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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Silencing history: forgetting Italy's past during the refugee crisis in Europe

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## Abstract

Most scholarly analyses of memory politics investigate how historical events are remembered selectively in order to justify political choices. Recent research has shown that 'silencing the past', notably the omission of relevant historical events, is also an important aspect of memory politics. This article examines how Italian leaders silenced significant periods of Italy's history during the refugee and migrant crisis in 2014–2018. Drawing on memory politics and postcolonial literature, the article argues that Italian foreign policy discourses are based on both historical oblivion and the long-standing myth of the 'good Italian'. The myth negates the controversial aspects of Italy's colonial experience and permeates the country's self-perception as an international actor. Italian foreign policy narratives also silenced the highly relevant precedent of Italian migration abroad. The focus is on the public speeches of Italy's main political actors, notably national ministers and the leaders of the largest parties in parliament.

**Keywords** Italy · Memory · Forgetting · Postcolonialism · Foreign policy · Migration

## Introduction

> Italy can and should be a protagonist of a new season of sincere and concrete multilateralism. We can be one because we have no skeletons in our closet, we don't have a colonial tradition, we haven't dropped bombs on anyone and we haven't put the noose around the neck of any other economy. We are Italy and Italians, a people that is used to being respected for the quality of our products

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> and actions. (Manlio di Stefano, Italy's Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, cited in L'Espresso 2019)

Manlio Di Stefano's statement reveals a defining aspect of Italy's official politics of memory and foreign policy since the Second World War: the attempt to silence and whitewash Italy's highly controversial colonial past and draw a positive historical image of Italians, both in absolute terms and in comparison with other European nations (notably France, the UK and Germany).[1] Nationalist, right-wing and centre-right politicians have been the main proponents of apologetic and self-exculpating narratives about Italy's colonial past and sometimes even celebrated Italian colonialism as part of the country's supposed bygone grandeur (Ponzanesi 2016: 374). Di Stefano himself is a member of the populist Five Star Movement, which was in a coalition government with the far-right League from June 2018 to August 2019 (for early scholarly analyses of this government, see Bressanelli and Natali 2019; Newell 2019). However, with few and contingent exceptions (such as the Italian Communist Party's support of anti-colonial movements during the Cold War, or individual initiatives of former presidents of the republic), the silencing of colonial history has been a bipartisan feature of postwar Italian politics. In the postwar years, the new democratic state attempted to construct itself in opposition to colonial liberal (1861–1922) and fascist (1922–1943) Italy. At the same time, it tried to avoid compensation claims from the former colonies or criminal proceedings against army and colonial officials. Hence, the rupture with the past did not involve a critical analysis of, let alone an admission of responsibility for the colonial period. All these factors concurred in crafting an official discourse that silenced the colonial past and skirted responsibility for colonial crimes.

The fact that Italy lost its colonies during the Second World War, and thus was not directly involved in the decolonisation process between the 1950s and 1970s, enabled Italian politicians to avoid the relevant debates that occurred in other colonial countries. Moreover, postwar Italy did not have large ethnic minorities originating from the former colonies—and, until the 1980s, from any other foreign countries. This meant that, in addition to repressing the memory of its colonial past, republican Italy and Italians could construct their national identity along strongly racialised lines, where 'Italianness' coincided with 'whiteness' and Catholicism. This understanding of national identity became deeply engrained both among officials and the public opinion and continues to influence current domestic and foreign policy discourse (Lombardi-Diop 2012; Ponzanesi 2016).

Drawing on memory politics and postcolonial literature, this article argues that current Italian foreign policy discourse is largely based on both historical oblivion and the long-standing myth of the 'good Italian'. As will be shown, this is particularly true of official narratives concerning the recent refugee and migrant crisis in Europe. In this context, both Italy's colonial past and its (enduring) history as an

[1] Answering criticism to his statement cited above, Di Stefano argued that a distinction should be made between a 'colonial tradition', such as that of France and the UK, and 'episodes' such as those concerning Italy (see his personal Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/ManlioDiStefano/). His assumption is that approximately 60 years of Italian colonialism can be bracketed as an episode.

emigrant nation (Choate 2008) are suppressed in order to focus on the presumed security threat of migration. The article starts with a theoretical analysis of forgetting the past in memory politics. It then moves on to analyse the specificities of Italian forgetting, most notably the silencing of Italy's colonial crimes and the related construction of the myth of the 'good Italian'. These issues are further elaborated with reference to postcolonial scholarship on Italy, which has (belatedly) acquired an important position in academic debates since the 2000s. The subsequent empirical analysis investigates how silencing the past was an essential premise and constitutive element of Italian official narratives during the recent refugee and migrant crisis in Europe.

## The politics of forgetting the past

### Collective memory and forgetting

The term 'collective memory' refers to the shared memories held by a community about the past. It is an image of the past constructed by subjectivity in the present, based on a collective's current social and historical necessities (cf. Siddi 2017 for more detailed discussion). The selection and dissemination of discourses about a country's past has been termed 'politics of memory' (Lebow et al. 2006). The politics of memory involves actors who use their public prominence to propagate discourses about the past that are functional to current political goals (Lebow 2006). Thanks to their public prominence, state leaders and leading politicians enjoy the discursive power to influence a country's official memory narratives. By doing so, they can pursue both domestic and foreign policy goals. For instance, a state leader could use a narrative about the past (for instance, the negative effects of appeasement towards Hitler in the 1930s) to construct analogies with the present and justify foreign policy decisions (portray Saddam Hussein as a 'new Hitler' and justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003). Often, domestic and foreign policy goals are interlinked in the politics of memory: a particular historical narrative may serve the purpose of both corroborating a foreign policy decision and of uniting domestic public opinion behind that decision (cf. Klymenko 2019; Siddi 2017).

While the effects of selective remembrance or the distortion of historical events in official memory have been analysed in scholarly literature (see for instance the volume by Lebow et al. 2006), less attention has been devoted to the politics of forgetting. Forgetting is a central component of memory politics: dominant narratives are constructed through a selection of events that almost inevitably implies marginalising or leaving out other events that are not seen as consistent with the narrative. Like selective remembering, selective forgetting can justify or permeate both domestic politics and foreign policy decisions. While the politics of forgetting can occur in different ways and for different reasons (see Ricoeur 2004), this paper explores a specific type of forgetting, in which leading state actors and institutions take a central role. As Ricoeur (2004: 448) has argued, these actors may 'impose a canonical narrative by means of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery. A devious

form of forgetting is at work here, resulting from stripping the social actors of their original power to recount their actions themselves'.

While leading politicians can play a central role in the politics of forgetting, their efforts to confine certain historical events to oblivion can only be successful if they are endorsed by a substantial part of society. As Ricoeur (2004: 448–449) argued, social actors' dispossession of memory is 'not without a secret complicity, which makes forgetting a semi-passive, semi-active behaviour, as is seen in forgetting by avoidance (*fuite*), the expression of bad faith and its strategy of evasion motivated by an obscure will not to inform oneself, not to investigate the harm done by the citizen's environment, in short a wanting-not-to know'. Partial or selective memory can also be seen as a form of forgetting (Ricoeur 2004: 449). As we shall see below, the politics of forgetting characterised Italian narratives concerning the country's colonial and migrant past and influenced official Italian domestic and foreign policy discourses regarding the refugee crisis in Europe in the 2010s.

## Italy's colonial past and the politics of forgetting

Italy's official politics of memory marginalises and represses the country's colonial experience. The Italian colonial empire included Eritrea, Somalia, Libya and, even if only for a short (but significant) period, Ethiopia. In Europe, Albania and the Dodecanese islands of Greece were also Italian colonies. Italy's colonial experience took place between the late 1880s and 1943. It started later and ended earlier than that of other European colonial powers such as France, the UK or Portugal. However, it was a constitutive part of national politics for over five decades, in a period that largely coincided with the foundation of the modern Italian state and the formation of national identity. As Ben-Ghiat (2006) has argued, the empire was central to the construction of both national identity and national conceptualisations of modernity, particularly during fascism. Many Italian intellectuals embraced colonialism as a means to strengthen national identity. According to the fascist vision, the imperial experience would produce a new type of human being, disciplined and patriotic; this 'regeneration' embodied the fascist idea of modernity. Significantly, the fascist regime reached the peak of its popularity in the wake of the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 (Ben-Ghiat 2006: 382, 386).

In its colonial empire, Italy committed a vast range of crimes[2] on a large scale, including what can be seen as genocide. In the liberal (prefascist) period, they included summary executions and deportations as a tool to maintain order, mass repressions and the burning of Tripoli in 1911. During the fascist period, Italy used chemical weapons in the conquest of Libya and Ethiopia and constructed concentration camps in Libya (especially in Cyrenaica) to detain the civilian population during large-scale repressions. Mass repressions and arbitrary killings also took place in Ethiopia against the Coptic Church, in the fight against the anti-colonial resistance and throughout the colonial occupation (1936–1941). The crimes perpetrated

[2] By crimes, I intend acts that contravened laws and norms to which Italy had subscribed at the time (Labanca 2004: 303–304).

against the Cyrenean population and Ethiopian resistance fighters can be regarded as instances of genocide. According to available estimates, around 100,000 Libyans had died as a result of Italian policies by the early 1930s, out a population of less than a million (Labanca 2004: 304–306; Del Boca 2003). Criminal acts were committed during both wars of conquest and the ordinary colonial administration (Labanca 2004: 302). Throughout the colonial period, women in the colonies were subject to further discrimination; many were either forced into prostitution or into domestic and sexual servitude for Italian colonists (a phenomenon called *Madamismo* in Italian, cf. Iyob 2000). Italy's colonies also served as testing ground for strategies of mass repression that would later be applied during Italy's occupation of Greece and Yugoslavia in the Second World War (Ben-Ghiat 2006: 383).

Moreover, Italy's colonial empire had legacies—for both Italians and the colonised countries—that lasted well after 1943. As far as Italy and Italians are concerned, many Italian settlers remained in Libya and Ethiopia in the first postwar decades. Italy lost all its colonies with the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, despite diplomatic efforts (endorsed by all political forces) to salvage at least part of the empire. As other European powers retained their colonial possessions, the loss of empire left many Italians 'feeling wronged rather than repentant' (Ben-Ghiat 2006: 390). In postwar Italy, there were no critical public debates on the colonial experience and crimes, nor any related trials. Conversely, national myths about the innate goodness of the Italian colonialist became entrenched and have persisted until today. In addition, Italy continued to seek a privileged relationship with its former possessions and was in charge of an UN-authorised trusteeship over Somalia from 1949 to 1960.

Having lost all its colonies during the Second World War, Italy did not have to confront the process of decolonisation in the 1950s–1970s, as for example France and the UK did. This, together with the fact that very few people from the former colonies were allowed to settle in Italy, helped insulate the country from contemporary and sometimes critical European debates on colonialism and its legacies (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 6–7). An active official politics of denying and forgetting Italian colonial crimes, while only remembering the supposed positive aspects of Italian colonialism, contributed to the widespread ignorance of Italian public opinion regarding the country's colonial past.

The official politics of suppressing the colonial past encompassed the following main aspects. Firstly, postwar Italian governments rejected Ethiopia's requests to put on trial presumed war criminals, 'using delay, trickery and every possible expedient' (Labanca 2004: 308). Secondly, they actively impeded the emergence of truth about Italian colonial crimes. In the postwar years, the Italian ministry of foreign affairs entrusted former colonial officials with the task of publishing documentation regarding the alleged achievements of Italian colonialism. A large sum of money was spent to publish fifty volumes, which critical historians have defined as a 'colossal, costly and almost incredible effort of mystification' (Del Boca 2003: 18). For decades, access to colonial and military archives was controlled by and only granted to people associated with the former colonial administration (Del Boca 2003: 19; Morone 2010). Even today, critical discussions of Italian colonialism are mostly confined to academic environments, despite the numerous scholarly publications that have appeared in recent years (cf. Triulzi 2006: 433; De Donno and Srivastava 2006).

Finally, both official and societal discourse promoted the myth of the 'good Italian', which is elaborated upon below. As a result, in Italian mainstream public debates, colonialism has been remembered mostly in exotic terms and for the infrastructural projects that were implemented in the former colonies (Labanca 2004: 309).

According to Triulzi (2006: 430), memory of the colonial past in Italy can be portrayed as a pendulum oscillating between an 'all-out desire to forget' and the 'nostalgic recollection of a past which is selectively remembered and re-enacted to suit Italy's new role in the postcolonial age'. This re-enactment occurred in particular as a response to immigration and took the form of a revival of an 'idealised and assertive colonial memory' (Triulzi 2006: 430). This selective memory and forgetting has fuelled feelings of cultural and racial superiority, which shape the new postcolonial encounter between Italian citizens and the disenfranchised ex-colonial subjects.

Italy's colonial experience was significant also in that it contributed to creating a national identity in opposition to black people (Ponzanesi 2016: 376), including a sense of racial entitlement that survives at present (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 368). Discourses and practices forged in relations with the colonial empire had an impact on the development of metropolitan conceptions of race (Ben-Ghiat 2006: 383). The imposition of racial laws and apartheid in the colonies institutionalised racial discrimination. By 1937, an apartheid regime was in force in Italian East Africa, including racist segregation in public places in cities, the expropriation of native land and ghettoisation. Marriages between Italian citizens and colonial subjects were banned in order to prevent the alleged contamination of the so-called Italian Aryan-Mediterranean race. These developments in the colonial empire paved the way for the adoption of racist, anti-Semitic ideology and legislation in Italy in 1938 (De Donno 2006: 405–409).[3]

After 1945, the lack of sufficient critical analysis and public debate on colonial racist practices allowed racist discourse to survive and be deemed acceptable in democratic Italy. Therefore, race has been a central element not only in Italian nationalist narratives, but also in the country's cultural discourse and national identity construction. Through race, the profound differences of class, gender and political belief that hindered the notion of a united Italy were repressed and forgotten (Re 2010; Lombardi-Diop 2012: 176). As recent research has highlighted, today's rampant xenophobia is inseparable from the failure to process Italy's racist foundations and dispel the myth of the 'good Italian' (Patriarca and Deplano 2018).

## The myth of the 'good Italian'

Forgetting the colonial experience was part of a broader politics of forgetting Italy's controversial past, including most notably the crimes committed during the fascist period and the Second World War. Before switching allegiance to the Allied side in

[3] Moreover, scholarly research has refuted apologetic claims according to which Italian colonisers violated race laws for humanitarian reasons. As Barrera's work (2003) has shown, settlers were in agreement with their government regarding the subordination of the colonised and sought contact with the locals mostly to take advantage of them.

September 1943, Italy had been in an alliance with Nazi Germany and participated in, or single-handedly launched[4] the invasions of France, Albania, Greece, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. During this time, Italian troops had been responsible for war crimes and played a role in facilitating the Holocaust (see for instance Rodogno 2005). Before the war, Italy adopted anti-Semitic and racist legislation. However, official Italian memory of the postwar years focused entirely on the anti-Nazi and anti-fascist Resistance that took place in northern and central Italy in 1943–1945. The Resistance also constituted the foundational myth of post-1945 republican Italy (even if political parties sometimes disagreed on its interpretation, cf. Fogu 2006). The quest for a 'usable past' (Moeller 2002) is a common feature of state building after major historical dislocations, and the selection of the Resistance as a foundational myth was meant to bolster Italy's new anti-fascist and democratic identity. At the same time, this narrative obfuscated Italians' role as perpetrators and denied any continuity between fascist Italy and postwar Italy. Italians were able to reinvent themselves as anti-fascist by forgetting that many of them ever were fascist.

In the dominant official narratives, Italians were portrayed as predominantly anti-fascist; if anything, they had been victims of Nazi and fascist crimes. At the root of this discourse was the myth of the 'good Italian' (*Italiani brava gente*), which attributed to Italians an innate humanism that prevented them from committing criminal acts (Fogu 2006: 145 and 169). The myth was propagated through numerous media, including the highly influential national cinema, and became 'the quintessential expression of a truly collective memory' (Fogu 2006: 147). From Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) to Gabriele Salvatores' *Mediterraneo* (1991) and Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1999), Italians were presented as good folks. Symptomatically, a popular movie on Italy's participation in the war against the Soviet Union was titled *Italians Good People* (*Italiani Brava Gente* 1964). In the movie, the 'evil' German allies, rather than the Soviets, were portrayed as the main antagonists of the 'good' Italian soldiers. Moreover, particularly in the first postwar decades, 'an active policy of censorship and suppression of information concerning the fascist wars of aggression ensured the removal of the most troubling fascist past from memory' (Fogu 2006: 152).

Hence, the myth of the 'good Italian' became a pervasive narrative in Italian politics and society, shaping self-conceptions of Italians' behaviour both in the African colonies and on European war fronts. This oblivious and largely mendacious narrative also shaped the self-perception of postwar republican Italy in international politics. Ignorance or denial of Italy's colonial crimes and complicity in wars of aggression led Italians to think that they had always been a relatively pacific nation, unable and unwilling to commit atrocities such as those perpetrated by Nazi Germany or the British and French colonial empires. The lack of reflection on Italy's pre-1945 racist policies allowed numerous racist practices to survive in democratic Italy, both in what was seen as acceptable language and in societal behaviour. The fact that postwar Italian identity was (re)built around Catholicism and whiteness further reinforced racialisation processes through the automatic exclusion of whoever was not

[4] Fascist Italy invaded Greece in October 1940 without prior consultation with Nazi Germany.

seen as white or Catholic. The lack of substantial immigration from the former colonies and other countries in the first postwar decades corroborated Italy's self-perception as a demographically and culturally homogenous nation (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 7). Historical oblivion and racialising discourses became a defining element of Italy's postcolonial condition.

## Italian postcolonialism and migrations

The whitewashing and repression of Italy's colonial experience has shaped the country's current postcolonial condition, which is highly relevant to ongoing Italian debates on the refugee and migrant crisis. The notion of the 'postcolonial' is based on the understanding that the economic and cultural effects of colonialism are still present in the former colonising country, for instance through the unjust treatment and exclusion of migrants from the Global South and the reinstatement of the imbalances of the colonial system in today's international relations (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 2). The concept of postcolonialism includes the processes of racialisation, gendering and cultural transformations prompted by the legacy of colonialism and migrations (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 2). The concept is thus highly relevant to understanding current Italian politics and society, including national debates on migration and Italy's Southern Question.

Italy has a long history of both transatlantic and trans-Mediterranean migrations; approximately 26 million Italians left the country between 1876 and 1976 (Choate 2008: 244). However, the history of Italians as a migrant nation—which continues today—has only a minor role in official memory and in current public debates, which are dominated by migration to, rather than away from Italy. Recently, scholars have analysed Italian emigration and Italy's pursuit of a colonial empire as related phenomena. For instance, Labanca (2007) argued that, by acquiring colonies in Africa, Italy hoped to redirect migration abroad towards its colonial empire. Propaganda in liberal and fascist Italy depicted the colonies as an extension of national territory that would accommodate and satisfy the needs of masses of Italians. This propaganda targeted in particular the many poor and unemployed in Italy's South (the *Mezzogiorno*), a part of the country that has been described as Italy's internal colony. The description of the South as internal colony is based mostly on the subaltern and racialised way in which it was integrated in the national project during national unification, as well as on its relative poverty (cf. Gramsci 2005; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 4–5; Ponzanesi 2016: 375).

Even after the end of its colonial empire, Italy continued to be an emigrant nation and did not experience any major influx of migrants from the ex-colonies or other African countries for several decades. This was also due to Italy's highly restrictive citizenship policy towards former colonial subjects (Deplano 2018). Small groups of people arrived from the former colonies in the 1950s and 1960s, most notably Eritrean women who followed returning Italian families for which they had worked during the colonial period, or Somali students sent by the Italian trusteeship administration to train future political cadres. As recent research has shown (Deplano 2018: 402–405), they often experienced racial discrimination. It was only from the 1980s

onwards that Italy, while not ceasing to be an emigrant nation, became a destination or a passageway for migrants (as it had already been in antiquity), particularly from Eastern Europe and the Global South. However, even while the number of migrants increased and Italy became a multicultural society, Italianness continued to be associated with specific cultural and biological (whiteness) traits, thereby constructing a normativity of Italian whiteness (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 9–10, 18). In this context, racism and exclusionary practices against immigrants became widespread since the late 1980s (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 374).

Most significantly, racist images, behaviour and praxis that originated in colonial times were reactivated and resurfaced in the public sphere, where they combined with new narratives portraying migrants as a threatening Other (Ponzanesi 2016). They also reinstated relationships of power created by colonialism (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 367). One of the most conspicuous examples of this was the opening of detention camps for refugees on the Libyan coast, in cooperation with Gadhafi's regime (following the 2008 Italian-Libyan treaty), where human rights were violated repeatedly and systematically. While the camps purportedly had very different goals from those created by fascist Italy in Cyrenaica in the 1920s and 1930s, their resemblance to the camps of the colonial past was perversely remarkable. Even more worrying was the fact that, due to Italy's politics of forgetting the colonial past, few Italians realised this resemblance. The perceptions of many Libyans and other Africans may have been fundamentally different, however, given the persistence of colonialism—and, in the case of the Arab World, even of anti-colonial resistance against fascist Italy, epitomised by the Libyan fighter Omar al-Mukhter—in their collective memory (Labanca 2010a: 12–13).

Hence, when thousands of African and Albanian migrants arrived Italy in the 1990s and 2000s, long-standing racial clichés and prejudices re-emerged, as if they had been bequeathed from the colonial period to present generations. According to the official census, the number of foreigners living in Italy increased from 356,159 in 1991 to 1,334,889 in 2001 and 3,769,518 in 2011 (Colucci 2019: 428). In Italian society, a racist system of perceptions and practices became the routine and permeated personal conversations, the media and the political debate (Triulzi 2006: 434). Even recent fictional works published by Italian authors that seemed interested in processing the colonial past ended up perpetuating colonial clichés and presented almost exclusively the perspectives of colonisers (Labanca 2010b; Stefani 2010). As Chambers (2008: 7) has argued, current xenophobia is related to the failure to confront and critically reflect on the colonial past, a past that continues to shape national configurations of identity, culture and modernity. In Italy, the politics of forgetting the colonial past has thus been functional to the current dominance of xenophobic discourses vis-à-vis migration and to the country's foreign policy posture (Ponzanesi 2016: 375).

## Recent migration to Italy and the rise of anti-migrant discourses

As argued, both the construction of national identity within racial and religious boundaries and the failure to come to terms with Italy's racist past contributed to

Italians' opposition to the settling of migrants (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 368). Even in Italian scholarly environments, migration was for a long time analysed only from the standpoint of labour market demand and other economic considerations. Migrants were not conceptualised as people or social actors (Dal Lago 2010: 5). Since the 1990s, Italian political and media debates on migration have often focused on its alleged link with criminality. Migrants tend to be lumped together in terms of a single and uniform community, which also facilitates attributing the blame of crimes committed by a few to this entire, constructed community (Dal Lago 2010: 5–6). In the 2000s, centre-right governments criminalised the very act of migrating—outside very few and limited legal channels—through the introduction of a new category of crime (in Italian, *reato di immigrazione clandestina*). Since 2011, Italy effectively blocked also the annual quota system that regulated entry for third-country national workers (the so-called *decreto flussi*). As Dines and Rigo (2016: 164) argued, the ensuing lack of agricultural workers was offset by the illegal employment of numerous asylum seekers that crossed the Mediterranean Sea in the 2010s, leading to a 'refugeeisation of the workforce'. Keeping large groups of migrants and asylum seekers in a precarious legal and economic condition was hence geared to the needs of Italy's dysfunctional economy, particularly (but not only) the agricultural sector in the South of the country (Dines and Rigo 2016). Here, many local entrepreneurs and powerful criminal organisations welcomed the availability of underpaid seasonal labour, unable to demand better work conditions via legal channels (Dal Lago 2010: 8).

The effects of globalisation and the 2008 economic crisis—notably the worsening labour conditions—also played a role in the rise of anti-migrant discourse (Colucci 2019: 428–429). Modern Italy's national identity has been constructed around the idea of whiteness and clear cultural and territorial boundaries. As Appadurai (2006) has argued, globalisation blurs these boundaries and may cause anxieties about the presumed loss of economic sovereignty and well-being, leading in turn to anti-migrant sentiment and calls for cultural purification. These processes were particularly strong in post-2008 Italy due to the combined effect of the economic crisis and the growing challenge to the established idea of the country as a culturally homogenous nation. Greater precariousness led to a 'growing and pervasive feeling of fear' (Colucci 2019: 429). Political forces, particularly on the right side of the spectrum, attempted to stoke fears about economic uncertainty and identified migrants as easy scapegoats (Dal Lago 2010: 6–7; Urso 2018). As right-wing and extreme right parties (most notably *Lega Nord* and *Alleanza Nazionale*) joined government coalitions in 2001–2006 and 2008–2011, their anti-migrant discourse acquired institutional endorsement and was more easily mainstreamed via the media. As Ponzanesi (2016) has shown, colonial constructions and negative (and usually gendered) images of black Otherness were prominent in Italian societal and institutional debates in the 2010s.

It was against this background that the migrant and refugee crisis entered the Italian political and societal context. The number of asylum seekers arriving to Italy by sea increased with the onset of the Arab Spring, together with the number of those who died en route. In 2011, 64,261 people arrived to Italy in this manner. Arrivals decreased to 13,267 in 2012, but then increased to 42,925 in 2013, 170,100 in

2014, 153,842 in 2015, peaking at 181,436 in 2016. In 2017, the number dropped to 119,247 (Colucci 2019: 430). A further and more drastic drop appears to have occurred in 2018 and the first months of 2019 (Ministero dell'Interno 2019). The share of those seeking political asylum upon arrival has increased, reaching 123,482 in 2016. However, the majority of asylum requests have been rejected since 2015, also due to the constant tightening up of the right to asylum. The relocation of some asylum seekers to other member states of the European Union (EU), as desired by the Italian government, has been a serious bone of contention within the Union. As the dispute escalated, both the EU's internal and external borders have become increasingly militarised. Moreover, in 2016–2017 the Italian government made controversial agreements with several factions controlling different parts of Libya in order to stop migrants from crossing the sea towards Italy (Colucci 2019: 430–435).

The Italian debate around migration became more heated after 2015 due to other developments. The dichotomy Christian/Muslim, which had already become polarised after 9/11, was exacerbated further following the 2015–2016 terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels. The terms 'migrant', 'Muslim' and 'terrorist' were often juxtaposed and even equated in mainstream Italian (and European) discourses. Moreover, the Italian political debate became more polarised when a new draft law regulating the attribution of citizenship was discussed in 2015–2017. The new draft law essentially addressed the condition of second generation immigrants by allowing them to apply for Italian citizenship at birth if they satisfied certain conditions (such as being born in Italy, having at least one parent with a regular permanent stay permit, cf. Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 381, note 32). Right-wing parties vocally opposed the law. Although centre-left forces were in government and enjoyed a relative majority in parliament, the draft law was eventually discarded due to the lack of a political majority that would support it in the decisive parliamentary vote. Numerous (especially centrist) politicians believed that the law would be unpopular and withdrew their support (Colucci 2019: 435–436). Meanwhile, in this increasingly heated context, hate crimes against immigrants, Muslim citizens and Roma grew exponentially (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 374).

## Forgetting the past and Italian official discourses on migration

The link between migration, Italy's postcolonial condition and the politics of forgetting the colonial past became particularly evident during the Five Star-League government in Italy in June 2018. The statement by Manlio Di Stefano (cited in L'Espresso 2019) reported at the beginning of the article is a glaring example. His claim that Italy does not have 'a colonial tradition' and did not 'drop bombs on anyone' highlights how oblivion and ignorance of the country's history has pervaded Italian politics. As a prominent government official and representative of the largest party in parliament, Di Stefano felt entitled to make a public statement blatantly disregarding ascertained facts and historical evidence. What is more, when reminded of Italy's actual colonial past, Di Stefano insisted on his argument and claimed that Italian colonialism was just an 'episode' of little importance. Significantly, he juxtaposed his denial of Italy's colonial past to a reiteration of the myth of the 'good

Italian' ('a people that is used to being respected for the quality of our products and actions'). This shows how both themes concur in the official repression of memory concerning Italy's crimes perpetrated in the first part of the twentieth century. The fact that Di Stefano used this 'cleansed' narrative of Italian history to advocate the role of protagonist in international affairs demonstrates the link between Italy's politics of forgetting and foreign policy.

Di Stefano's statement was not an isolated case. Indeed, other instances show an even clearer link between Italy's postcolonial condition, the politics of forgetting and official foreign policy discourses related to migration. In January 2019, Deputy Prime Minister and Five Star leader Luigi Di Maio (cited in La Repubblica 2019) argued that

> There are dozens of African states where France prints its own currency, the colonial franc, and then finances French public debt with that currency. Macron first lectures us, then continues to finance [French] public debt with the money that he uses to exploit African countries. If we want to stop departures [of migrants from Africa to Europe], let us start by addressing this topic, and let's do it also at the UN, not just within the EU. […] [We should] start sanctioning those countries that do not decolonise Africa because what is happening in the Mediterranean is the result of the actions of some countries that even want to lecture us.

Echoing Di Maio's argument, Alessandro Di Battista—one of the most prominent Five Star politicians—argued:

> […] Above all France, through its geopolitical control of that area where 200 million people live and use banknotes and coins printed in France, manages the sovereignty of entire countries, preventing their legitimate independence, their monetary and fiscal sovereignty and their possibility to run expansionary fiscal policies. As long as this currency won't be torn, which handcuffs African peoples, we can keep talking about open or closed ports [in Europe], but people will continue to flee, to die at sea, to look for other routes and try to come to Europe (cited in La Repubblica 2019).

While Di Maio's and Di Battista's statements identified a link between postcolonialism and migration, they did so only to attack the policies of a country that they perceived as an antagonist. Their argument (wrongly) presupposed that Italy does not have postcolonial relations and interests in African countries, despite the fact that most migrants started their trip across the Mediterranean to Italy from Libya, a former Italian colony where Italy has considerable economic interests.[5] Oblivion of Italy's colonial past and postcolonial present, as well as the myth of the 'good Italian', provided the foundations for Di Maio's and Di Battista's claims. They were also fundamental constituents of a foreign policy narrative, which highlights how

[5] The central role of Italian energy company ENI in the Libyan oil sector, as well as Italy's large oil imports from Libya, is evidence of such interests.

the politics of forgetting and Italy's postcolonial condition influence current Italian foreign policy.

While Di Stefano, Di Maio and Di Battista are all members of the Five Star Movement, the narratives described so far were by no means a prerogative of Five Star politicians. Matteo Salvini—the leader of the League, Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister in 2018–2019—also argued that 'The problem of migrants has many causes, there are those [countries] that deprive African people of wealth, including France. Paris has interests that clash with those of Italy in Libya and has no interest in stabilising the situation' (cited in Di Santo 2019). Significantly, Salvini admitted that Italy had interests in Libya, but framed them as legitimate and beneficial to the latter. Conversely, he portrayed French policies as destabilising Libya. Salvini's rhetoric usually included anti-migrant, xenophobic and anti-EU claims. In his speeches on migration, he repeatedly argued that 'Africans should stay in Africa' and practically implied that the very act of migrating (with very few and arbitrary exceptions) is criminal and a threat to Italy. In order to make this argument, Salvini simultaneously had to silence Italy's past and present as an 'emigrant nation' (Choate 2008). Hence, the very essence of Italy's stance towards immigration in 2018–2019 was based on denying the country's past. While this stance was welcomed by a substantial part of 'complicit' Italian public opinion (cf. Ricoeur 2004: 448), European politicians from countries hosting Italian migrants highlighted its inherent contradictions.[6]

The silencing of Italy's migrant and colonial past was not only a feature of the Five Star-League government. Ministers of the previous two governments, led by a centre-left majority (2013–2018), contributed to the framing of migration as a threat in official discourse. They also promoted discourses that silenced Italian migration and reflected Italy's postcolonial condition. Marco Minniti, Minister of the Interior from June 2016 to January 2018, engineered and praised agreements with the Tripoli-based Libyan government and Libyan warlords to prevent migrants from crossing the Mediterranean. These agreements 'violated refugees and migrants' rights through the externalization of border control to countries outside Europe […] trapping tens of thousands of people in Libya, where they are at risk of serious human rights violations' (Amnesty International 2019). According to Amnesty International (2019), Italy was therefore complicit in the torture of migrants in Libya due to its efforts to keep them on Libyan territory. What is more, the Italian government helped to establish a system of detention centres in Libya where human rights were violated. As argued, these centres were reminiscent of Italy's policies in Libya in the 1920s and 1930s, when civilians were deported to detention camps against their will, and often died as a result. Nevertheless, no prominent Italian politician discussed this historical precedent, nor were there any noteworthy societal debates. The

[6] Most notably, Jean Asselborn—Luxembourg's Minister of Foreign, European Affairs and Immigration—reminded Salvini that 'In Luxembourg we had thousands of Italian immigrants. They came as migrants, who worked in Luxembourg so that you in Italy could have money to pay your children' (cited in Sandford and Miner 2018).

lack of such debates can be seen as a consequence of Italy's politics of forgetting the colonial past.

Even while criticising the xenophobic discourses of right-wing political parties, Minniti (2018) described migration as a 'problem'. He also argued that 'a modern left cannot break a, let's say, sentimental link with those who are in a rage or are afraid', a clear reference to anti-migrant and xenophobic discourses that became dominant in Italy in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and globalisation processes (cf. Appadurai 2006). Minniti's statements epitomised the political strategy on migration of Italian governments led by centre-left majorities in the 2010s. These governments realised that, in a difficult economic context, immigration was a highly popular scapegoat that could be used by right-wing parties to draw voters' support. However, rather than developing a competing political narrative, centre-left governments oscillated between providing a moderate version of the same narrative and mimicking it completely (cf. Urso 2018[7]).

Many statements of Matteo Renzi, a prominent member of the centre-left Democratic Party and prime minister from February 2014 to December 2016, are exemplary in this respect. For instance, Renzi declared that Italy should abandon the 'feel-good and third-worldist narrative according to which we have the duty to welcome anyone who fares worse than we do' (cited in Il Fatto Quotidiano 2017). Renzi also argued that Italy should help migrants 'at [their] home', and whoever came to Italy 'should take into account our identity', which was 'first of all cultural, civic, spiritual, social'. By defining Italian identity in spiritual (that is, Catholic) terms, Renzi reiterated both right-wing discourses and, most notably, twentieth-century constructions crafted in the fascist and colonial period. Such definition ignored Italy's growing cultural diversity and highlighted the lack of historical awareness of Italy's discrimination against religious minorities, such as Italian Jews, Roma and non-Christian Italians (cf. Patriarca and Deplano 2018). The systematic silencing of Italy's discriminatory past, both at home and in its former colonial empire, played a fundamental role in making such exclusive definitions of Italian identity acceptable even to allegedly more liberal and leftist voters.

## Conclusion

This article illustrated how Italy's politics of memory and its postcolonial condition influenced discourses on foreign immigration, as well as the country's foreign policy posture, during the post-2014 European refugee and migrant crisis. It argued that Italy's long-standing politics of forgetting its colonial and migrant past played an important part in the current rise of anti-migrant and xenophobic discourses. As Italians never confronted their country's racist and criminal colonial history, numerous colonial clichés, racist discourses and practices resurfaced when Italy became the destination of thousands of African migrants. Due to the deep-rooted self-perception

[7] This is corroborated by Urso's (2018) finding that, when in government, left-wing parties tend to use fewer humanitarian arguments and endorse securitized narratives.

of Italians as a 'good people', both politicians and the public opinion largely failed to recognise the racism and the colonial tropes inherent in their anti-migrant discourses and policies. In this context, Italian politicians only cited colonialism to blame other European countries—France in particular—for allegedly causing the migration of Africans to Europe. Conversely, Italy's colonial past was silenced or denied.

In fact, Italian foreign policy in Africa continues to be conditioned by the legacies of its colonial history. Colonialism has had profound consequences for Rome's relations with Libya, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia (see for instance Calchi Novati 2008). Furthermore, Italy remains a 'migration crossroads'. Hundreds of thousands of Italian citizens have moved their residency abroad in recent years (Colucci 2019: 437–438).[8] The very fact of condemning migration to Italy or considering it a problem, while millions of Italians moved abroad and many more continue to do so, is contradictory and encourages the official silencing of a highly significant part of Italian history and present.

However, the inexorable transformation of Italy into a multicultural society—as statistics on immigration since the 1990s show—could put pressure on Italian politics and public opinion to confront the country's colonial and migrant past, as well as its postcolonial condition. Long-standing conceptualisations of Italian identity in terms of whiteness and Catholicism will most likely become increasingly contested and lead to social conflict due to the exclusion of a growing number of people that live in Italy. Furthermore, both other European countries and political actors in former Italian colonies have recently challenged Italian foreign policy narratives based on assumed, positive self-conceptualisations.[9] The combined effects of domestic developments and external pressure may eventually induce a long overdue public and official debate on Italy's repressed colonial past.

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[8] Moreover, between 2011 and 2017, almost 300,000 foreign citizens chose to shift their official residence from Italy to another country.

[9] For instance, Libyan general Khalifa Haftar—one of the most influential actors in Libya at the moment—has repeatedly accused Italy of neocolonialism in its policies towards Libya (cf. Il Post 2017).

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