the title of a March 10 column in *Corriere della Sera* by a center-right deputy from north of Milan, Romualdo Bonfadini, famous for heading an 1875 parliamentary commission investigating southern law and order. He asked, "Can anyone talk of anything else than the African terror?" He did not doubt that there might be some exaggeration, either by journalists or by Livraghi in attempting to distract from his own role, and he observed that the revelations had grown "from corruption to murder, from murder to

¹⁹ "Gli assassinii d'Africa," *Il Secolo* (Milan), March 6-7, 1891. "Gli scandali africani: Arresto del tenente Livraghi a Lugano—Nuove gravi rivelazioni," *Caffaro* (Genoa), March 10, 1891. "Barbarie italianissime in Africa," *L'Osservatore Romano* (Rome), March 5, 1891; "L'Italia in Africa," *ibid.*, March 6, 1891; "Decadenza di virtù militare," *ibid.*, March 11, 1891.

²⁰ "Domandiamo un'inchiesta," *La Tribuna* (Rome), March 5, 1891; "Gli assassinii d'Africa," *Il Secolo* (Milan), March 6-7, 1891; "Il processo di Massaua," *Il Diritto* (Rome), March 6, 1891; "I fatti d'Africa e il dovere del governo," *ibid.*, March 7, 1891. *L'Osservatore Romano* (Rome) repeatedly referred to Africa as *tenebrosa*, meaning dark, shadowy or mysterious, citing Henry Stanley's characterization of it as the "dark continent." "Le proteste di Menelik contro il protettorato italiano," *L'Osservatore Romano* (Rome), January 27, 1891; "L'Italia in Africa," *ibid.*, February 25, 1891; "L'Italia in Africa," *ibid.*, March 17, 1891.

slaughter, from tens of victims to hundreds, to eight hundred, to a thousand.” He noted that some people were saying that all of the colonial powers experienced such episodes, but he replied that one murder could not justify another.

Bonfadini called for the scandal trials to be moved from the colony to Italy. The homeland could better defend true Italian-ness and Italian honor, and its civilian legal system could better flush out and convict those who had been “unworthy of the name Italian.” He had never been in favor of acquiring the colony, but conceded that he would not now favor its abandonment. He concluded, however: “The flag raised by us on those [Red Sea] shores has to be really, and not as a lie, a flag of civilized society.” His sense was that Italians were uniting without regard to partisan politics “to demand that a severe justice fall on the heads, high or low” that were responsible for the wickedness.²¹

The rhetoric of skepticism

The initial uproar was genuine. There was broad agreement among press and parliament that if the accusations were substantially true, the colonial killings were to be condemned. However, the unity of which Bonfadini spoke masked underlying ambiguities. There was no clear line between the scandalized and the skeptical. One could be both at this point. For some, the greater the sense of scandal, the greater also the inclination to skepticism. Moreover, whether the accusations were all true was still contested. Corazzini never disclosed his sources, though the Massaua military prosecutor was one of those suspected of leaking information to him and was soon recalled to Italy and replaced.²² In addition, Corazzini never made public the substance of his testimony before the soon-appointed investigating commission, though he said he would do so.²³ Livraghi’s statements and behavior, while seeming to validate Corazzini’s accusations, enlarged on them so much as to feed skepticism. How could

²¹ R. Bonfadini, “L’incubo,” *Corriere della Sera* (Milan), March 10-11, 1891.

²² Press accounts imply that leaks by the prosecutor would have been improper as extra-judicial attempts to influence the impending trials. The prosecutor publicly denied leaking any information. F. Paronelli, “Ciò che dice il marchese Invrea,” *Il Piccolo* (Naples), August 17-18, 1891.

²³ See Corazzini, “Echi africani,” *La Riforma* (Rome), May 12, 1891.

mass executions have occurred over a year or two and still have been kept secret? Competing narratives circulated. Public images of the press as truth teller versus scandal sheet wrestled with each other. Most commentators assumed that there was at least some “exaggeration” in the colonial reports.

Several newspapers attempted unsuccessfully to restrain the clamor, publishing admonitions to reserve judgment and even carefully circumscribed denials of some accusations. On the right, Florence’s *La Nazione* acknowledged that Corazzini’s report had made a painful impression across the country. Yet it expressed confidence that his revelations were in large measure exaggerated. It considered Italian public opinion to be “excessively impressionable” in Africa matters, though it conceded that if even only a small part of the accusations turned out to be true, they should be abhorred by all Italy. On the left, Crispi’s own newspaper, *La Riforma*, credited him with having initiated the colonial investigation in 1890 which led to discovery of the secret killings, but the paper was otherwise subdued, deferring to Crispi’s other journalistic defenders. Palermo’s *Giornale di Sicilia* accused Crispi’s enemies of hoping to saddle him with blame for the killings and to obtain a colonial withdrawal. *Il Popolo Romano* attacked Livraghi’s veracity and the exculpatory tenor of his confessions, and urged that matters should be allowed to proceed calmly through the courts “rather than on the basis of the judgments of newspaper correspondents.” It said that *La Tribuna* could have disclosed Corazzini’s revelations “in five lines” instead of sensationalizing them.²⁴

Of the large-city daily papers, *Gazzetta di Venezia* stood out for offering an hypothesis to justify secret colonial executions.²⁵ If Livraghi

²⁴ “Gravi denuncie,” *La Nazione* (Florence), March 6, 1891; “Africa,” *ibid.*, March 11, 1891. “Ultimo corriere: L’Italia in Africa,” *La Riforma* (Rome), March 5, 1891. “Pallone sgonfiato,” *Giornale di Sicilia* (Palermo), March 14-15, 1891. “I fatti d’Africa,” *Il Popolo Romano* (Rome), March 8, 1891. See also “L’inchiesta sui fatti africani,” *ibid.*, March 11, 1891.

²⁵ The small Milan paper *L’Italia* seems to have advanced an argument similar to that of *Gazzetta di Venezia* above. See the report in “I misfatti d’Africa,” *L’Opinione* (Rome), March 12, 1891. Nicola Bernardini, *Guida della stampa periodica italiana*, pref. by Ruggero Bonghi (Lecce: Tipografia Editrice Salentina, 1890), 712-13, described *Gazzetta di Venezia* as having been a “moderate” paper