

ENTANGLEMENTS OF POWER

Geographies of domination/resistance

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NOMADIC STRATEGIES AND COLONIAL GOVERNANCE

Domination and resistance in Cyrenaica, 1923–1932

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In the modern period, questions of domination and resistance have arguably been cast in their starkest extent during European imperial interventions in the colonial world, and the social, political and cultural control exacted by the modern, totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. This chapter considers one episode when a European imperial power incorporated a further slice of African territory as its colonial domain. Yet this instance of colonial expansionism was part of the totalitarian project of Fascist Italy, and the regime utilised all the modern technologies of warfare and social control to defeat the resistance of the indigenous population. The region concerned was Cyrenaica: the eastern coastal region of modern-day Libya, that stretches from the Egyptian border to the Gulf of Sirte and reaches into the Saharan interior to the south. My concern is with the efforts of Fascist colonial governance to subjugate and quell the resistance of the nomadic and semi-nomadic populations of Cyrenaica. Through this example, I suggest that the colonial conflict in Cyrenaica should not be regarded as a simple struggle between the colonisers and the colonised; but rather we should recognise a complicated and shifting matrix of relations of domination and resistance. Moreover the struggles were not only grounded in a series of spaces and territorialities, but also revolved around questions of mobility that were played out *across* the spaces of the North African desert. This chapter also constitutes an introduction to one of the least known, but perhaps one of the more lethal episodes in the history of modern European colonialism, for although the figures are vague and contested, estimates put the fatalities at somewhere between 30,000 and 70,000 (Santarelli *et al.* 1986)

Fascism, colonialism and domination

Since the early 1980s, our understandings of Fascist Italy have been augmented by an increasing number of studies that emphasise the various roles of culture, hegemony and popular consensus in the regime's domestic governance through the late 1920s and 1930s (De Grazia 1981; Falasca-Zamponi 1992; Gentile 1996). From the mid-1920s, for example, the regime seldom resorted to the kinds

of blatant public violence and physical oppression that characterised its early years. Whereas emphasis upon cultural persuasion was characteristic of metropolitan Italy, the regime's oppression of its colonial subjects in Africa was often acute and unforgiving. Once established, Italians represented their imperialism as a more benign and co-operative strain than that practised by other European powers (Bono 1989; Finaldi 1997). However, there is little doubt that during the actual conquest of colonial territories, the Italian record was scarred by instances of extreme ruthlessness and barbarity. As ever, European notions of authority and dominance were materialised in a far less subtle manner in Africa than in mainland Europe. In the Italian case, Fascism's use of mustard gas and machine guns against poorly armed Abyssinian troops in the Ethiopian campaign of 1935–1936 is only the most infamous example. Less well known is the campaign waged by the Italian colonial authorities in Cyrenaica, between 1923 and 1932.

The campaign was directed against the resistance of the indigenous Bedouin tribes and the Sanussi religious fraternity that provided political leadership for the Bedouin throughout the campaign. The Italians were concerned to establish their dominance over their new colonial territory, and to appropriate the land so that it might be distributed to Italian emigrant peasant families to be settled and farmed as Italy's 'Fourth Shore' (Del Boca 1991b; Segrè 1974, 1987). However, the resistance of the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the coastal plateau and the interior stymied Italian plans for nine years. The Sanussi had previously constituted a loose form of governance in the region; after the Italian invasion, they led the Bedouin in a campaign of resistance that relied primarily upon their adaption of their traditional nomadic lifestyles. Above all, their mobility, their familiarity with the Cyrenaican environment and the support they received from the nominally 'conquered', semi-settled peoples of the coastal provinces rendered the Bedouin formidable opponents who frustrated the far superior numbers and equipment of the Italians. Eventually, the Italians applied some of the most modern and savage technologies of warfare and social control to defeat this resistance, ultimately incarcerating the entire population in a chain of concentration camps where *at least* 35,000 died in just two years (Abdullatif Ahmida 1994).

These extreme measures finally ended the resistance, but stand as one of the bleakest episodes in the history of European imperialism in Africa. The war had been fought over territory and was essentially a struggle over space; but it was also, crucially, a struggle contested *across* space, and fought out through issues of mobility. This chapter attempts to develop a more nuanced understanding of these events through a discussion of Bedouin mobility as a strategy of resistance to Italian colonial rule. At the same time, I consider the interwoven geographies of domination and resistance that characterised both sides of this struggle. Finally, I discuss ideas of the desert and mobility in Euro-American cultures and

suggest that a tendency towards romanticising nomadism in contemporary social theory ought, perhaps, to be counterposed by an awareness of this war and other such attempts of the colonial period to conquer and sedentarise nomads by force.

Europe, the desert and nomadology

Europe and the desert

Since Classical times, the arid lands of the Sahara desert to the south of the Mediterranean Sea have constituted a region of enduring fascination for European societies. To peoples accustomed to more temperate climates, the apparent hostility of its environments combined with the vast scale of its area rendered the desert the antithesis of continental Europe. At the same time, from the Classical understanding of the Sahara as the edge of the known world (Mudimbe 1994; Romm 1992), through to more recent interpretations of an arid, impassable barrier that separated the Mahgreb from the territories of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahara has frequently been regarded as little more than a relentless stretch of hostile, barren, empty space. Throughout this cultural tradition, the only inhabitants of the region to make any sizeable impression upon European imaginations were Bedouin nomadic tribes and their herds, moving across the desert between waterholes and oases.

To many Europeans, these mobile peoples living amidst an elemental environment contrasted markedly to their own bounded, sedentary, industrial lifestyles. The worlds of nomads, it was thought, were not demarcated by the territorial boundaries or disciplined spaces of modern European societies. As such, throughout history they constituted one of Europe's Others and were frequently viewed with suspicion because of their difference. Yet simultaneously, they were also cast as romantic figures with apparently care-free, pre-modern lifestyles and an affinity with their natural environments. They provoked both fear and fascination for Europeans (Dawson 1994; Root n.d.). Obviously, there are far more complicated histories and flows of peoples, cultures, political influences, commodities and goods across the Sahara than these arbitrary European geographies allow. Yet at the same time, parts of the North African littoral, and the Saharan interior in particular, remained *terra incognitae* to western knowledges until well into the twentieth century (Atkinson 1996). The region was a casualty of generalised western imaginations whereby it was consistently represented and reproduced as a hostile, barren environment populated by a scattering of nomads. To Europeans of the imperial period, such lands were considered ripe for colonial occupation. As Root writes: 'Although there have always been people living in the Sahara, in colonial eyes the desert is

landscape without culture, wild, uncultivated land that remains out of control' (Root n.d.: 29).

Cast as such, the desert served as little more than vacant space to be appropriated at will by the west. In nineteenth-century French art and literature, the Sahara was frequently represented as a wilderness that could be at once redemptive and restorative (Heffernan 1991). It was also imagined as an elemental, 'pure' environment, denuded of the layers and comforts of modern society. In the early twentieth century, for example, the desert served as a liminal space on the margins of western society. It attracted a host of 'travellers' who sought solitude, or the chance to fulfil their romantic fantasies of heroic, unhindered movement and escape from the more ordered societies whence they came. It became a stage for the embodiment and performance of nomadism by western subjects such as T.E. Lawrence or Wilfred Thesiger, who rode into the desert to escape European social boundaries (Dawson 1994). Equally, the Sahara provided a space for the transgressive cross-dressing and masculine, Arabic lifestyle chosen by the 'self-willed nomad', Isabelle Eberhardt (Abdel-Jaouad 1993). Crucially though, these fantasies were enabled by a long-standing European colonial discourse that constructed this land as both vacant and available for precisely this kind of physical and philosophical journeying. Equally, such travels were often enabled in material terms by the military force of European colonial powers. It is clear that historically, the desert has been imaginatively appropriated at will by westerners for their own purposes.

One such 'desert explorer', dubbed posthumously 'another potential T.E. Lawrence [with] the same dynamic qualities' (Driberg 1937:7) was Knud Holmboe. An Arabic-speaking Danish Muslim, in 1930 this self-styled traveller resolved to drive across North Africa, from Morocco to Cairo, in search of the freedoms of desert travel (Holmboe 1937). Yet when he reached Italian Cyrenaica, rather than finding solitude, freedom and empty spaces populated by nothing more than a scattering of Bedouin communities, he found a territory under strict Italian martial law. All forms of movement were outlawed, the Bedouin tribes were herded into concentration camps, and any individuals caught outside the camps was liable to be shot on sight (Holmboe 1937). What Holmboe encountered in place of the wild empty spaces that he anticipated were some of the complex geographies of domination, resistance and mobility that I consider in this chapter.

Nomadology

Arguably, aspects of the European tradition of romanticising the desert and the figure of the nomad have never gone away. The success of the 1996 film *The English Patient* is only one more recent example. Even in the more rarefied realms of social theory there are traces of this enduring rhetoric. Academic

interest in the ideas of nomadology has intensified markedly in recent years and the trope has emerged as a popular element of contemporary theory. As Cresswell (1997) points out, by contrast with earlier cultural theorists, contemporary writers celebrate mobility and movement endlessly, and the metaphor of the nomad enjoys significant currency at the heart of postmodernism. For many, it provides an idealised model of movement and displacement, and a metaphorical trope for non-fixity, anti-essentialism and mobility as resistance to the bounded spaces and orders of modern society. As such, the nomad provides a classic example of a 'deterritorialised' subject.

The popularisers of nomadism, Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 1987) ground their discussions of the term using the example of the resistance to fixed, feudal authorities of the stone-masons, carpenters and labourers who migrated around medieval Europe while building its Gothic cathedrals. Nevertheless, despite their chosen example, in other sections of their discussion, Deleuze and Guattari (1986) refer casually to two very different, non-European regions as the emblematic landscapes of the nomad. The western Asian Steppes, and particularly the arid, desert environments of North Africa, are enlisted as the archetypal nomadic environments. The nomads who illustrate their arguments move around between 'water points' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986:50), and it is the nomad who 'clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert advance, and who invents nomadism as a response to this challenge' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986:51). Furthermore, the nomad is said to make the desert as much as be made by it, and is compared to the shifting, rhizomatic vegetation that characterises arid lands (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 53). This rhetoric clearly draws upon long-standing European traditions that associate these vast spaces and harsh environments on the margins of Europe, with nomads and nomadism—the exotic, mobile cultures that constitute 'others' to settled, European societies (Root n.d.). Although they call for historicised case studies, Deleuze and Guattari seem to reproduce the associations of nomads with steppes and deserts, and particularly, with the arid lands of North Africa (Cresswell 1997).

Other writers also incorporate this imagined, depopulated desert environment into their discussions of nomadology and movement. Kaplan (1996) critiques Baudrillard and Deleuze and Guattari in her extensive survey of the debate (see also Kaplan 1987). She claims that

Mapping 'terra incognita' requires the open spaces and depopulated zones constructed by colonial discourse. While the 'dark continent' signals Africa's imbrication in imperial modern culture's self-construction, the blinding white spaces of the desert present another opportunity for Euro-American inventions of the Self. From Isabelle Eberhardt to Jean Baudrillard, from T.E. Lawrence to David Lean, the philosophical/ literary

trek across the desert leads to a celebration of the figure of the nomad—the one who can track a path through a seemingly illogical space without succumbing to nation-state and/or bourgeois organisation and mastery... the nomad...offers an idealized model of movement based on perpetual displacement.

(Kaplan 1996:66)

In various western cultural traditions then, the 'blinding white spaces of the desert' are uncritically reproduced as the archetypal spaces of the nomad. Even today, these imagined places serve as a backdrop to modern theories of movement and resistance, with the desert a ready metaphor for contemporary theories of deterritorialised movement and flux. Quite aside from the dangers of generalisations and the over-simplistic counterposing of domination and resistance, in this tradition, the nomad is also often gendered as masculine: moving with impunity around the natural landscapes where 'he' lives. To borrow Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, the nomad's desert is smooth space: land available for unhindered movement, and unstriated by any extant social, political, economic or cultural geographies.

The problem with all of this, as Kaplan notes, is that 'Euro-American recourse to the metaphors of desert and nomad can never be innocent or separable from the dominant orientalist tropes in circulation throughout modernity' (Kaplan 1996: 66). There is a danger that, for privileged, western theorists,

The Third World functions simply as a metaphorical margin for European oppositional strategies, an imaginary space... This kind of 'othering' in theory repeats the anthropological gesture of erasing the subject position of the theorist and perpetuates a kind of colonial discourse in the name of progressive politics.

(Kaplan 1996:88)

The risk is that nomadic peoples are seldom problematised, historicised or allowed any detailed social, political or cultural profiles in modern texts. They simply provide a convenient example of mobility and deterritorialisation. Cresswell argues that the figure of the nomad has been subjected to 'vast generalisations and misguided metaphorical play' (Cresswell 1997:362). He points out: 'Such metaphorical reductions can serve only to negate the very real differences which exist between the mobile citizens of the postmodern world and the marginalised inhabitants of other times and places' (Cresswell 1997:377). To avoid such casual appropriations of nomadic experiences and spaces, both writers call for situated, contextualised and provisional accounts of mobility—although Kaplan notes that previous attempts were partial and unsatisfactory (Kaplan 1996).

My intention in the remainder of this chapter is to provide a preliminary account of some of these marginalised inhabitants of another time and place, and particularly the ways that the nomadic Bedouin population of Cyrenaica developed 'nomadic strategies' to resist Italian occupation. I also relate the ways in which Bedouin nomadism and their deterritorialisation were constructed as 'problematic' by the Italian colonial authorities, and finally, the extreme methods that were employed to force these communities to abandon their traditional mobile lifestyle *precisely because* of the continuing resistance that their movement posed to Italian colonial governance. I suggest that our understandings of nomadism might benefit from a more contextualised and historicised awareness of some of the complex, entwined, contradictory, but nevertheless deadly geographies of domination and resistance that have marred Maghrebian histories.

Conquering Cyrenaica

The Italian conquest of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and the Saharan regions to the South provides a complicated and regionally differentiated history of different degrees of domination being exacted over the indigenous peoples. As Thomas (1993) emphasised, colonialism was frequently negotiated amidst local and regional contingencies. Italian colonialism in Libya was no exception. In the early years, the Libyans were virtually untouched by European 'rule'; on later occasions, the Italians collaborated with groups within Libyan society to maintain order; and eventually, the Italians imposed direct, brutal, martial control upon the population. The story also differs between Libya's two main regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, and the episode was also played out across the expanses of the Saharan interior. What follows is a brief account of the strategies that marked the first stages of Italian colonialism in Tripolitania and, especially, Cyrenaica.

Early Italian colonialism in Cyrenaica

Italian forces invaded the Ottoman territories of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania on the North African coast on 4 October 1911 (Malgeri 1970). Urged onwards by a growing colonialist lobby, the patriotism stirred by the fiftieth anniversary of the Italian state, and, some argue, to deflect attention from increasing domestic problems, Prime Minister Giolitti authorised the move with rhetoric about seizing Italy's fair share of colonial Africa (Del Boca 1986; Bosworth 1996). There was also talk of reclaiming the former granary of ancient Rome, and settling Italian emigrants under the Italian flag in Africa (Pistolese, 1932). The invasion was concluded in 1912, although not before the Italians had employed the most modern and technological machinery of warfare against the Turks and

their Libyan supporters, including motor transport, radio and the world's first use of aerial bombing (Paris 1991; Wright 1989). The Ottoman empire sued for peace in October 1912. One fading imperial power was displaced by a more recent European imperialism as the Italians established themselves in the main cities and along the coastal littoral (Del Boca 1986, 1991a).

Italian involvement in the First World War from 1915 to 1918, and the social and political chaos that engulfed the country afterwards, meant that the Italian presence in Libya was never consolidated. Indeed, it became so precarious that Italian colonial agriculture at one stage totalled just eighty-nine allotments (Bosworth 1996). The situation changed in 1922 when Mussolini's Fascist movement emerged from the anarchy of Italian society with promises to restore stability and Italian prestige on the world stage. Clearly, their pretences to a more 'fitting' international profile for Italy depended, in part, upon Fascism's ability to 'pacify' their North African territories successfully. Consequently, Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and the Saharan regions would suffer greatly at the hands of yet another European intervention in Africa.

In Tripolitania, the western coastal region of Libya that adjoined Tunisia, Governor Giuseppe Volpi anticipated the regime's thirst for colonial territory, and, in response to some isolated, local resistance from tribal *shaikhs*, inaugurated the full-scale *reconquista* (reconquest) of inland Tripolitania in January 1922 (Segrè 1974; Volpi di Misurata 1926). Within three years, much of Tripolitania and the adjacent Saharan interior had been incorporated into the Italian colonial realm, although the region was not fully 'pacified' until 1928; even then, some 'rebels' retreated still deeper into the Sahara to the Fezzan. In one respect, any effective, co-ordinated, sustained resistance to the Italians had been critically compromised by the antagonisms and in-fighting between the Tripolitanian tribes, divisions which the Italians encouraged and developed (Abdullatif Ahmida 1994; Santarelli *et al.* 1986; Wright 1969). But whereas the Tripolitanian resistance had tried to hinder Italian mobility through attacks on the region's rail network (Maggi 1997), in a taste of the tactics that would later be visited upon Cyrenaica, the Italian military commander Rodolfo Graziani dispatched highly mechanised, mobile forces to attack the Arabs' *camps* rather than their military bases. Volpi reported back to Rome that Italian success was based upon 'using Arab tactics against Arabs' (Segrè 1974:48), although the Italian exploitation of the rivalries and tensions between the Tripolitanian tribes was also significant.

In Cyrenaica the situation was different. In 1922, the Italian authorities controlled the ports and the coastal strip; although the inland plateau and the Saharan interior were composed of a mosaic of traditional tribal territories, these local units were transcended by the broader, regional layer of political governance provided by the Sanussi religious fraternity (whom I discuss shortly). This pattern of governance had been enshrined since 1917 when an

Italian government, preoccupied with the war in Europe, signed the Acroma accords with the Sanussi (Evans-Pritchard 1945a). The infrastructure of forces, camps and officials that underpinned the Sanussi authority was partially funded by the Italians and the two groups even shared some military camps along their mutual frontier (Santarelli *et al.* 1986). Clearly, as the Italians fought the Austro-Hungarian empire on their northern frontier, they were prepared to share power in Cyrenaica with the Sanussi order, and to collaborate with this single political entity rather than with the tribes and *Shaikhs* that were thus further subsumed beneath Sanussi authority. The Acroma treaty underpinned the position of the Sanussi, who in turn provided some measure of colonial stability for the Italians (Evans-Pritchard 1945a). Thus, as contingencies directed events, the Liberal governments of pre-Fascist Italy forged a mutually beneficial agreement that served Italian purposes and reinforced Sanussi authority over Cyrenaica and its peoples.

The collaboration disintegrated in the spring of 1923. On 6 March, the Italians seized a Sanussi camp and took control of the 'mixed-camps' they shared with the Sanussi without warning. Half the Sanussi regular troops were thus captured (Evans-Pritchard 1949). Subsequently, on 1 May 1923, the Italians unilaterally declared all Italo-Sanussi treaties to be void, and attacked their former partners (Evans-Pritchard 1945a). To a regime that was gradually silencing opposition at home, and one that was also slowly extending its control over the public sphere (Atkinson 1998), the notion of sharing power in the colonies with African 'subjects' fell far short of the ideal. Similarly, although the embryonic totalitarianism of Fascism would never be fully realised (Morgan 1998), one element of the regime's aspirations seems to have been unchallenged control over national and colonial territory. Yet their attempt to seize exclusive hegemony over Cyrenaica left the Italians contesting their presumed colonial realm with the ambitions and territoriality of the Sanussi.

The Sanussi fraternity

The Sanussi fraternity had been established as an Islamic Order in 1843 by al-Sayyid Muhammed bin 'Ali al-Sanusi, an Algerian cleric and intellectual who had studied and taught in Fez, Cairo and Mecca (Evans-Pritchard 1945a). The movement worked to encourage simple, austere Islamic observance throughout the territories of modern Libya, Chad, Eastern Sudan and the central Sahara (Peters 1990; Wright 1988). It was highly successful and over the next eighty years, the order gained followers rapidly and extended its influence from its historical centre in Cyrenaica across the Sahara to the Sudan, and along the Egyptian coast into the west of the Arabian peninsula (Evans-Pritchard 1945b). The Sanussi expanded by establishing lodges, called *zawiyas*, in populated regions, but especially at oases and other key nodes of trans-desert routes. The

zawiya network served as centres of education and religious teaching, but also functioned as sites of poor-relief, banking, administration and commerce (Evans-Pritchard 1945b; Valenzi 1932). Thus, concomitant with their expansion, the Sanussi also became much more of a secular authority that, having won the support and loyalty of the majority of the semi-nomadic and nomadic tribes of North Africa, constituted a semblance of co-ordinated governance and political authority in the Saharan interior—at least, as viewed in European terms. In Evans-Pritchard's words, theirs was a 'Theocratic empire' (Evans-Pritchard 1945a).

Perhaps inevitably, the *zawiya* network began to exercise a degree of Sanussi control over the desert interior, and especially over trade. While the Ottoman empire had established control over coastal trade and some routes into the Sahara, the Sanussi lodges and the order's hierarchy were sustained by taxation upon trade in the interior (Rochat 1973) and the order struggled to preserve its hegemony over this relatively lucrative source of income. It is alleged that the Sanussi continued to control a trans-Saharan trade in slaves until as late as 1930 (Abdullatif Ahmida 1994; Wright 1989). Evidently, despite their support from many among the Bedouin tribes, the Sanussi were implicated in a clear geography of control and territoriality.

In addition, Sanussi territoriality was also partially constituted in response to earlier European interventions in North Africa. The fraternity had traditionally avoided contact with European desert-travellers, and earned itself much negative publicity as a result (Wright 1988). Abdullatif Ahmida (1994) claims that the Sanussi anticipated European interference in their affairs from the late nineteenth century, when European colonial designs upon Africa became unmistakably clear. When the French destroyed some of its lodges in Chad in the 1890s, it seems that the Order decided to resist any future European incursions into their space. Consequently, they were inextricably drawn into international political relations as they developed an anti-colonial, pan-Islamic ideology that aimed to unify the disparate tribes of North Africa. They also trained and prepared for any future European interventions (Abdullatif Ahmida 1994; Peters 1990). The influence of the Sanussi had its origins in their embedded history as Cyrenaica's leading religious order. However, they also developed into the major secular authority of the region, with a reach across the tribal divisions and territories of North Africa. Consequently, Cyrenaica and the adjacent Sahara were neither the empty, unpopulated landscapes of European imaginations, nor the vacant space that might provide the potential colonial territory that the Italians envisaged. Rather, these lands were already striated by various elements of taxation, control and authority, although these were not particularly evident to 'western' eyes.

When the Italians invaded in 1911, the Sanussi were inevitably concerned to maintain their domination over their desert territories. While some of the Bedouin tribes initially fought the Italians alongside Ottoman troops, upon the

Italo-Ottoman peace of 1912, the Sanussi took over the leadership of the anti-colonial campaign themselves. They later also rallied to the *Jihad* (holy war) declared against the allies by the Islamic world in the First World War, and engaged the British in Egypt as well as the Italians. It is from this period that members of the fraternity began to talk in ever more literal terms of their *Hakuma al-Sanusiya*—their Sanussi government (Evans-Pritchard 1945a). The anti-colonialism and territoriality of the Sanussi therefore found expression from 1911. Although at one stage the order was content to maintain its hegemony over the Cyrenaican interior as established by the Acroma accords, it is hardly surprising that when the Italians renounced the treaty in 1923, the Sanussi were prepared to resist the seizure of ‘their’ territory.

The Italian leadership hoped for the relatively swift submission of inland Cyrenaica. In contrast to the situation in Tripolitania, however, the Sanussi provided a coherent degree of political leadership for the resistance, and many of the nomadic and semi-nomadic population rallied to their support. Although Peters (1990) revised Evans-Pritchard’s (1949) analysis of the Sanussi to claim that the tribal *shaikhs* should be accorded some significance in any explanation of the practicalities of the struggle against Fascist Italy, the *symbolic* importance of Sanussi leadership seems to be broadly unchallenged. For example, Evans-Pritchard argued that: ‘the Sanusiya comprised a symbol to which the Bedouin clung and which enabled them to withstand twenty years of privation, near-starvation and death, during the resistance to the Italians’ (Peters 1990:26).

If merely at a symbolic level, the Sanussi appear to have transcended most intertribal divisions. The Sanussi thus shifted away from their collaborative domination of the region in harness with the Italians, to provide the leadership for a sustained campaign of resistance that would frustrate Italian plans for nine years. It may have been the desire to preserve their territorial power that primarily motivated the Sanussi. Certainly, their moral leadership was compromised on occasions by the failure of many of the Sanussi hierarchy to become actively involved in the campaign, and more particularly by the ‘taxes’ and support that the Sanussi-led bands extracted from some of the semi-settled, *sottomessi* (‘submitted’, ‘pacified’), tribes of the coastal provinces. Therefore, although the brutality of the Italians in Libya is perhaps the most salient aspect of this colonial struggle, it is important to remember that there were no simple or discrete categories of resistance and domination in this instance, but rather a series of complex and interwoven questions of oppression and resistance that were played out across the desert landscapes of Cyrenaica in a struggle for control over space.

Reconquering Cyrenaica

From 1923 until 1932, Italian forces waged an increasingly bitter and cruel colonial war against the resistance of the Cyrenaicans. Not all of Cyrenaica's population were actively involved in the conflict, however. The settled peoples of the coastal towns and cities were sympathetic to the cause and often resented Italian colonialism, but, perhaps due to the well-established Italian presence along the coast, they were seldom actively involved (Evans-Pritchard 1949). A little further inland, some of the semi-nomadic and sedentary Bedouin tribes likewise remained largely peaceful. These groups were the *sottomessi* who found themselves in a crucial, albeit unfortunate, position as the war developed. Further inland still were the more nomadic, desert Bedouin who had less entangled relations with Italian influences and less familiarity with European notions of space and territory. Under the leadership of the Sanussi, these groups provided the bulk of the resistance. After the initial battles, the Sanussi-Bedouin forces seldom totalled more than a thousand in number, and were divided into small, mobile groups. Yet the sustained and effective manner of their resistance was based upon their flexibility and their mobility in the Saharan desert. These 'nomadic strategies' and the responses they provoked from the Italians constitute the remainder of this chapter, although I connect this story to the geographies of domination, oppression and resistance that were consequent upon this struggle across space.

Nomad strategies: mobility as resistance?

In 1923, the Sanussi and their Bedouin supporters were far outnumbered by the Italians. Neither did they boast any of the conventional training, equipment and logistical support that the Italians shipped into the country. Sanussi-Bedouin forces comprised 2,000 untrained men. Their armaments were estimated at rifles for these troops with a further 3,000–4,000 among the tribes, and a few machine guns and pieces of artillery (Evans-Pritchard 1945a; Segrè 1974). By contrast, the Italians controlled all the ports and major towns, and mobilised some 20,000 soldiers—mainly colonial troops from Eritrea, who, as Christians, would become notorious for their harsh treatment of the Muslims (Evans-Pritchard 1949). Italian forces were also equipped with all the fearsome technologies of modern warfare, from mechanised columns, to aircraft fitted to deliver poison gas.

Unsurprisingly, in the first few months of the war when the Sanussi-Bedouin engaged the Italians in the standard military manner, they were heavily defeated (Abdullatif Ahmida 1994). It was clear that orthodox military campaigning was futile, and so, from mid-1923, the Sanussi-Bedouin began to resist the Italians on their *own* terms. The result was guerrilla warfare. The entire strategy was predicated upon the greater mobility of the Cyrenaicans, their familiarity with the

landscapes and geographies of their region, and their ability to harass and attack the Italians at a number of different locations, but then to melt away into the supposedly pacified *sottomessi* in the coastal provinces (Rochat 1973). The Sanussi-Bedouin were led in these 'nomadic strategies' by a cleric called Omar al-Mukhtar. A highly capable and respected leader despite his advanced years, Omar al-Mukhtar commanded small, mobile groups called *muhafiziya* (or *dors*), although the Italians labelled them 'rebels' and 'brigands' (Evans-Pritchard 1949). However, the main theme of the resistance from late 1923 to the end of the struggle in 1932 was the ceaseless movement and evasion of the *muhafiziya*, and their constant harrying of the Italian colonial forces.

Both Patton (1988) and Muecke (1984) adapted Deleuze and Guattari's theories of nomadology to argue that nomadic groups have employed movement and mobility—what they call 'nomadic strategies'—in political struggles. I suggest that this very quickly became the case in Cyrenaica. In addition, I argue that it was precisely because the armed resistance was fought over vast spaces, by small, flexible, mobile groups that were familiar with movement around these environments, that the anti-colonial struggle lasted for so many years. Although Evans-Pritchard tended to romanticise the Sanussi-Bedouin resistance, he was well aware of the significance of the adoption of 'nomadic strategies'. He celebrated the success of this new Bedouin strategy:

the Sanussi were fighting in their own country and the Italians had to adapt themselves to the kind of fighting which seldom fails to upset the orthodox military mind. Ordinary tactics are useless against an enemy who wanders at will over country with which he is familiar, among a population all friendly to him, and whose tactics are little more than the three guerrilla imperatives, strike suddenly, strike hard, get out quick.

(Evans-Pritchard 1945a:71–72)

A strategy based upon sustained mobility completely sidestepped the tactics and strategies of the Italians. European warfare was predicated upon the accumulation of territory through the capture of fixed points, and the advancement of a 'front' into enemy lands. The *muhafiziya* subverted these notions by refusing to engage the Italians along a front and defend a recognised territory, but by attacking their enemies wherever they could. The *muhafiziya* groups were small and highly mobile, partially to ease the logistics of supplies, but also so that they could cause maximum nuisance to the Italians in precisely this manner (Evans-Pritchard 1949). Evans-Pritchard continued:

The smallness of the Sanussi units and their mobility confused the slow and unwieldy Italian columns. If they split up they were liable to be surrounded and annihilated; if they kept together they lost the advantages of

surprise and mobility... The Italians found that the blows they struck at the enemy often struck at the air [for the] Bedouin retired to less accessible regions or circulated gaily between the Italian garrisons.

(Evans-Pritchard 1945a:72)

Rather than engage the Italians in the European manner that the Italians anticipated, the Cyrenaicans exploited their traditional mobility and familiarity with the desert landscapes to maximise their resistance. They ensured that there was no easily identifiable enemy force that could be located and engaged. In so doing, the Sanussi-Bedouin operated as if moving across smooth space, without the limitations and constraints of European notions of territorial warfare. At the same time, they undermined Italian notions of 'pacified' territory by operating in areas that the Italians thought they had already 'conquered'. Even in the last year of the war, when the Sanussi-Bedouin numbered fewer than 700 and attacks were only a fraction of earlier periods, there were still 53 recorded 'engagements' and 210 'skirmishes' (Evans-Pritchard 1949).

The unorthodox strategies of the Sanussi-Bedouin clearly perplexed and annoyed the Italian military officers and colonial officials. Written sources express their frustration and indignation. Attilio Teruzzi, the Italian Governor of Cyrenaica from 1927 to 1929, complained bitterly that his forces were not fighting against a 'traditional enemy' which might be defeated in one orthodox military engagement, but one that had no identifiable form or bases. In Teruzzi's words:

the rebels are not tied down to anything, are not bound to any impediment, have nothing to defend or protect, and can show themselves today in one place, tomorrow 50km away, and the following day 100km, to reappear a week later, to vanish for a month.

(Evans-Pritchard 1949:172)

Or, Corrado Zoli, an official at the Cyrenaican colonial ministry and later Governor of Eritrea, wrote of the Bedouin that:

[This was] an elusive enemy who kept the Italian forces in constant movement and alarms by endless surprises, incursions, raids, and ambushes; making use of his great mobility, powers of dispersal, tactical independence, and perfect knowledge of the insidious terrain, to avoid decisive encounters.

(Evans-Pritchard 1949:173)

In response to the nomads' strategies, the Italians were compelled to increase their own mobility. They also revealed a foretaste of the terror tactics that would

later be inflicted upon the civilian population in their uncompromising response to the guerrilla strategies and amorphous nature of their enemies. Given their inability to locate and target the mobile *muhafiziya*, in late 1923, they launched surprise mechanised attacks on the less mobile camps of the Bedouin, indiscriminately killing those found there and also destroying their herds and food stores. When the rainy season waylaid overland transport, the camps were bombed and strafed from aircraft (Evans-Pritchard 1949; Wright 1969). In addition, the Italians also dropped poison gas on some camps (Del Boca 1996). The Italians claimed 800 Bedouin fatalities, 230 captured and 1,000 wounded between March and September 1923 alone. In addition, they killed or confiscated 700 camels and 22,000 sheep, the livestock upon which the whole economy and well-being of the tribes depended (Evans-Pritchard 1949). If these early months of the war had revealed the horrendous casualty rates that the Cyrenaicans would later suffer, they also demonstrated that the Europeans were willing to employ all possible modern technologies against the Bedouin. Similarly, given their failure to engage their elusive enemy, the Italians were prepared to visit warfare upon the more static camps of the Bedouin, and to target the families of the *muhafiziya* and their herds. This proved a first taste of the reprisals that would be prompted by the 'nomadic strategies'.

Questions of mobility continued to dominate the war into 1924. In March of that year, the Italians adapted their strategy again and attempted to counter the mobility of the Sanussi-Bedouin groups by increasing their own flexibility and movement. They established a series of bases for highly mobile, mechanised patrols that criss-crossed the country (Evans-Pritchard 1949). The intention was to harry the Bedouin constantly and to prevent them from settling or regrouping at any time. The patrols also destroyed all the Bedouin herds and crops which they encountered (Abdullatif Ahmida 1994; Rochat 1973). Although this tactic proved relatively successful in the short term, ultimately, it was the Italians who were drained by the constant movement (Segrè 1974). The *muhafiziya* continued to attack smaller patrols, but would spend more time hidden among the *sottomessi* nearer the coast—making Italian reprisals difficult without provoking further resistance from the supposedly pacified groups of the coastal regions (Evans-Pritchard 1949).

The sottomessi

Situated between the Italian bases along the coast and the desert interior with its roaming Sanussi-Bedouin bands, the nominally pacified *sottomessi* played a central role in the war. They also found themselves in a uniquely vulnerable position. The literature is agreed that the majority of the indigenous population of Cyrenaica resented Italian colonialism and supported the resistance (Del Boca 1988; Evans-Pritchard 1949; Santarelli *et al.* 1986). However, as the buffer

between the 'passive' populations of the coastal towns and the militant tribes of the interior, the nomadic and semi-nomadic *sottomessi* of the coastal hinterland were the focus of particular attention from both the Italians and the *muhafiziya* as each side sought, and often compelled, their assistance in the struggle (Santarelli *et al.* 1986).

Italian policies towards the *sottomessi* differed across the region, but all were designed to ensure that these groups would not support the resistance (Evans-Pritchard 1949). In some areas, surveillance and control of the *sottomessi* were strict and unrelenting. They were forced to camp in designated areas near Italian bases, so that they could be observed and inspected at any time. Their movements were restricted and their horses were confiscated to hinder any rapid movements. Punitive measures, including executions, accompanied any evidence of complicity with the resistance (Evans-Pritchard 1949). In other districts, the control was less severe, but the Italians attempted to turn the *sottomessi* against the *muhafiziya* through propaganda and subsidies (Del Boca 1988). In addition, they frequently armed militia groups from among the *sottomessi* to encourage resistance to the 'brigandage' of the Sanussi-Bedouin 'rebels'. This was in response to the support demanded from the *sottomessi* by the *muhafiziya*, who regularly raised 'taxes' and requisitioned supplies from the 'pacified' population. In this way, the Italians hoped to engineer conflicts and subsequent blood feuds among the population, and therefore, to divide and conquer as their Roman ancestors had done (Evans-Pritchard 1949).

However, the Bedouin appear to have resented the Italian presence far more than they nurtured inter-tribal rivalries, and the *sottomessi's* support for the resistance seems to have been sustained throughout the conflict. Men from these communities often replaced *muhafiziya* members who were killed, and the pacified population continually channelled funds and intelligence, as well as supplies of food, horses, guns and ammunition to the fighting groups. Thanks to the *sottomessi*, the Italians themselves were the source of much of the armoury of the *muhafiziya* (Wright 1969). In addition, the Sanussi organised a taxation system by which a tithe was levied upon all Cyrenaicans. This funded the resistance effort and the caravans that were brought into Cyrenaica across the Egyptian border (Santarelli *et al.* 1986). However, although the Sanussi would even provide written receipts, the resistance fighters were not always supplied willingly. There were continual examples of domination *within* the broader Bedouin resistance as the *muhafiziya* routinely extracted taxes or 'religious dues' from the *sottomessi*. The record is vague on this issue, but it seems that the Sanussi-led forces would seize supplies and funds by force if necessary, or exact reprisals upon communities that resisted them (Evans-Pritchard 1949). Again then, any notion that the resistance was an entirely homogeneous movement is fractured on this question, and it was these disputes that the Italians tried to exploit by arming some elements of the *sottomessi*.

Nevertheless, despite these tensions and the unfortunate position of the *sottomessi* as subject to both Italians and *muhafiziya* demands, in general the settled and semi-nomadic *sottomessi* provided crucial support for the resistance. Their camps were places of rest and refuge for active resistance fighters. They also provided some degree of safety and relative anonymity from Italian surveillance—for the *muhafiziya* could pass as peaceful herders among their families in camp (Rochat 1973; Santarelli *et al.* 1986). Certainly, the Italians struggled to tell them apart and to separate ‘rebels’ from supposedly ‘pacified’ Bedouin (Graziani 1932, 1937; Pace 1932). This situation was unfortunate for the *sottomessi* in other ways. One consequence was the increasing targeting of the camps by the Italians. Here, it was women, the aged and the young who suffered these attacks more frequently than elements of the male population who were away with the *muhafiziya*. Here again we find fractures within the resistance movement, this time along lines of gender, age and vulnerability.

Despite these cleavages, in general, the continuing support of the *sottomessi* for the resistance forced the Italians to recognise that *all* of the population were involved in the struggle in some respect. In 1932, Graziani, the man who would eventually defeat the Sanussi resistance, admitted that:

In essence, the Cyrenaican rebellion, was an expression of hostility to our rule that has been developed and consolidated in the peoples’ spirit by the Sanussi...all of the population of Cyrenaica participated in the rebellion—on the one hand, the potential [rebels]: the so-called submissive population, on the other hand, those that are openly in the field: those that are armed. All of Cyrenaica, in a word, was rebellious.

(Graziani 1932:56–57)

It was the recognition of the implicated nature of all Cyrenaican society that prompted the strategies through which Graziani eventually crushed the resistance.

Theorising nomadism: Italian attitudes

The war dragged on throughout the 1920s. Gradually, the Italians managed to pacify much of the coastal hinterland and to push their influence further into the wooded valleys and ravines of the Cyrenaican steppe, and towards the edge of the Sahara proper to the south (Santarelli *et al.* 1986). However, despite continual heavy losses, the *muhafiziya* remained an enduring problem for Italian colonial ambitions. In Italy, the Fascist regime had cemented its social control by 1925, and the regime became increasingly angered by the resistance in Libya. A string of officials were appointed to try to resolve the brutal colonial war in the desert;

throughout this period, a particular Italian rhetoric developed in response to the resistance of the Sanussi-led nomads.

The nature of nomadic society and the category of nomadism itself became problematised as deviant and dangerous, and Italian incomprehension at their lifestyles and non-fixed territoriality led to nomads being portrayed as uncivilised and backward. As Evans-Pritchards writes:

The Italians detested the Bedouin. Long years of campaigning against guerrilla bands, under Omar al-Mukhtar, who refused to submit in spite of heavy losses, had irritated them more than governments are usually irritated by Bedouin and made them increasingly flamboyant and brutal. In the whole Italian literature on Cyrenaica I have not read a sentence of understanding of the Romany way of life and its values. Because they lived in tents without most of the goods of the peasant, and even more the townsman, regard as a sign of civilisation, the Italians spoke of them as barbarians, little better than beasts, and treated them accordingly.

(Evans-Pritchard 1946:12)

The idea that the nomads were rooted in their natural desert landscapes and lived anti-modern lives also took hold among some Fascists. One colonial official, Biagio Pace, hinted at mysterious, deep-seated psychological reasons behind the resistance, and speculated upon the seemingly transcendental control of Omar al-Mukhtar over the population (Pace 1932). Such sentiments also informed the new military commander of Cyrenaica. A fresh, hard-line approach had been signalled in 1928 when Rome appointed Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio to the joint governorship of both Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (Segrè 1974). After a failed attempt to negotiate a settlement with Omar al-Mukhtar, Badoglio resolved that a military solution was his only viable option. To this end he appointed Graziani in March 1930, with the remit to finally defeat the Bedouin by whatever means. As mentioned earlier, Graziani had successfully quelled Tripolitania in the early 1920s by employing mobility and attacks upon Bedouin camps, so using 'Arab tactics against Arabs'. But in addition to his reputation for desert warfare and his experience of anti-tribal campaigning, Graziani would also propose his own theories about the nomads (Graziani 1932, 1937, 1948).

Graziani revealed a conventional European, conservative distaste for the Islamic Bedouin: 'The problems of nomads were not new in the history of colonisation', he wrote, 'all ancient and modern nations have had to exercise their authority and dominion over them' (Graziani 1932:275). He reflected broader Fascist ideologies by rationalising nomadism as a pathological, 'primitive' condition of these people. He described a 'typical' Bedouin:

This is the nomad, anarchist, the lover of the most complete liberty and independence, intolerant of any restraint, a headstrong, ignorant, unconquerable, bluffing and boastful hero, it is enough for him to possess a rifle and a horse; [and] under the pretence of the necessity of moving his tent, he will disguise the desire to withdraw himself from every governmental contact and control.

(Graziani 1932:189)

Furthermore, the Bedouin were

Rebellious against every tie of discipline, used to wandering in immense, desert territories, bold in mobility and ease of movement, and pervaded by a fascination with independence, they are always ready for war and raiding, the nomads have always resisted every governmental restraint.

(Graziani 1932:191)

In conclusion, although Graziani seems to reveal a reluctant fascination with the Bedouin lifestyle and their unfettered movement (as he perceived it) across the desert, he also labelled this group a threat to the 'security and peace' of the colony (Graziani 1932). Their 'natural' anarchism and resistance to any European order or governance meant that the Bedouin simply could not be governed in any recognisable European manner. As such, the Bedouin situation was represented as being virtually intractable: how could Italy hope to settle its emigrant population in the colony while the incorrigibly rebellious Bedouin roamed around the region at will?

Furthermore, Graziani's theories reinforced other writing in Fascist Italy that justified Italian imperialism by reference to the 'primitive', 'ungoverned' peoples who lived in Italian colonies. Such conclusions were published as part of Italy's 'scientific' colonial surveys of Libya in 1937 (Atkinson 1996; Lando 1993). While his colleagues adapted eugenic sciences and the study of cephalic indexes to analyse southern Libyans (Cipriani 1937; Gini 1937), the geographer Emilio Scarin studied the 'population characteristics' of the Fezzan in the Saharan interior. He too found a people unsuited to the structures of modern society and government. He wrote: 'given the particular constitutions of families of the Arab type, it is an impossibility for the Fezzanesi to live independently, because of their indolence, [and] their poverty' (Scarin 1937:609; see also Scarin 1934). The populations abutting southern Cyrenaica were thus dismissed as uncivilised and 'backwards'. These are only some examples of the kind of rhetoric that served to justify the brutal and uncompromising measures that Graziani would enact in Cyrenaica. They also provide some insight into Italian frustrations with the Bedouin conceptions of space and territory that jarred so fundamentally with European conventions of fixed, bounded space. I suggest in

this final section that the mobility employed by the anti-colonial resistance combined with this Italian distrust of nomads to tragic ends.

Confining nomadism

As Graziani had realised, the entire population was involved in the rebellion in some respect or other. He consequently talked disparagingly of the whole of Cyrenaica as

a poisoned organism, but which has a festering bubo at one point on the body. In this case, the bubo is the fighting-band of Omar al-Mukhtar, [but this] results from the infection of the entire body. To heal this sick body, one must destroy the origins of the illness that cause the bubo.

(Graziani 1932:64)

His contempt for the nomads, their apparently anarchic lifestyles and their 'infection' of the entire country was compounded by his irritation at their ability to forestall Italian plans for Cyrenaica. Armed with his instructions to finally defeat the Sanussi-Bedouin at whatever cost, Graziani initiated what the Italians now called a 'War without quarter' (Graziani 1948:63). The Sanussi-Bedouin resistance bands were harried still more: Graziani increased the mobility of his forces yet again, while desert wells were poisoned to restrict the movement of the *muhafiziya* around the interior (Wright 1969). The Sanussi lodges in these regions were also closed, and their *Shaikhs* were exiled to the Italian prison-island of Ustica. However, it was the 'pacified' *sottomessi* who now became the prime focus of Italian efforts to crush the rebellion.

Although reprisals against individuals had been harsh, and the surveillance and control of certain *sottomessi* communities had been stringent, it had proved impossible for the Italians to stem the flow of recruits, supplies and funds to the *muhafiziya*. In consultation with his officials and superiors in Rome, Graziani determined that if *all* the population was implicated in the rebellion, then the entire nomadic and semi-nomadic tribal population of Cyrenaica had to be brought under total Italian control before the *reconquista* could be completed (Graziani, 1937; Santarelli *et al.* 1986). To this end, he authorised fierce new measures against the *sottomessi*. To halt the supply of arms to the *muhafiziya*, the tribes were disarmed and a military court was flown around the country, dispensing summary 'justice' to any inhabitants found in possession of arms, or suspected of assisting the rebels (Rochat 1973). However, the most lethal measure was the creation of a series of concentration camps that would eventually contain over 100,000 people and 600,000 livestock (Bosworth 1996; Del Boca 1988).



Figure 4.1 The concentration camp at el-Abiar

Source: Graziani 1937:272–273

The first camps were established in January 1930, and more were constructed in the following months. Throughout this period, the population of Cyrenaica was systematically rounded up and marched into confinement (Rochat 1973; Salerno 1979). Even the *sottomessi* communities who had provided the least overt resistance to the Italians were nevertheless herded into the camps (Evans-Pritchard, 1949). By the summer, the entire nomadic and semi-nomadic population were crowded into barbed-wire encampments. The image of the concentration camp at el-Abiar (Figure 4.1) demonstrates the nature of their confinement; el-Abiar was about 50 kilometres inland from Benghazi. It was one of the smaller camps and conditions there were among the best in the system: it boasted two teachers, a first-aid station and a medical tent (Graziani 1948; Ottolenghi 1997; Santarelli *et al.* 1986). At the lowest estimate, it held 3,100 people, who were forced to pitch their tents in a kilometre-square enclosure, upon an ordered, rectilinear pattern with broad ‘corridors’ that were designed to aid the surveillance of the Bedouin (Santarelli *et al.* 1986). By contrast, Ottolenghi (1997) claims a total of over 1,200 tents, with Bedouin family groups in each totalling some 8,000 inmates. Whatever the figures, the camp and its barbed-wire fences materialised European notions of a bounded territoriality; they finally forced the Bedouin to live within a disciplined, controlled, fixed

space—in contrast to their traditional conceptions of group encampments and unfettered movement across territory.

Just as Bedouin senses of territory and mobility were crushed by the camps, so too the needs of their livestock were disregarded. The Bedouin herds were permitted to graze only within a given distance of the camps or they were confiscated. Inevitably, the stocks were decimated when the allocated grazing land was exhausted (Moore 1940). The herds had constituted the foundation of the Bedouin pastoral economy, which was subsequently ruined. Guerri (1998) considers this to be a deliberate policy, claiming that

this was a true genocide that was perpetrated not only militarily, but also through a systematic extermination of the herds that would decimate their livestock resources, the only source of survival for the pastoral herders.

(Guerri 1998:299)

A further corollary was a change in the traditional Bedouin diet within the camps. From a diet of regular meat and plentiful milk, the Bedouin were forced to survive upon the desultory rations of tinned food that the Italians supplied to the prisoners (Rochat 1973). The Italians boasted of providing the first taste of sanitation and ‘western’ healthcare for the nomads (Pisenti *et al.* 1956), although even the most basic hygiene provision was often lacking and typhus was endemic in the camps (Santarelli *et al.* 1986). The change in diets, the insufficient rations and the cramped conditions in the camps meant that many Bedouin also succumbed to disease, ill-health and malnutrition. The mortality rates were appallingly high and the *lowest* estimates of fatalities in the camps start at 35,000 (Abdullatif Ahmida 1994). Quite aside from the deliberate destruction of the Bedouin livestock, the camps themselves were particularly lethal places. This was no accident. Graziani wrote to Badoglio in August 1930 claiming that

the government is calmly determined to reduce the people to most miserable starvation if they do not fully obey orders. The same severity will be meted out to all those outside who act on their behalf.

(Santarelli *et al.* 1986:78)

It seems clear that the Italians were prepared to persist with this policy for as long as it took for the Sanussi-Bedouin resistance to be contained and crushed.

Graziani’s primary intention had been to cut the supply lines to the rebels; with the incarceration of virtually all of the *sottomessi* population he succeeded. The Sanussi-Bedouin bands had been fighting for over seven hard years, and when the Italians managed to choke still further their support from the ‘pacified’ population, their situation became even worse. Moreover, Graziani also planned to restrict the *muhafiziya*’s final source of support. All remaining supplies were

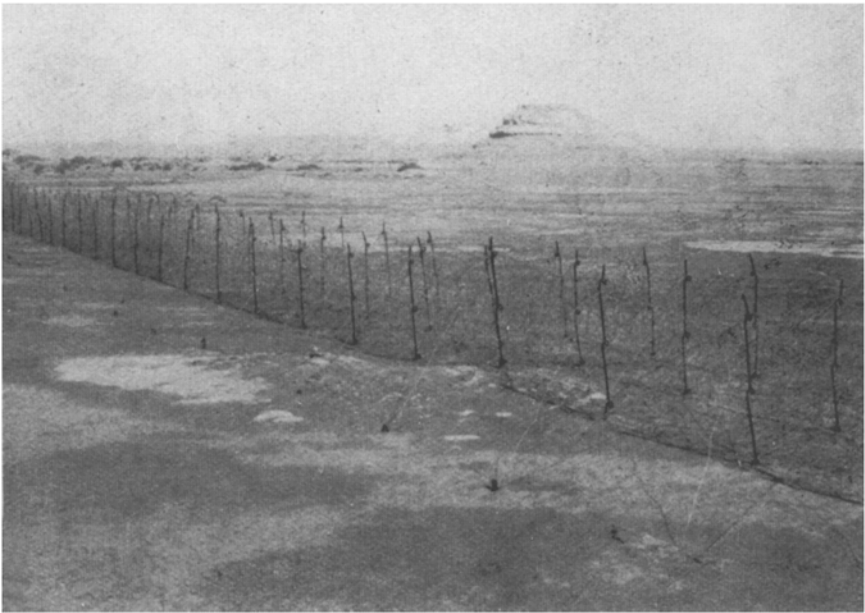


Figure 4.2 The fence along the Libyan—Egyptian frontier

Source: Graziani 1937:320–321

delivered via caravans that brought arms, food and other goods from across the Egyptian frontier, where sympathetic groups, Sanussi lodges and the covert support of the Egyptian authorities combined to provide assistance to the rebels (Santarelli *et al.* 1986). The Italians also solved this problem with barbed wire. Graziani ordered the construction of a 282 km long fence, to run from the Mediterranean coast southwards along the Egyptian frontier (Figure 4.2) (Graziani 1937; Pace 1932). The fence was constructed in six months and finished by September 1931, measuring 30 feet wide and 5 feet high. It was patrolled by mechanised units operating from a series of forts and by aircraft from a series of airfields. A telephone system ensured the coherence of the surveillance along the length of the fence (Wright 1969; Zoli 1949). Although incongruous in the midst of the Saharan landscape—particularly given the use of modern military and communications technologies—here again, Italian conceptions of fixed, impassable boundaries were eventually materialised, in this instance, by territorialising the desert interior along Italian lines.

Although some supplies still reached the diminishing *muhafiziya*, assistance from Egyptian sources were now also largely denied to the Sanussi-Bedouin. Commentators are agreed that these measures signalled the end of the rebellion. When Omar al-Mukhtar was captured, tried and executed in September 1931 in the

concentration camp at Soluch, before an audience of 20,000 Bedouin who had been forced to attend, the campaign was virtually over. Without their charismatic leader, most remaining rebels were caught or fled to Egypt. Badoglio declared the rebellion vanquished on 24 January 1932 (Santarelli *et al.* 1986).

After the war

Throughout the 1930s, the Italian regime would invest remarkable sums of capital into the creation of Italy's 'Fourth Shore'—a colonial realm to the south of the Mediterranean stocked by settler families who farmed and cultivated the coastal regions (Del Boca 1988; Fowler 1972; Fuller 1992; Ipsen 1996; Segrè 1974, 1987; von Henneberg 1994, 1996). Yet beyond 1932, the Italian literatures mention little of the Sanussi and the Bedouin: decimated and crushed, they were allotted no significant roles in the making of this Fascist utopia. However, their dangerously amorphous sense of territory and their lack of respect for European-style boundaries ensured that after nine years of conflict, the colonial authorities were unwilling to allow the population simply to disperse across the areas of Cyrenaica now earmarked for Fascist settlers. The Italians debated maintaining the camps as permanent settlement sites for the Bedouin, but realised that the conditions would inevitably wipe out the remaining Cyrenaicans (Santarelli *et al.* 1986). Instead, most of the surviving population were released from the concentration camps in 1932, although their oppression continued. They encountered restrictions upon their movements and the spaces that they might occupy. Movements of tents and peoples were observed and recorded. Even everyday tasks and journeys were policed by Italian sentries who permitted movement only with an appropriate travel-permit (Evans-Pritchard 1946). Unregulated mobility still carried the penalty of imprisonment.

In later years, the Italians would portray themselves as unique among the European colonial powers in their sensitivity towards Islam and the cultures of their Libyan subjects (Bono 1989; Evans-Pritchard 1946). However, from 1932 onwards, a whole series of regulations and restrictions constrained the Bedouin spatially, and effectively denied them their traditional lifestyles. They were forced into the structures of European bounded spaces and subjected to Italian territorialities. Once established at such great length, Italian control over its colonial domain, and domination over the defeated Bedouin resistance, was sustained through the continual policing and disciplining of space.

Conclusion

In 1924, writing in an early edition of *Foreign Affairs*, an Italian called Carlo Schanzer reassured the American readership that

Under the friendly guidance of the Italian Government the patriarchal simplicity of tribal life in Cyrenaica has been gradually [improved, yet] ... where the benefits of civic organization are refused by recalcitrant natives who want to continue under the tyrannical and arbitrary rule of their petty feudal lords, Italy takes such measures to re-establish order as seems advisable in the given case.

(Schanzer 1924:456)

Tribal life in Cyrenaica may well have been patriarchal, and the various rivalries and oppressive practices of petty feudal lords, or the Sanussi fraternity, undoubtedly complicated the lives of individuals and groups within Bedouin society. However, while these extant instances of domination are significant and argue against a simple narrative of colonising Fascists oppressing an heroic, nomadic resistance, the gradual imposition of Italian colonial domination over Cyrenaica seems to me to have only compounded the entangled matrix of oppression and resistance in the region. In particular, as the 1920s progressed, the 'measures to re-establish order' that the Italian colonial officials found 'advisable' in response to the Sanussi-Bedouin resistance became more and more severe each year. By some estimates, between half and two-thirds of the Cyrenaican population died in the Italo-Sanussi wars between 1911 and 1923 (Evans-Pritchard 1949). The majority of these deaths occurred as a result of the incarceration of the entire nomadic population in the concentration camp system of 1930–1932. Even official Italian figures admit that the population of Cyrenaica declined from 225,000 in 1928 to 142,000 in 1931 (Segrè 1982). By any standards, this is an appallingly high casualty rate, and Del Boca is surely justified in reminding us that: 'In no other Italian colony did the repression assume, as in Cyrenaica, the character and the dimensions of an authentic genocide' (Del Boca 1988:183).

These horrific consequences developed from a conflict over territory that was fought out through questions of mobility across space. Underpinning this struggle were the differences between Italian and Bedouin conceptions of space and territory. European notions held that Cyrenaica and the Sahara were empty spaces and that all nomadic peoples could be classified in the same manner. In fact, there were a series of hierarchies and tensions within the Bedouin resistance, and the Bedouin population had an extant series of territories and striations that they defended against the Italians.

By contrast, the Italians desired their colonial subjects to be fixed, controlled and submissive—and the movements of the Bedouin and the nature of nomadism were constructed as threats to colonial order. The Bedouin, however, eventually resisted the Italians by *accentuating* their mobility as a conscious strategy: they fought the war with no regard for the boundaries that the Italians were trying to define. Although they perplexed and enraged their enemy as a consequence,

they also resisted superior Italian forces for nine years. The conflict was concluded only after the Italians had invested huge amounts of effort, funds and time into defeating a much smaller enemy; ultimately, the colonial authorities had resorted to total institutions to quell and control the Cyrenaican population.

This history of the Cyrenaican war is little known, but it does seem to compromise contemporary inter-war imaginations that romanticised the desert as a liberating space of free movement and liberty, and which celebrated the Bedouin as enjoying simple, pre-modern lifestyles. Likewise, when modern theory reproduces the casual metaphor of the desert nomad as an example of a deterritorialised subject, it too runs the risk of eliding some of the very brutal histories of sedentarisation that have marked North Africa.

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