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# Constructing Jewish Otherness in the Italian Empire: The Case of Colonial Guidebooks

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This article looks at how Jewish groups were portrayed in Italian colonial guidebooks of the 1920s and 1930s. More than simple travel aids, these publications reflected and shaped the ways colonial society imagined its subjects. The article compares the depictions of Jews with those of other ethnic and religious groups, paying attention to the stereotypes employed, the construction of ethnic identities and the imprint of colonial and Fascist ideology. The article asks three main questions: how were Jewish groups represented in the colonies? In what ways was their 'otherness' articulated? And how did these representations evolve in step with Fascist imperial policy and antisemitism? By following these dynamics across both European and African colonies, the article highlights the entanglements of colonialism and antisemitism in Italy's imperial project.

## Introduction

Honest among themselves (archaic forms of credit based on a verbal agreement still persist), extremely strict in their observance of outward practices, and relatively cohesive in their solidarity with fellow believers, they have no qualms about deceiving Europeans, who must always exercise great caution when making purchases.<sup>1</sup>

This was the portrayal reserved for the Jews of Tripolitania in the pages of the Italian guidebook published by the *Touring Club Italiano* (Italian Touring Club – hereafter, TCI). The year was 1923: Italy had formally governed the North African territory for over a decade, though its authority remained precarious, contested by both armed resistance and the persistent fractures of colonial administration. Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Rhodes, the Dodecanese and, after 1936, Italian East Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia) soon became central to the literature of overseas tourism. Under Fascist rule, travel guides emerged as the key medium for exploring these destinations, blending historical and archaeological information with practical advice on documents, hygiene and accommodations. Crucially, they also devoted significant space to the portrayal of human types: ethnic and religious groups described in terms of language, customs, traditions and social organisation. These sections offered readers a composite, and deeply hierarchical, picture of the peoples inhabiting Italy's colonial territories.

Jews were also included among these groups. Their history, characteristics and presence within the colonies were reconstructed in the TCI guides. The aim of this article is to analyse how Jews in the

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<sup>1</sup> Amilcare Fantoli, *Guida della Libia, Parte Prima Tripolitania* (Milano: TCI, 1923), 25. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Italian are the author's own.

Italian colonial possessions were described, which aspects of their representation were most emphasised and how these artefacts constructed an image of extra-European Jewishness. It also examines how these portrayals evolved alongside the development of the Fascist regime and its antisemitic policies. Any discussion of Fascist antisemitism, however, must be framed within the historical specificity of the Italian case: before 1938, many Italian Jews participated in and identified with the regime and its effort to restore a Roman Empire, and Jewish patriotism and Fascist allegiance could still appear compatible. This makes it all the more important to analyse how colonial cultural artefacts such as tourist guidebooks contributed to the gradual production and normalisation of Jewish 'difference' in imperial settings.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the article asks whether the construction of Jewishness varied across the different colonies and compares the role of African and European possessions in shaping these representations.

The sources for this analysis are the TCI guidebooks published between 1923 and 1941. The Fascist rise to power in 1922 marked continuity rather than rupture with the colonial enterprise of liberal Italy, which already held Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, Rhodes and part of the Dodecanese. At the same time, the Fascist regime expanded this inheritance, turning it into a fully-fledged imperial project with the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936. The year 1941 provisionally closed this chapter, as the British Empire occupied most Italian possessions in Africa. Yet the colonial venture was far from concluded, and its legacies continued well beyond the wartime collapse of Italy's imperial geography.

### Guidebooks and Jews: An Exploration of Historiography

Known as the 'flag with the wheel', the TCI was founded on 8 November 1894 in Milan by members of the *Milano Società Velocipedistica* (Milan Velocipede Society) and was initially called the *Touring Club Ciclistico Italiano* (Italian Touring Cycling Club). It began as an association of cyclists with a passion for travel, aiming to promote tourism. These were years when similar clubs and associations were emerging across Europe, such as the *Cyclists' Touring Club* in England (1878), the *Touring Club de France* (1890), the *Deutscher Touring Club* (1899), the *Touring Club de Belgique* (1895) and its counterpart, the *Touring Club du Congo Belge*, established in 1913 with branches in places like Léopoldville and Elisabethville. Similar organisations also appeared in the Netherlands (1883), Luxembourg (1896), Switzerland (1896) and Austria (1896). The shared goal of these groups was to improve road infrastructure and promote bicycle tourism. In 1900, the members of the so-called *Sodalizio milanese* (Milanese association) decided to change the organisation's name to *Touring Club Italiano*, emphasising the expansion of its objectives to embrace the 'new horizons' that the dawn of the twentieth century seemed to promise.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the drive towards modernity and the increase in national wealth transformed its objectives, linking it to the tourism industry in Italy and beyond – a connection that endures to this day.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the TCI gradually developed a growing interest in automobiles, shifting the focus away from bicycles and advocating for the adoption of regulations for automotive traffic.

The TCI was inextricably linked to its publishing activities, producing road and travel guides that, though initially intended for members, soon reached a much wider audience. The first of these guides, like most of its publications, was dedicated to Italy. It was published in June 1895 under the title *Guida-Itinerario dell'Italia e di alcune strade delle regioni limitrofe* (Guide-Itinerary of Italy and some roads of the neighbouring regions).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the TCI primarily focused on providing information about Italy through periodic publications, such as *Le Vie d'Italia* (The Roads of Italy), a monthly magazine published between 1917 and 1968, dedicated to tourism within the peninsula and later on Libya. Thus, most of the guides published between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were primarily

<sup>2</sup> John Foot, *Blood and Power: The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 213.

<sup>3</sup> Stefano Pivato, *Il Touring club italiano* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2006), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1901 and 1915, Italian per capita income rose by 28 per cent. Pivato, *Il Touring*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Giuseppe Vota, ed., *I Sessant'Anni del Touring Club Italiano. 1894–1954* (Milano: TCI, 1954), 55.

focused on domestic narratives within their respective countries, with little to no attention given to international tourism. Among these ‘giants of tourism’, as they were called, were the *Baedeker*, *Murray* and *Fodor* guides, later joined by more contemporary ones like *Michelin* and the immensely popular and widespread *Lonely Planet*.

Literature has, to some extent, overlooked the role that travel guides have played in narrating and constructing the notion of *otherness* abroad, focusing instead on their dimension as cultural items.<sup>6</sup> In particular, attention has been given to how these artefacts became part of the history of European mass tourism and the significant impact they had, especially in Europe, on shaping the popularity of recommended destinations. In the Italian context, the narrative and description of colonial tourism, as well as the impact of travel guides on this phenomenon, are meticulously explored in the pioneering work of Esther Capuzzo, *Italiani Visitate l’Italia*. The book dedicates an entire section to Rhodes, Libya and East Africa, striving to frame this broad subject within a wider historiography on Fascism and colonial propaganda. Capuzzo highlights how, especially during the 1930s, there was ‘a policy of tourism with an imperialist orientation on the part of the State,’<sup>7</sup> shaping a colonial image that ‘not only consolidated consensus but also mobilised masses and resources towards the colonial perspective through a shared ideology and the creation of a colonial imaginary’. This was achieved through exhibitions, fairs, museums, collections, travel guides and tourism magazines aimed at a diverse audience, including segments of the population for whom these tools represented the sole means of knowledge about Africa.<sup>8</sup>

Recent scholarship on Italian colonialism has increasingly focused on the cultural and ideological aspects of empire, while largely overlooking the ways in which travel literature and guidebooks functioned as instruments of colonial power. Works like Mia Fuller’s *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* and Ruth Ben-Ghiat’s *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* explored how Italian identity and perceptions of the ‘Other’ were constructed in colonial contexts.<sup>9</sup> The recent works of Valeria Deplano, such as *L’Africa in Casa. Propaganda e cultura coloniale nell’Italia fascista*, have reconstructed an image of Africa that permeated Italian culture, written and rewritten according to the needs of successive regimes. Simona Berhe examined the circulation of the journal *Le Vie d’Italia* in Libya, published by the TCI, which reflected the growing exoticism in Italy and, as Berhe perceptively notes, offered a form of reading that ‘substituted for the journey itself, representing a source of knowledge that satisfied the natural curiosity to explore distant places’.<sup>10</sup> Yet the intersection between colonial studies, analyses of propaganda and scholarship on Jewish history and antisemitism remains a largely underexplored historical nexus.

From this perspective, an exemplary case – though not Italian – is the *Baedeker* guidebook on occupied Poland, published in 1943. In effect, what emerges in its 264 pages is a colonial territory, described under the patronage of Hans Frank, Governor-General of Poland from 1939 to 1945, in what was designated the *Generalgouvernement für die besetzten polnischen Gebiete* (General Government for the Occupied Polish Territories). The guide promoted a form of bourgeois tourism, aimed at civilians meant to settle the country and at soldiers tasked with supporting the occupation. It was unmistakably a propaganda tool, articulating a project of intra-European colonisation that did not simply affirm the cultural superiority of Germany and its concept of *Heimat* – that is, the rooted,

<sup>6</sup>Victoria Peel and Anders Sorensen, *Exploring the Use and Impact of Travel Guidebooks* (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2016), 14.

<sup>7</sup>Ester Capuzzo, «*Italiani, visitate l’Italia*»: politiche e dinamiche turistiche in Italia tra le due guerre mondiali (Milano: Luni editrice, 2019), 19.

<sup>8</sup>Capuzzo, *Italiani, visitate l’Italia*, 19.

<sup>9</sup>Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* (London: Routledge, 2010); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup>Simona Berhe, «Un impero di carte: l’immagine della Libia nelle riviste turistiche *Le Vie d’Italia* e *Libia*», *Clio@Themis* 12, no. 12 (Apr. 2017): 2.

quasi-mystical idea of homeland and cultural belonging central to Nazi ideology – but sought to naturalise it. The travel guide highlighted artistic and archaeological heritage and sketched the history of local populations in overtly tribalist tones. Strikingly, it made no attempt to address the history of the local Jews – a notable departure from the guides examined here – while presenting the Warsaw Ghetto itself as a kind of tourist attraction.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, travel guides proved essential for analysing the historical evolution of the landscapes under consideration, whether European or otherwise. They provided a lens through which to understand how colonial ambitions, ideological constructs and perceptions of the other were shaped and disseminated. By doing so, these guides facilitated a mediated encounter with colonial territories, framing them within narratives of European dominance and modernity. This made them crucial tools for interpreting how tourism intersected with the broader socio-political and cultural dynamics of imperialism, offering insights into the ways landscapes were imagined, consumed and redefined within the context of both European and colonial spaces.

What place did Jews occupy in these guidebooks? The representation of Jews within the colonial territories has been almost entirely neglected. Beyond broader studies on the history of antisemitism in Italy – particularly during the Fascist period – there is no comprehensive comparative analysis of the various conceptions of Jewish groups and Jewish communities across Rhodes, Libya and East Africa. The study is compartmentalised and foregrounds the diversity of intra-Jewish experiences across different national case studies.<sup>12</sup> Renzo De Felice's now-dated classic *Ebrei in un paese arabo* reconstructs the history of Libyan Jews from 1835 to their emigration in 1970, privileging the political dimension in its narrative.<sup>13</sup> Subsequent reconstructions of Libyan Jewish history – most notably Maurice Roumani's *The Jews of Libya: Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement* – have likewise sought to recompose the diversity of Jewish coexistence in the Libyan context.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the theme of persecution has dominated the historiography of the Jews of Greece, through the reconstructions of Esther Fisci Menascé,<sup>15</sup> or in Michele Sarfatti's *I confini di una persecuzione*, which analyses the application of Italian anti-Jewish racial legislation beyond the Italian mainland.<sup>16</sup>

This article examines the construction of Jewishness within Fascist colonial discourse, focusing on the role of tourist guidebooks as instruments for shaping both antisemitism and what might be termed a 'Jewish colonial library' of the Fascists. While scholarship on Fascist antisemitism has focused largely on legislation and persecution in Italy, little attention has been given to how anti-semitic categories were naturalised through everyday cultural artefacts like tourist guides. This paper seeks to address that absence.

<sup>11</sup>Carole Fily, 'About the 1943 Baedeker Guide of the General Government of Poland'; K. The Review, 29 Mar. 2023, accessed 5 Sept. 2025, <https://k-larevue.com/en/about-the-1943-baedeker-guide-of-the-general-government-of-poland/>.

<sup>12</sup>Internal differences within Jewish experiences – particularly in North Africa – have been highlighted in comparable ways by several studies. This is evident, for instance, in Michael Laskier's *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1994). Focusing on the Algerian case, Sarah Abrevaya Stein has emphasised similar dynamics in *Saharan Jews and the Fate of French Algeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Comparable internal variations have also been explored for Morocco, notably by Jessica Marglin in *Across Legal Lines: Jews and Muslims in Modern Morocco* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), and by Aomar Boum in *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup>Renzo De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo gli ebrei nella Libia contemporanea tra colonialismo, nazionalismo arabo e sionismo, 1835–1970* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1978). The English translation, *Jews in an Arab Land: Libya, 1835–1970*, translated by Judith Roumani with an introduction by Raffaello Fella, was published by the University of Texas Press in 1985.

<sup>14</sup>Maurice M. Roumani, *Jews of Libya: Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3029jsr>. See also Barbara Spadaro, 'Remembering the "Italian" Jewish Homes of Libya: Gender and Transcultural Memory (1967–2013)', *Journal of North African Studies* 23, no. 5 (2018): 811–33.

<sup>15</sup>Esther Fintz Menascé, *Buio nell'isola del sole: Rodi 1943–1945: la tragedia dei militari italiani e l'annientamento degli Ebrei* (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2014); Marco Clementi, *Storia della comunità ebraica di Rodi (1912–1947)* (Roma: Tab Edizioni, 2022).

<sup>16</sup>Michele Sarfatti, *I confini di una persecuzione: il fascismo e gli ebrei fuori d'Italia (1938–1943)* (Roma: Viella, 2023).

Jews in the colonies occupied an ambivalent position – at once European and colonial subjects – subjected to processes of othering comparable to those applied to African and Muslim populations. The study asks how Jews were represented in Libya, Rhodes and East Africa, and how these depictions shifted with the regime's adoption of an explicit racist agenda in 1937, when the racial laws were applied in the colonies, paving the way for the antisemitic legislation of 1938. The analysis is organised in two parts: the first considers guidebooks published between 1922 and 1937; the second those from 1937 to 1941, when the war and the defeat of Fascism in the colonies marked a decisive rupture, tracing the impact of Fascist antisemitism on these representations.

### Touring Colonial Italy: The TCI Guides, 1923–30

Starting in 1922, the TCI launched a series of publications within the framework of the *Guida d'Italia* (Guide to Italy) programme, which also encompassed Italy's colonial territory of Libya. In 1923, this guide – divided into two volumes devoted respectively to Cyrenaica and Tripolitania – was published under the editorship of Amilcare Fantoli, director of the colony's meteorological observatories, drawing on existing bibliographies, official publications and numerous contributions. For Italy, these guides became an effective tool in both promoting tourism abroad and shaping colonial propaganda. A similar phenomenon occurred in Belgium with the first guidebooks to its colonial territories, such as the *Guide Congo-Nil*, published in 1934 by the *Société des chemins de fer vicinaux du Congo (Vicicongo)*, and in France with the *Guide des colonies françaises*,<sup>17</sup> issued in 1931 by the *Société d'éditions géographiques, maritimes et coloniales*.

Barely a year into power, the Fascist regime had already turned its attention to the Libyan question, with the aim of suppressing local resistance.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the interior of Tripolitania remained inaccessible, to the point that the guidebook noted that: 'travel into the interior [. . .] will for some time yet [. . .] represent an almost insoluble problem and, unfortunately, a far greater difficulty than it was years ago before Italian rule.'<sup>19</sup> This situation was attributed largely to 'the hostility and mistrust of the indigenous population towards any of our [Italian] undertakings',<sup>20</sup> which in any case tended 'not to encourage private initiatives seeking to travel within the colony'.<sup>21</sup> Travel and excursions were, indeed, advised to remain confined to the coastal areas, the Gefara plain and the Gebel plateau – territories deemed safer and more effectively controlled by Italian troops. The guide itself underscored the persistent limitations of colonial penetration, remarking that, among all African regions bordering the Mediterranean, Tripolitania was 'the one that had benefited least from the effects of European civilization'.<sup>22</sup> With the exception of Tripoli – perceived as resembling a small southern Italian town, and more specifically a Sicilian one – urban centres such as Homs or Zuara were described as little more than insignificant villages, while 'every other settlement, whether coastal or inland, lacked even the most elementary conditions of civilized life'.<sup>23</sup> From the outset, the guide targeted readers who wished 'to study and verify firsthand the commercial, agricultural, and mineral resources' of the colony. In this sense, it presented itself less as a practical aid for overseas tourism than as a manual for explorers or adventurers, oriented towards the economic potential of the territory rather than the leisure of the traveller.

<sup>17</sup> Henri Nicolai, 'Un guide colonial. Le Guide du Voyageur au Congo belge et au Ruanda-Urundi', *Belgeo. Revue belge de géographie* 3, no. 3 (2012): 3.

<sup>18</sup> Nicola Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia: 1911–1931* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> *Guida della Libia, Parte Prima Tripolitania*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Both guidebooks' volumes provide a wealth of detail on the history of the country and its social composition, including extensive information on the colony's demographic profile. Particular attention was devoted to the Jewish population, to whom an entire section was dedicated. The first volume on Tripolitania – reflecting the larger numerical presence of Jews in Tripoli – allocated far more space to describing Jewish communities and their distinctive characteristics. In the same section, under the heading *Ebrei* – Jews, both volumes give information on the presence and distribution of Jewish groups across the colony. In Tripolitania, the guides reported 'around 12,000' Jews in Tripoli, 'a certain number in Homs and Misurata',<sup>24</sup> and only a minimal presence 'elsewhere (Zuara, Jefren, Zàuia, Gariàn, and a few other localities)'. In Cyrenaica, the Jewish population was concentrated in Benghazi, though 'scattered groups were also to be found in Dern, Marsa Susa, Tolmeta, Cyrene, el Merg, and Tobruk, as well as, in isolation, in other parts of the colony'.<sup>25</sup>

The guidebooks devoted significant space to the physical characterisation of Jewish communities, framing them through the lens of race. In Tripolitania, Jews were described as having 'preserved intact the somatic characteristics of their race', allegedly safeguarded by a refusal to marry outside the community. Even when intermixture with Berbers was acknowledged, the emphasis fell on 'notable purity of blood', with Jewish quarters portrayed as living relics of 'biblical figures'. A similar rhetoric shaped the depiction of Cyrenaican Jews, who were praised as 'specimens of purity' for avoiding 'crossbreeding'. These pseudo-ethnographic sketches were further reinforced through gendered stereotypes. Jewish women were objectified as 'generally attractive' in Cyrenaica but caricatured in Tripolitania as youthful beauties who inevitably became 'repulsively fat', marked by 'ugly hairstyles and clothing'.<sup>26</sup> The passage ended with a hypocritical admonition to 'respect women', a gesture that only underscored the misogyny and exoticism underpinning these portrayals. In these descriptions, racial science, colonial ethnography, and everyday antisemitism converged: Jews were simultaneously made familiar through biblical imagery and estranged through caricature, their otherness codified on the very pages intended to guide the traveller.

The volume on Tripolitania provides the most revealing details about Jewish stereotypes. It described the 'Tripolitanian Jew' as 'generally obsequious and reserved',<sup>27</sup> though – thanks to the 'great spirit of tolerance and fairness that Italians always demonstrate toward all peoples' – he might 'begin to better understand the benefits of our rule'.<sup>28</sup> Jews were characterised through familiar clichés: 'honest among themselves', 'extremely strict in the observance of outward practices' and 'solidarity with fellow believers', yet simultaneously ready to 'deceive Europeans, who must exercise great caution in their purchases'.<sup>29</sup> While the guides typically confined Libyan Jews to the sphere of petty commerce, they allowed that 'some sufficiently educated individuals' had, through prolonged contact with Italians or stays in Europe, 'modified their way of thinking and, relatively, of living'. Such phrasing reveals the logic at work: Europe functioned as the only route to emancipation from an alleged state of backwardness. This rhetoric folded Jews into the same civilisational hierarchy imposed on Africans and Muslims, where proximity to Italy equated with progress and distance signified primitivism. In the guidebooks, then, Jewish identity was not only racialised but also measured against a colonial yardstick of assimilation, confirming that even communities perceived as near-European could be relegated to the margins unless redeemed by Italian influence.

The guidebooks did not stop at racial caricatures; they also lingered over Jewish religious practices, presenting them with the air of ethnographic observation. In the Tripolitania volume, readers

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 24. According to the 1931 census of the Jewish population in the Italian colonies, there were 21,508 Jews in Tripolitania, 3,595 in Cyrenaica, 219 in Eritrea, 215 in Somalia and 4,480 in the Dodecanese; Roberto Bachi, 'Gli Ebrei delle Colonie Italiane: Note Statistiche sul Censimento 1931', *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 10, no. 9/10 (1936): 386.

<sup>25</sup>Amilcare Fantoli, *Guida della Libia, Parte Seconda Cirenaica* (Milano: TCI, 1923), 45.

<sup>26</sup>*Guida della Libia, Parte Prima Tripolitania*, 24–5.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

were told that ‘the Sabbath is generally observed scrupulously . . . Servants – almost all Jewish – follow these prescriptions as well, compelled by mutual surveillance.’ On the surface, this appears to be neutral description, but its inclusion in a travel manual raises a deeper question: why devote so much space to ritual minutiae in a book ostensibly designed for tourism and commerce? The answer lies in the double function of these texts. They transformed ordinary practices into spectacles of exotic difference, while at the same time casting Jewish religiosity as rigid, surveilled and socially alien. What emerges is a hybrid discourse – part guide, part ethnography, part propaganda – in which Sabbath observance became less a matter of faith than a marker of otherness, reinforcing the idea of Jews as an insular, disciplined, yet fundamentally foreign community within Italy’s colonial world.

Another recurring theme was the relationship between Jews and the Muslim majority, flattened in the guides under the broad label of ‘Arabs’. In Tripolitania, one volume remarked that ‘Jews with Arabs are timid, when alone and in need of protection . . . Yet in matters of commerce, Arabs and Jews do not disdain the closest ties.’<sup>30</sup> Such juxtapositions reveal how the guides constructed Jewish identity not in isolation but relationally, defined against and alongside the Arab population. The trope of timidity reinforced Jewish dependence on external authority, while the emphasis on shared commercial ties activated well-worn stereotypes of both groups as traders. By staging Jews and Arabs in parallel, the guidebooks inscribed them within the same colonial hierarchy: different in religion, but alike in their alleged deficiencies, and both ultimately positioned below the civilising presence of Italians. By contrast, the Cyrenaica guide offered only a brief comparison, remarking that the Arabs there ‘cannot be considered direct descendants of the first invaders, since too many infiltrations of Berber and Negro blood have occurred over the course of nine centuries.’<sup>31</sup> The Arabs, like the Jews, were subjected to a process of racial standardisation. The ‘Tripolitanian Arab’ was described as ‘a stunted shoot, due both to the inferiority of the land and to the lesser contact with the European race and Western civilization.’<sup>32</sup> As with the Jews, proximity to Europe was framed as the decisive measure of Arab ‘civilisation’. The guides emphasised that Arabs of the interior had retained ‘atavistic characteristics . . . in both body and spirit’, praising their faithfulness and courage yet immediately undercutting this by portraying them as incapable of sustained labour – ‘ill-suited’ for heavy work and producing only ‘a third of the output of a European worker.’<sup>33</sup> Such passages reveal the logic of colonial racialisation: virtues were acknowledged only to reinforce paternalistic dependence, while economic stereotypes justified the need for European oversight. By subjecting Arabs to the same civilisational calculus applied to Jews, the guides naturalised a hierarchy in which both groups were marked by cultural deficiency and physical inadequacy, their worth determined solely by their relation to the European model. The narrative continues with a series of generalisations about Arab hostility towards foreigners, tempered by an alleged admiration for the ‘white man’. Their traditions, too, were noted: ‘Ramadan (the Lenten fast) is, at least formally, strictly observed. One must take care not to offend, especially during this period, the great susceptibility of the people, particularly in the interior.’<sup>34</sup> Whereas Jewish women attracted the guide’s attention – described, however disparagingly, in terms of physical appearance and dress – Arab women were rendered invisible: readers were instructed to ‘abstain in every case from speaking with women or even attempting to look them in the face.’ What is most striking is the explicit *mise en parallèle* between Jews and Arabs. One guide asserted that ‘Arabs are generally more honest and less demanding than Jews in commercial dealings; but one must always reduce the asking price when making a purchase.’ This comparison did more than rank two groups within a colonial taxonomy of character traits: it cast Jews as uniquely untrustworthy, even when set against another population already racialised as inferior. The juxtaposition shows how anti-Jewish stereotypes had seeped so deeply into Fascist discourse that they appeared even in the ostensibly neutral

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>31</sup>*Guida della Libia, Parte Seconda Cirenaica*, 47.

<sup>32</sup>*Guida della Libia, Parte Prima Tripolitania*, 27.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 28.

format of a travel guide, naturalised through the casual language of practical advice. In this way, colonial travel literature became a vehicle for disseminating antisemitism not as an exceptional doctrine but as everyday common sense.

In 1929 the Touring Club published in Milan the guide *Possedimenti e Colonie: Isole Egee, Tripolitania, Cirenaica, Eritrea, Somalia* (Possessions and Colonies: Aegean Islands, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Eritrea, Somalia). Unlike its predecessor, this volume explicitly declared its purpose: to 'practically "guide" the tourist of average culture in visiting cities and regions, explaining their many aspects from the physical, economic, landscape, historical, and artistic points of view'.<sup>35</sup> Here the guidebook emerges more openly as a tool of Fascist propaganda, designed to fascinate readers with distant and exotic places in order to stimulate tourism and promote colonial discovery. The volume brought together all of Fascist Italy's colonial possessions. Significantly, while the sections on Eritrea and Somalia made no mention of a Jewish presence, those devoted to Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and the Aegean islands offered detailed descriptions of the Jewish communities living in those territories.

In Tripolitania, Libya, the section 'presso gli Israeliti' (among the Israelites) described Jewish customs in minute detail, beginning with childbirth rituals: to protect the newborn from the evil eye, 'with the meconium a "Hand of Fatima" is drawn on the wall near the mother's bed, and on the door a sheet of paper with charms against misfortune and evil spirits is attached'.<sup>36</sup> Six days later, the mother and her friends would eat a porridge of wheat and barley flour (*bsisa*) while singing traditional hymns. Such descriptions went well beyond the practical needs of a travel manual, offering instead a folklorised portrait that transformed everyday Jewish practices into markers of exotic difference.<sup>37</sup> The guide continued with the description of childhood rituals: students of the Talmud Torah were invited to pray for the newborn, who had to be held throughout the night by the mother or a close female relative. On the eighth day, circumcision (*milà*) was performed at home, followed by the distribution of sweets, spirits and syrups to the guests.<sup>38</sup> The narrative then moved on to weaning, schooling and the child's growth, noting that by 1929 'almost all Jewish boys, in addition to attending synagogue and Jewish schools, also attended Italian schools'. This remark is particularly telling: even within a folklorised account of ritual life, the guide inserted the theme of integration into Italian institutions, casting education as a tool of assimilation under colonial rule.<sup>39</sup>

Such emphasis on schooling resonates with the broader dynamics of Italianisation that Libyan Jews had been subjected to since 1922. As Renzo De Felice observed, unlike in other Arab countries they were an integral part of Libyan society while at the same time not concealing their Jewishness. The real difference among Jews in Libya, he argues, was not internal but rather between Libyan Jews and Italian Jews residing in the colony. For although Libyan Jews dressed in European style, sent their children to Italian schools and participated in colonial society, 'they remained Libyan Jews, psychologically and morally tied to local traditions and ways of life, and essentially quite different from their Italian coreligionists, who felt themselves first and foremost Italians'.<sup>40</sup> However, as Jens Hoppe states, 'the foundations for the persecution of the Jews in Libya were laid by the Italian fascists'.<sup>41</sup> This resulted in attacks against Jews in Tripoli as early as 1922 and later, in 1931 and 1936, in the issuance of a decree requiring shops to remain open on Saturday.<sup>42</sup> While De Felice maintained that no antisemitism was involved in this measure, Hoppe suggests instead that Italian historiography has tended to overlook

<sup>35</sup> L.V. Bertarelli, *Possedimenti e Colonie: Isole Egee, Tripolitania, Cirenaica, Eritrea, Somalia* (Milano: TCI, 1929), 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, 125.

<sup>41</sup> Jens Hoppe, 'The Persecution of Jews in Libya between 1938 and 1945', in *The Holocaust and North Africa*, ed. Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 54.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

the significance of Jewish religious observance and ritual norms.<sup>43</sup> The narrative found in guidebooks, even prior to these major events, should therefore be read through the lens of hostility towards Jews on the part of Italians from the very inception of the Fascist regime.

The guidebook's account proceeded to the boy's coming of age at thirteen, marked by a ceremony in which he donned the *tallit* for the first time. It then turned to marriage, emphasising practices such as the right of repudiation, the rare recourse to polygamy in cases of infertility and the replacement of levirate marriage with the ritual of *halitzah* according to Deuteronomy. The guide also drew directly on biblical references – for instance, citing Deut. 6:4 in describing the *viddui* and final confession recited at the deathbed.<sup>44</sup>

The guide noted that Tripolitanian Jews celebrated the major Jewish festivals as well as two local commemorations – Purim d'Esc-Scerif (1704) and Purim Bürgül (1795). It highlighted their 'picturesque practices', from strict Sabbath observance to rituals of Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hanukkah, Passover and other holidays, casting everyday religiosity in folklorised terms. The catalogue of rituals ended with a telling remark: 'and many other customs, too numerous to list, but many are disappearing as Libyan Jews become Europeanized'. What followed were comparisons that blurred Jewish and Muslim practices, particularly regarding housing and everyday life. Dress was described in detail: men in white tunics, black robes (*zimarre*) and fez without tassel but with European shoes; rabbis in dark turbans, wide black trousers, white stockings and low shoes.<sup>45</sup> Women, by contrast, were said to dress like 'the Muslim women of the cities', though their silk *baracano* left the face uncovered.<sup>46</sup> The same stereotyped and Orientalising descriptions were applied to Muslims. Accounts of customs blended fragments of anthropological knowledge, religious references and sweeping generalisations about male and female behaviour – revealing less about the populations described than about the worldview of those who authored the guides.

The 1929 guide to Italy's possessions and colonies devoted only a passing reference to Jews in Eritrea, describing them as 'almost all of Arabian origin', adhering to 'the rites of Yemen' and maintaining contact with the Abyssinian 'falashas', whose Jewishness was deemed uncertain.<sup>47</sup> The text emphasised 'strict observance of the Sabbath and fasts', reducing the community to ritual difference rather than social presence. By contrast, Somalia was portrayed as wholly 'islamized',<sup>48</sup> with no acknowledgement of Jewish life at all. This uneven treatment was not accidental: it reflected a selective colonial gaze in which Jewishness was noted only when it could be fitted into familiar categories – Arab, Yemenite, biblical – while in other contexts it was erased in favour of a homogenised image of Islam. In both cases, recognition and silence served the same purpose: to fold Jewish existence into a taxonomy that simplified the colony's populations and affirmed Italian authority over defining who counted as a distinct group.

The Dodecanese, and Rhodes in particular, became part of the Italian colonial sphere in the early twentieth century, marking a different trajectory for the local Jewish community. From the outset, the Jews of Rhodes were granted a form of *piccola cittadinanza* – a minor citizenship that signalled affiliation with Italy without conferring political rights. The island also hosted the Italian Rabbinical College (1928–38), sponsored by both the Fascist regime and the *Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane* (Union of Italian Jewish Communities), an institution designed to integrate Jewish life into the framework of Fascist cultural politics.<sup>49</sup> Rhodes attracted special attention as a Mediterranean outpost and bridge to the East, strategically positioned between Italian, French and British colonies.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> *Possedimenti e Colonie*, 227–8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 577.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 733.

<sup>49</sup> Simonetta Della Seta, 'Gli ebrei nel Mediterraneo nella strategia politica fascista sino al 1938: il caso di Rodi', *Storia Contemporanea* 6 (1986): 997–1032.

In 1930 a dedicated guidebook, *Rodi e le Minori isole italiane dell'Egeo* (Rhodes and the Smaller Italian Islands of the Aegean), presented the island as a possession of 'moral and historical value'. The tone differed sharply from the portrayal of Libya: Rhodes required only 'a touch of modern civil life' to complete its transformation into 'a center of orderly and progressive activity'.<sup>50</sup> In this narrative, the island's 'Orientals' were depicted as having 'much affinity with us Italians'<sup>51</sup> and thus as receptive to Italy's civilising mission – an image that aligned Rhodes more closely with Europe than with Africa in the colonial hierarchy. Rhodes was portrayed as a city 'on the threshold of civilization', needing only a European touch to become new, modern and harmonious – indeed, now 'typically Italian'. The guide dwelt at length on this *italianità* (Italian-ness), presenting the island as a colonial space markedly different from Libya. Progress was credited not merely to Italian influence in general but specifically to the work of the Fascist regime, described as embodying 'the new style of disciplined, industrious, and silent Italy'.

In the section *Demografia e Lingue* (Demography and Languages), the guide listed four principal groups within Rhodes's population of roughly 102,669: Muslims, Greek Orthodox, Latins and Jews. In it, we find virtually the same description of the Jews as in the 'Israelites' section of the Aegean islands volume of the 1929 guide.<sup>52</sup> The island was presented as a religious mosaic, yet each community was reduced to physical and moral stereotypes. The Orthodox were described as 'of medium height, fairly robust, with dark eyes and hair, resistant to fatigue', and portrayed as diligent traders engaged in sponge fishing, agriculture and pastoralism.<sup>53</sup> The guides depicted local groups through reductive stereotypes. Jews were presented as industrious traders engaged in fishing, agriculture and the professions; Muslims of Kos and Rhodes were described by physical traits and an 'apathetic' character, devoted to crafts and farming; 'Latins' were scarcely mentioned. Jewish communities, especially in Rhodes, were further distinguished by their 'singsong' language – a blend of Castilian, Greek, Turkish and Hebrew – linked to the expulsion from Spain, and by their supposed physical features and near-exclusive dedication to commerce.<sup>54</sup>

In the section on customs and popular traditions, the Jews of Rhodes were portrayed through a blend of folkloric curiosity and travel stereotypes. Alongside descriptions of their small quarter within the city walls, the guide highlighted a catalogue of superstitions and rituals – marriage taboos linked to the moon, protective gestures, dietary restrictions and therapeutic practices such as the elaborate *Seradura* healing rite.<sup>55</sup> These details, presented with almost ethnographic precision, constructed an image of a community governed by magical rules and symbolic gestures, a closed microcosm set apart from its surroundings. The emphasis was less on documentation than on creating a cultural type that the tourist could observe like an anthropological spectacle. Even observances such as the Sabbath or Sukkot were framed as picturesque survivals. In short, the 1930 Touring Guide did not simply record Jewish practices but organised them into a coherent narrative of exoticism and superstition, designed to satisfy folkloric curiosity rather than provide a neutral ethnographic account.

## Empire, War and Racialisation

The conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 marked the peak of Italian racism. From that point, an explicitly antisemitic policy emerged, echoed in colonial contexts and even in broadcasts from *Radio Bari*, which since 1934 had aired cultural programmes in Arabic across the Middle East. Italian colonial propaganda – directed primarily against Britain and France – took on an increasingly racist and, over time, antisemitic tone, revealing that Fascist antisemitism was far from a mere alignment with

<sup>50</sup> *Guida di Rodi e le Minori Isole Italiane dell'Egeo* (Milano: TCI, 1930), 75.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Possedimenti e Colonie*, 42–3.

<sup>53</sup> *Guida di Rodi e le Minori Isole Italiane dell'Egeo*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Germany.<sup>56</sup> In Libya, repression had already intensified before 1935 under Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, the so-called Butcher, who sought to crush resistance led by Omar al-Mukhtar through executions and mass deportations. Al-Mukhtar's hanging in 1931 became a brutal warning to the entire population. The same instruments of coercion were later deployed in Ethiopia after October 1935: Italy violated the sovereignty of the empire, defied the League of Nations and employed airplanes and chemical weapons to force Ethiopian surrender.<sup>57</sup> Although Addis Ababa fell in May 1936, the war soon gave way to guerrilla resistance that lasted until 1941, when Italy lost its colonies to British control. That same year the *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI) (Italian East Africa) was proclaimed, and Victor Emmanuel III was styled as emperor, the head of a late colonial empire whose principal jewels were Ethiopia, Rhodes and Libya.

In July 1937, as part of the campaign against the use of foreign names and languages, Osvaldo Sebastiani, head of Mussolini's private secretariat, ordered that the *Touring Club Italiano* change its name. The organisation thus became the *Consociazione Turistica Italiana* (CTI) (Italian Tourism Association).<sup>58</sup> The 1937 *Libia* guidebook of CTI fully reflected the solemn and hieratic rhetoric of Fascist propaganda:

Today Italy has its great Colonial Empire, marvelous, a dream that the Duce has made reality, and Tripolitania and Cyrenaica – now unified in every administrative respect under the name of Libya – have achieved, in the fervent Fascist climate, a development that may well be said to exceed all favorable expectations.<sup>59</sup>

Libya was thus portrayed as pacified, its Arab rebellion finally subdued and celebrated as Italy's 'fourth shore', the natural political and geographical extension of the nation. The splendour of this achievement was epitomised in Tripoli, held up as a showcase of *italianità* in North Africa and a symbol of Fascist success. Yet, as earlier guides of the 1920s made clear, Tripoli remained a mixed city – Arab, European, Christian and Jewish – its diversity at the heart of the colonial narrative.<sup>60</sup> This very diversity helps explain the growing centrality of race in Fascist discourse. The link between imperialism and the turn towards antisemitism is evident in the racial laws of 1937 and the explicitly antisemitic legislation of 1938. As indeed the historian Olindo De Napoli has argued, 'imperialism represented the Italian path to racism'. At the same time, it is important not to conflate the two: the measures against colonial subjects and against Jews were distinct in both their content and their application, reflecting different orientations and objectives.<sup>61</sup> The Ethiopian War also produced a rapprochement between Italy and Germany, which, as Michele Sarfatti has observed, transformed the 'previously tolerated solidarity of the Jews of the peninsula – both Fascist and non-Fascist – with the victims of Nazi antisemitism'.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, Ethiopia and the consequent turn to imperialism represented more than a colonial expansion: they marked a qualitative shift in Fascist policy towards the Jews, laying the groundwork for the transition from a regime that could still accommodate Jewish loyalty to one that increasingly defined belonging through the lens of race.

The 1937 guidebook on Libya portrays the Jewish population as being heavily influenced by Muslim customs, a description largely unchanged from that found in the 1929 editions.<sup>63</sup> Specific Jewish practices are outlined in detail, including rituals surrounding birth, childhood, marriage,

<sup>56</sup> Arturo Marzano, *Onde fasciste: la propaganda araba di Radio Bari (1934–43)* (Roma: Carocci Editore, 2015), 168.

<sup>57</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *La conquista dell'impero* (Roma: Laterza, 1979).

<sup>58</sup> Vota, *I Sessant'Anni del Touring Club Italiano*, 301.

<sup>59</sup> Luigi Bertarelli, ed., *Libia* (Milano: CTI, 1937), 5. Although Luigi Bertarelli, one of the founders of the TCI, had died in 1926, the guidebooks continued to be published under his name.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Olindo De Napoli, *La prova della razza: cultura giuridica e razzismo in Italia negli anni Trenta* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2009), 135.

<sup>62</sup> Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista: vicende, identità, persecuzione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), 108.

<sup>63</sup> Bertarelli, *Libia*, 104; *Possedimenti e Colonie*, 228.

funerals and local festivals. Their clothing, too, is described in relation to Muslim women in the city: while Jewish women shared similar dress, their outer cloaks were always of white silk, and, unlike their Muslim counterparts, Jewish girls wore coloured blouses only after marriage. Their houses were said to resemble those of the Arabs, and their economic life was depicted as centred on small-scale commerce and craftsmanship.<sup>64</sup> By contrast, Arabs and Berbers were presented primarily in terms of geography and religion: Arabs as Muslims spread throughout the region, particularly along the coast, and Berbers as concentrated in the Gebel and highland areas. Other groups, such as people of sub-Saharan African descent and the Cologhli (descendants of Janissaries and local women), were briefly mentioned but without the ethnographic detail devoted to Jews and Arabs. What emerges from these descriptions is a discourse of differentiation that nonetheless shows continuity rather than escalation. Despite the Fascist regime's growing racial radicalisation between 1929 and 1937, the guidebooks do not yet display the more virulent antisemitism that would soon come to characterise Fascist propaganda and legislation.

A true example and product of Fascist imperialism was the *Guida dell'Africa Orientale Italiana* (Guide to Italian East Africa), published in Milan in 1938 by the CTI. From the very opening lines by its author, Senator Carlo Bonardi – a Fascist and, since 1928, deputy director of the Touring Club Italiano – the work declared its ideological purpose:

The Guide aims first of all at an ideal objective: to pay homage to the Majesty of the King-Emperor, to the Duce, founder of the Empire, to the great Leaders who assisted him in accomplishing this titanic undertaking, to the Heroes who fell in the name of Italy, and to all the Fighters, from the Princes of the House of Savoy to the humblest Soldiers, to the Sailors, to the ever-faithful Blackshirts, to the Workers, who with their labor and sacrifice prepared and secured the conquest.<sup>65</sup>

The guide was, in essence, a paean to Fascist imperialism, endlessly reiterating its triumphalist rhetoric. Its central themes were those of development and modernity, but its scope extended well beyond the remit of a conventional travel book. It was intended as a resource for soldiers stationed in Italian East Africa, for businessmen seeking to expand economic ties and for scholars interested in deepening their knowledge of the colony. In this sense the 1943 *Baedeker's* guidebooks on occupied Poland resonated same intents. Tourism was acknowledged only as a secondary purpose, to be pursued once road networks were sufficiently modernised. A recurring emphasis was placed on security, with the assurance that 'day by day, general safety improves, along with logistical organization.'<sup>66</sup> A short yet significant section of the guide was devoted to religion. It described the region as moving 'from a paganism still widespread in certain areas to the predominance of the monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, not without traces of Judaism.'<sup>67</sup> It was precisely this last element – Judaism – that received particular attention. The guide offered a historical reconstruction, suggesting that it had been introduced by 'Jews coming from Arabia for commercial reasons.'<sup>68</sup> From there, it was said to have spread among the *Agaw*, who, as the Ethiopianist Carlo Conti Rossini (1872–1949) observed, adopted Judaism as a bulwark against Christian assimilation and were able for centuries to maintain their political independence, until their subjugation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Drawing explicitly on Conti Rossini, a leading Italian orientalist and expert on the Beta Israel, the guide attempted to sketch the origins of Ethiopian Judaism, attributing its diffusion to the *Agaw* populations – though it was not the place, of course, to engage in a detailed discussion of that history. As early as 1929, in *L'Abissinia*, Conti Rossini characterised the 'falascià' as 'indigenous Jew'

<sup>64</sup> Bertarelli, *Libia*, 86; *Possedimenti e Colonie*, 212.

<sup>65</sup> *Guida Africa Orientale Italiana* (Milano: CTI, 1938), 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–90.

of uncertain origin.<sup>69</sup> The guide adopts, almost verbatim, Conti Rossini's definition and historical reconstruction, presenting them as a distinct community whose 'beliefs exhibit a syncretic amalgam of Judaism, Christianity, and paganism.'<sup>70</sup> In this regard, the scholars' intellectual contribution is an evident part of the guidebook. Also, the Jewish status of the Beta Israel was historically complex and frequently contested within Western Judaism. The guidebook's hesitation therefore cannot be read simply as error, but should also be situated within wider debates over genealogy, religious practice and classification that shaped how this Jewish group was described and recognised from the late nineteenth century onward.<sup>71</sup>

According to the guide, the subjugation of the Beta Israel took place under the Christian dynasties, though elements of Judaism were preserved within their traditions. What remained of the Beta Israel – referred to at the time in Italian as 'falascià', foreigners in Amharic – were described as 'scattered traces of Judaism', concentrated mainly around Lake Tana and the Semien region. Their Jewish dimension, the guide suggested, had been gradually corrupted, yet the 'Jewish influence was undoubtedly significant, as can be seen in the practices of the Abyssinian Christian Church as well as in various institutions connected to religion, such as marriage and family organization.'<sup>72</sup> The intermingling of liturgical and ritual elements between Ethiopian Orthodoxy and Judaism was acknowledged as one of the most striking features of these two peculiar traditions.

What emerges, then, is the notion of a distinctive religiosity practiced by the Beta Israel, comparable to Judaism but never explicitly recognised by the guide as genuinely Jewish. At the same time, the Beta Israel were also incorporated into Fascist strategies of co-optation in Ethiopia, particularly as a counterweight to Christianity, the dominant religion of the country, which was described as being 'in steep decline for a complex of historical and moral reasons', a condition that only the Italian regime could remedy. One example was the introduction of a dual hierarchy in 1937, which severed the Ethiopian Church from its traditional dependence on the Egyptian Orthodox clergy.<sup>73</sup> The supposedly backward and barbaric Christianity of the Abyssinians was contrasted with Catholicism, celebrated through the missionary endeavours of Franciscans and Lazarists. The guide indeed defined the history of Catholicism in Ethiopia as 'a noble and adventurous tale.'<sup>74</sup>

Like the Beta Israel, Muslims – and perhaps even more so – were also targeted by Fascist policies of co-optation, particularly under Rodolfo Graziani. His strategy aimed at establishing institutions such as schools and cultural centres in order to promote a more favourable image of Italy as a conquering power, likely as a counterpoint to the repressive measures he had previously overseen in Libya. The guide devoted a section to Islam, offering a historical reconstruction of its spread in Ethiopia and Eritrea after the early Islamic period. It listed in laudatory tones the various religious brotherhoods present in the region: the Mirghaniyya (with centres in Otumlo near Massawa and in Keren), the Qadiriyya (in Harar, Brava in Somalia and among nomadic groups in Eritrea), the Sammāniyya (among the Jabarti and in Limmu Ennarea), the Ahmadiyya (in Merca and the Bur area of Somalia) and the Salihyya (along the middle and upper Shebelle River).<sup>75</sup> The treatment was brief but notably free of disparagement, presenting Ethiopian Islam largely as the domain of mystics and Sunni traditions. In this narrative, the guide emerges as both propaganda and tourist instrument – indeed

<sup>69</sup> Carlo Conti Rossini, *L'Abissinia* (Roma: Cremonese, 1929), 133.

<sup>70</sup> Conti Rossini, *L'Abissinia*, 134.

<sup>71</sup> For details, see Daniel Summerfield, *From Falashas to Ethiopian Jews: The External Influences for Change, c. 1860–1960* (London: Routledge, 2011); Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Allo specchio dei Falascia: Ebrei ed etnologi durante il colonialismo fascista* (Firenze: La Giuntina, 1987); James Arthur Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Stéphane Ancel and Éloi Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and The Challenges of Modernity', in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, ed. Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (New York: Hurst & Company, 2015), 72.

<sup>74</sup> *Guida Africa Orientale Italiana*, 91.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

the only such work on Italian East Africa and its religions – produced just before the empire itself collapsed in 1941.<sup>76</sup>

In 1940 a *Guida Breve – Italia Meridionale e Insulare e Libia* (Short Guide: Southern and Insular Italy and Libya) was published.<sup>77</sup> The new geographical configuration of the guides underscored how the African territory had by then been incorporated into Italy itself. As expected, the preface celebrated Fascist modernity, embodied in urban planning, land reclamation, colonisation and above all autarky. To the Italian regions, it declared ‘metropolitan Libya has been added, namely the coastal provinces of Tripoli, Misurata, Benghazi, and Derna, which are, in every respect, to be considered provinces of the Kingdom.’<sup>78</sup> The guide was extremely detailed, yet it entirely avoided demographic and religious questions. No mention was made of the Jews of Tripoli or Benghazi. Instead, it highlighted monuments such as the Gurgi Mosque, described as ‘the most elegant, built in 1883’, and only alluded in passing to the Jewish quarter, ‘known as the Hara.’<sup>79</sup> It is difficult to determine whether the omission of Jews from the description was driven by antisemitism, by racism or simply by the practical need to condense into a short wartime guide only those aspects considered essential for the tourist. It is nonetheless important to note that the asymmetry between the application of racial laws in Italy and the erasure of Jews from guidebooks must be situated within the broader context of a relationship that Italian diplomacy – by no later than 1940 – was actively seeking to recalibrate through a more conciliatory approach towards Mediterranean Jewish communities.<sup>80</sup>

Turning to Greece and the Aegean islands, the CTI published a guidebook on *Grecia* (Greece) in 1941.<sup>81</sup> Its appearance must be understood in the context of war: Italy had entered the conflict alongside Germany in June 1940 and over the years developed a specific Mediterranean strategy.<sup>82</sup> The guide itself declared that Italy, ‘together with its German ally, fights to bring Europe peace, prosperity, and justice’, while acknowledging that it might seem unusual to publish a guide to a country regarded as an enemy, indeed ‘at the service of the enemy.’<sup>83</sup> This act of dissemination was also an act of counter-information, intended to frame the war in Italy’s terms. What remains most striking, however, is the importance that Fascist Italy attributed to circulating knowledge of Greece – a country officially cast as an enemy yet represented in the guide almost as part of Italy’s imperial orbit. The ambiguity lay in Greece’s political status. Following the Italian invasion of 1940 and the subsequent German intervention, the country existed in a liminal space: in part a territory militarily occupied, in part treated rhetorically as if it were already integrated into the Italian sphere of influence. For this reason, Greece assumed the character of a half colony, suspended between conquest, occupation and imagined annexation. With regard to religion, the guidebook on *Grecia* differed sharply from earlier volumes. Whereas previous guides had offered detailed descriptions of Jewish communities, here the treatment was reduced to a brief statistical note: Israelites, 73,000. According to other data, some 70,000 of them lived in Salonika alone.<sup>84</sup> The subsequent pages devoted considerable attention to the various Christian churches, yet even in the sections on Salonika – home to one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe – no further mention was made. The Jews were, in effect, entirely erased from the guide’s narrative. Earlier guides had devoted considerable space to Jewish communities – often through stereotyped descriptions of their language, physical traits and occupations – whereas

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> *Guida Breve – Italia Meridionale e Insulare – Libia* (Milano: CTI, 1940).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Tullia Catalan, ‘Under Observation: Italian Jewry and European Jewish Philanthropic Organizations in 1938–1939’, in *Italian Jewish Networks from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century: Bridging Europe and the Mediterranean*, ed. Francesca Bregoli, Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti and Guri Schwarz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2018), 127–49.

<sup>81</sup> *Grecia* (Milano: CTI, 1941).

<sup>82</sup> Davide Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo: le politiche di occupazione dell'Italia fascista in Europa (1940–1943)* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003).

<sup>83</sup> *Grecia*, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 89.

by 1941 they appear only as a statistical note, with no cultural or historical elaboration. It is difficult to determine whether this silence was the product of explicit antisemitic intent, a reflection of the racial climate after 1938 when there started what John Foot called ‘war on Italy’s Jews’,<sup>85</sup> or simply a by-product of the guide’s broader focus on Christian institutions. Yet the effect is nonetheless striking: even in Salonika, home to one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe, Jews are rendered marginal and almost invisible. This absence may suggest a new phase in the racialisation of Jews within Fascist discourse – less a matter of describing or categorising them, and more a matter of erasing them from the cultural map of the empire.

## Conclusion

The analysis of TCI guidebooks shows how tourism, colonialism and racial discourse intersected under Fascism. Far from neutral, these texts classified and evaluated populations in ways that reinforced imperial hierarchies. Jews, like other groups, were subjected to this process, yet their position remained particularly unstable – at once European and non-European, both familiar and foreign.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, guides to Libya and Rhodes included detailed, if stereotyped, accounts of Jewish groups, emphasising their customs, occupations and supposed physical and moral traits. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, the tone shifted. The *Guida dell’Africa Orientale Italiana* treated Judaism as a historical residue; the 1940 *Guida Breve* almost entirely omitted Jewish life in Tripoli and Benghazi; and the 1941 guidebook on Greece reduced Salonika’s vast Jewish population to a mere statistical note and completely overlooked the Jews of Rhodes.

It is difficult to determine whether these silences stemmed from antisemitic intent, wartime constraints or editorial choices aimed at brevity. What is clear, however, is that Jews moved from being described in detail – often through racialised categories – to being rendered marginal, residual or nearly invisible within the colonial narrative. If not a total erasure, this shift reflects a transformation in the grammar of racialisation under Fascism, one that paralleled the broader evolution of imperial policy and the introduction of the racial laws in 1937–8.

These guidebooks therefore illustrate how even ordinary cultural artefacts could participate in redefining social categories under dictatorship. By tracing the changing representations of Jews across different colonial settings, it is possible to stress not only how propaganda adapted to shifting political circumstances but also how the boundaries of belonging were subtly redrawn within the everyday language of tourism.

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<sup>85</sup>Foot, *Blood and Power*, 225.