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Chapter 8

Bāsh-Būzūq and Artillery Men: Sudan, Eritrea and the Transnational Market for Military Work (1885–1918)

Introduction

The criticism that Sudanese historiography has been the victim of a form of “exceptionalism” (Sharkey, Vezzadini and Seri-Hersch 2015: 2–3) that has insulated it from the rest of the region could also easily be applied to Eritrea, a country whose history has been closely framed around the nation-state paradigm (Reid 2001). At a local level, this dual exceptionalism has translated into an inevitable mutual lack of interest between the histories of the two countries. Apart from Italy’s conquest of Kassala in 1894 – and its restitution in 1897 – and the infamous Bevin-Sforza Plan, which in 1949 was one step away from dismembering Eritrea by allocating parts of it to Sudan and Ethiopia, there have been very few occasions in which the two historiographies have entered into a dialogue, and the substantially extraneous way the relationship between Sudan and Eritrea is presented is striking. Even Rex S. O’Fahey’s (2001) attempt to draw attention to the abundant documentation on the history of Eritrea in the Sudanese archives did not enjoy an adequate follow-up. Yet there are many points of contact between the histories of Sudan and Eritrea, and all of them indicate the depth of the links between the two territories.

Against the background of the historical relations between Sudan and Eritrea – a subject that is still waiting to be fully investigated – this chapter starts out from the Sudanese presence in the Italian colonial army, with two main objectives: the first is a result of a need to identify areas that can join the two historiographies together in some kind of dialogue, and the second is to propose an interpretive framework that posits the history of Sudan and Eritrea in a broader dimension. It is not possible to transcend a purely national approach simply by summarising national histories: the trends and processes that require a broader brush so that their overarching implications can be understood must be identified. The history of work-related mobility often allows us to detect this connection between areas. In this chapter, following the example provided by Jan Lucassen and Erik-Jan Zürcher (Lucassen and Zürcher 1998; Zürcher 2013), the actions of soldiers are viewed as a form of labour with a powerful transnational dimension (Collins and Arielli 2013). In North-East Africa, and in particular Sudan and Eritrea, there is no shortage of

stories about the colonial troops from the various states (Scardigli 1996; Volterra 2005; Lamothe 2012; Ofcansky 2013; Vezzadini 2015), just as there is no lack of accounts of individual units or enlistment practices (Salih 2005; Volterra 2012), but the most favoured perspective is generally national, which creates the impression that the establishment of the various bodies was an authentic expression of the territories to which they belonged (Hill and Hogg 1995; Parsons 1999; Volterra 2005; Moyd 2014; Vezzadini 2015). For instance, from this perspective, the *Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali* [hereafter RCTC] of Eritrea was presumably made up of Eritrean soldiers, just as the Somalian RCTC was made up of Somalis. However, the automatic transposition of categories such as a national army to Africa is problematic, and often risks creating ambiguity. As Jan-Bart Gewald reminds us, a more in-depth analysis offers a more nuanced picture, since “the bulk of armies in Africa’s history have never been national armies”, hence the need for an analysis from a transnational studies perspective in order to obtain a better understanding of the characteristics of military work in North-East Africa (Parsons 1999: 3; Gewald 2009: 105). An analysis of the composition of the various colonial armies in the Horn of Africa in the period between the 19th and 20th centuries reveals very diverse trajectories that problematise their presumed national homogeneity in terms of troop composition. An examination of the regulations of the Italian colonial troops is a particular case in point: for the Eritrean RCTC, the 1893 Regulations specified that up to one-third of recruits could be enlisted into its ranks from outside the colony (Italia, Ministero della Guerra 1893; Vitale 1960, 1: 96). The Somali case is even more significant: the Italian observers recognised that the Somalis had undoubted qualities of courage that they considered to be compromised by a lack of discipline and a religious “fanaticism” that long hindered their inclusion among the ranks of the colonial troops. For this reason, the first Regulations of the Somalian RCTC (1906) established that 70% of the recruits should be of Arab origin (that is, Yemenites), 10% Somalis, preferably from the British Somaliland Protectorate and the Majeerteen Sultanate, and the remaining 20% of “other stocks” (Vitale 1960, 1: 96). Similar data emerge from a statistical analysis of the composition of French colonial troops in Djibouti, where “Soudanais”, *Tigréens*, *Oromos* and *Amharas* were reported to be among the ranks (Jolly 2016: 106). During the First World War, recruits from British Somaliland represented 66% to 82% of the force and, as late as 1947, the Commander of the *Côte française des Somalis* troops boasted of having an actual “*Légion étrangère*” (Jolly 2016: 104–105) in his service.



Figure 8: Alessandro Comini, Gunner Company (c. 1912–1913).¹

The armed forces played a central role in the architecture of colonial power. Without its coercive power, administrations had no way of enforcing their authority over a territory (Killingray 1986; Reid 2012; Moyd 2014). Establishing and maintaining troops was therefore a key objective for all colonial powers. As can readily be deduced from an analysis of the various colonial budgets, huge human and material resources were allocated to the achievement of this goal. In Eritrea, the army was the most important economic sector and the most accessible source of employment for at least two generations of Eritreans. Additionally, military work was one of the major engines of social mobility, allowing its members to strengthen their position and social status.

By identifying and illustrating the military labour market in North-East Africa and then highlighting the role the Sudanese played in it, we can also solve another problem, this time one that is extensively debated among Africanist historians (Klein 2011), and, in particular among those specialising in Sudan: the question of military slavery, an old practice with deep roots in the history of Sudan (Prunier

¹ Author's private collection.

1992; Sikainga 2000: 24). For many historians of Sudan, these men's slave past influenced their histories heavily even after they had been freed, preventing them from being truly liberated. At the mercy of various powers, as Ahmad Alawad Sikainga writes, "slave soldiers were inherited by the successive regimes that ruled the Sudan" (Sikainga 2000: 26). Douglas H. Johnson – to whom we owe some of the most interesting studies on military slavery in North-East Africa – recalls how a military slave identity "persisted, even if the state did not, and even the state changed [...]. It is this very persistence of identification with a patron which makes it possible to claim that the institution continued under colonial rule, even when the formal term and legal status of 'slave' did not" (Johnson 1989: 76–77). Sudanese soldiers enjoyed an ambiguous form of freedom (Johnson and Archer 1988: 147). Other scholars, such as Ronald M. Lamothe, have preferred to make distinctions: although Lamothe admitted that the question of defining the status of these persons was quite challenging and complex, in his view a slave soldier's condition was not a permanent one, and tended to disappear as their military role evolved (Lamothe 2012: 45–46). Might analysing military work by focusing on its transnational dimension allow us to better understand the degree of effective autonomy and agency of the men who joined the colonial armies? To clarify this, in addition to using both published and unpublished sources and referring to the existing literature on the military history of North-East Africa, this chapter uses statistical information extrapolated from the staffing tables of the various colonial armies: documents which, given the importance of the data, often offer a close look at the geographical origins of enlisted men.²

The first part of the chapter considers the military landscape in the Horn of Africa in the last quarter of the 19th century. The second section focuses on the Sudanese presence in the Italian army in the aftermath of the Italian landing at Massawa (1885), and then goes on to outline the geography of military work in North-East Africa, following the evidence of Sudanese employed in the various regional armies.

² The documentation on Italian colonial troops is mainly kept at the Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore Esercito (Rome). Owing to the limited number of places available, this archive is not easily accessible. A precious summary of the preserved materials (38,247 digital images) is available thanks to the commendable work of Alessandro Volterra (2014). Most of the primary sources used in this chapter are held by the Archivio Eritrea of the Archivio Storico del Ministero Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (Rome), and the Regional Archive of Addi Qayyeh (Mendefera, Eritrea). English translation by the author.

Adopting a Synchronic View

The unanimous opinion is that the Sudanese were highly esteemed for their martial qualities because they had modern training and good operational experience, and because they were a disciplined body accustomed to the use of firearms, which made them especially highly appreciated and very much sought after as soldiers (Vezzadini 2015: 210–214). The peak of their fame was reached when they were used in Mexico in the 1860s, and later during the Anglo-Egyptian re-conquest of Sudan (Hill and Hogg 1995; see also the chapter by Heather Sharkey in this volume). But in order to understand the excellent reputation and presence of Sudanese in various armies as the end of the 19th century approached, we must consider at least two other equally important factors.

The first was Egypt's gradual loss of power on the international stage, especially in North-East Africa. The battle of Gundet (16 November 16 1875) and later the battle of Gura (7–9 March 1876) marked the end of Egypt's expansionist policy in the Horn of Africa. In the space of few years, under the weight of a series of severe military defeats and spiralling public debt, Egypt lost important parts of its territories and its independence to Great Britain, which became the hegemonic regional power. The cuts imposed by the *Caisse de la dette publique* (1876)³ also affected the army, which saw its budget significantly slashed. The defeat at Tel-el-Kebir (September 1882)⁴ led to the collapse of the Egyptian army, which was officially dissolved by the Khedive Tawfiq, who entrusted its reorganisation to Sir Evelyn Wood, who was *Sirdār* (Commander in Chief) of the new Egyptian Army from December 1882 to 1885 (Dunn 2013: 153). At the start of its reconstruction stage, the army's total strength was about 7,000, and its main function was to maintain internal order and protect its borders (Besant 1934: 162), but in subsequent years this number increased, and settled at around 12–13,000 men between 1889 and 1891⁵ – an extremely small number if one considers that it had numbered nearly 130,000 men in 1832 (Fahmy 1997: 96). Operationally, after the failure of the Gordon Relief Mission (1884–1885, to help Charles Gordon, who had been isolated in Khartoum), the New Egyptian Army adopted an almost exclusively defensive position. With the Mahdist defeat at Tushki [Toski, Tushkah] (3 August 1889) and the subsequent

³ Established on 2 May 1876, the Public Debt Commission was a joint international commission to control the finances and administration of Egypt. It was formed by Austria-Hungary, France, Great Britain and Italy. It was officially abolished on 17 July 1940.

⁴ During the battle (13 September 1882) the Egyptian forces, led by Ahmad 'Urābi Pasha, were decisively defeated by the British Army. The battle enabled Britain to extend its control over Egypt.

⁵ As for 1889, Sikainga indicates a strength of 12,633 men (Sikainga 2000: 26), and for 1891 Martin W. Daly indicates 12-13,000 men (Daly 1997: 32).

failure of the plan to extend the revolt to Egypt, the situation on the southern frontier calmed down, as did Eastern Sudan. By the turn of the century, therefore, what had been one of North-East Africa's most powerful armies had undergone a major downsizing, and many of its men had been demobilised. However, this was only partially true for the Sudanese soldiers, who were considered to be the best fighting force in circulation, and whose recruitment was therefore especially courted. Between 1884 and 1888, five Sudanese battalions were formed (numbered from the IXth to the XIIth), representing some thirty per cent of the Egyptian army (Lamothe 2012: 26–28). Further confirmation that the Sudanese battalions were elite units in the Egyptian army can be found in the conditions they were offered, which were particularly good in terms of food, clothing and weapons, while their wages were higher than those their Egyptian comrades received (Lamothe 2012: 73–78).

The downsizing and massive demobilisation of the Egyptian army took place in a context of high demand for military work by the other powers in the region. The Mahdist state (1885–1898) captured thousands of Egyptian soldiers, most of whom were integrated into the Mahdist forces. These slave soldiers coming from the Egyptian army were concentrated into separate units called *jihādiyya*, which were armed with rifles. To prevent them from leaving the country, Khalifa 'Abdullāhi imposed a general prohibition on "Blacks" from doing so (Lamothe 2012: 28; Sikainga 1996: 32). The emergence of the Mahdist state created an insurmountable obstacle between the regions of South Sudan and neighbouring countries, making it extremely difficult to gain access to what had been one of the main recruiting grounds for the Egyptian army. The second country in the region that began a profound reform of its armed forces was Ethiopia, which beginning in the second half of the 19th century acquired a massive amount of firearms and tried to establish a permanent regular army (Caulk 1978; J. Dunn 1994). With no lack of men, Ethiopia sought to focus on attracting experts, among whom, as we shall see, were some Sudanese.

Starting in the early 1880s, Italians (Eritrea and Somalia), French (Territoire d'Obock and Dependencies, and later the Côte française des Somalis), English (Somaliland and Imperial British East Africa) and Germans (Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft, DOAG, German East Africa Corporation) made their appearance in the region. Forced to operate in often especially inhospitable environments, these European countries all quickly opted to create corps of colonial troops mainly made up of African soldiers. With this surge in the need for military personnel trained in the European discipline and the use of firearms, demand soon exceeded supply, creating the conditions for lively competition among the various armies seeking recruits. This meant that individuals with decent military experience had a good chance not only of finding employment in one of the security forces that were being formed but in some cases even being able to choose which force to enlist in. This meant moving, and crossing borders in search of the best employ-

ment conditions. Mobility and military work are closely related dimensions. The life stories of many soldiers and their service status paint a picture of great mobility and actual diasporic and transnational lives (Gewald 2009: 108). First, as in the case Elena Vezzadini studied, there were movements within a particular territory and the mobility of Egyptian officers in Sudan (Vezzadini 2015: 225–231), but there was also transnational mobility. In the 19th century, the Egyptian army operated outside the country's borders on several occasions, and so it was that Sudanese soldiers formed part of the Egyptian contingent that was sent to Greece in 1823, and two Sudanese regiments were sent to Hijaz in 1835, and later to Syria (Helal 2010: 35–38). In 1853, Governor 'Abbās Pasha made 15,000 men available to the Ottoman army in the Crimean War, including some Sudanese (Dunn 2013: 18). However, the best-known foreign mission of Sudanese troops was undoubtedly the one that took 446 Sudanese soldiers to fight alongside the French in the Mexican war in 1863.

The available biographies of these soldiers all provide a picture of great geographical mobility, as was the case with Farrāj Ṣādiq, who, in addition to Sudan, went to Southern Egypt and Eritrea during his military career, and later, in 1901, travelled to Rome, Milan, Turin, Vienna and Budapest as a servant of a Hungarian doctor (Hope 1951). 'Alī Jifūn, another Sudanese officer whose biography has survived (Percy 1896; Lamothe 2012: 19–21; Sharkey in this volume), was in Sudan, Egypt, Eritrea, Mexico and France, while during his ten-year military career, 'Abdallāh 'Adlān moved between Sudan, Egypt, Eritrea and Ethiopia (Bredin 1961). While in the past foreign service had been determined and mediated by the Egyptian army, however, in this new situation many of these men became entrepreneurs, often deciding to enlist in a particular colonial army on the basis of personal considerations. The level of autonomy was therefore significantly greater, although it was not absolute.

***Bāsh-Būzūq* and Artillery Men**

The dynamics and life trajectories we have just illustrated emerge clearly from an analysis of the initial stages of Italy's domination of Eritrea. The Italian Expeditionary Force, made up of 800 soldiers and 40 officers, left Naples on 17 January 1885 under the command of Colonel Tancredi Saletta "for an unknown destination", and arrived in Massawa on 5 February 1885.⁶ Thus began the decisive push for the conquest of the territories that in 1890 were known as the "*Colonia Eritrea*".

⁶ Another 100 sailors aboard the Castelfidardo, commanded by Trucco, attacked and disarmed the Beilul garrison. As early as October 1884, Sir Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer) had made it known

As soon as they disembarked, the Italians found themselves facing an Egyptian garrison of a regular unit of about 250 men, a *buluch et taadib* – that is, a correctional company, made up of soldiers who had received disciplinary sentences (Grosso 1931: 495) – which in turn was supported by about 1,000 *bāsh-būzūq*.⁷ The garrison offered no resistance. Much more pragmatically, while waiting for Rome and Cairo to resolve the situation, the Egyptian troops continued to garrison the territory in the name of the Khedive, while the Italians did the same in the name of the king of Italy. Starting on 5 February 1885 Massawa began to wake up under two flags, and works on Italian colonial history refer to this period as the Italo-Egyptian condominium.

Arriving in the midst of colonial troops without any experience, the Italians quickly understood how essential it was to proceed with local enlistment so that some of the more onerous routine tasks could be delegated. While waiting to deal with the delicate task of forming their own colonial corps, the quickest and most practical solution seemed to be to recruit some of the men that formally served the Egyptians. On 30 April 1885, therefore, the first 100 *bāsh-būzūq* were recruited under the command of Sangiak (Major) Hassan Aga Osman, an Albanian from Jannina, who had formerly been their commander with the Egyptians (Scardigli 1996: 16). The conditions offered by the Italians – wages, discipline, uniforms, etc. – were the same as the Egyptian had provided (Scardigli 1996: 16). Enlistment was voluntary, and the main incentive was the attractive conditions of service.

On 2 December 1885, “with a small coup d'état” (Mondaini 1927: 44), General Carlo Genè put an end to the singular Italo-Egyptian condominium: the Egyptian troops left Massawa, and all the *bāsh-būzūq* who were still in their service moved to the Italians. At the end of the year, there were 927 *bāsh-būzūq* in the service of

that the British government “would be happy” if Italy settled in Massawa. This position was also reiterated by the British Foreign Minister.

7 The name means “hotheads”. The Dutch traveller Juan Maria Schuver, who travelled in Anatolia before arriving in Sudan and Ethiopia, translated it to mean “his head is irregular”: that is, “his head (his chief or officer) was not regularly appointed by the Sultan, but acquired his position by recruiting soldiers independently on his own terms.” See Schuver 1996: 8. By extension, it also means irregular light infantry.

According to historian Marco Scardigli, “the bash-buzuk were organised into ortù of 500 men commanded by a sangiak or serbayade with one or more helpers (*wachil* or *uachil*). The *ortù* was divided into 5 companies of 100 men under the command of a *jusbasci* or a *bimbasci*. The company in turn was divided into four platoons (*buluk*) of 25 men under the command of a *buluk-basci*: these Turkish terms and the same names of the units would survive under the Italians, demonstrating an affiliation of the colonial troops from our army with the *bash-buzuk* and also proving of how the very idea of colonial troops was born Massawa, starting with the lexicon to be used” (Scardigli 1996: 13).

Italy, divided into two horde, one internal, consisting of 200 men with garrison and public security functions, and the other external, with defence duties. Recruitment of *bāsh-būzūq* continued in the years that followed, and by June 1887 their numbers had risen to about 2,000 (Grosso 1931: 495).⁸ Referring to the origin of these men, General Saletta wrote to the Ministry of War: “the Basci-buzuk come largely from the districts of Sudan and the African side of the Red Sea, although there are also not a few Abyssinians among them. They are generally recruited from the lowest classes of the population, especially porters or idlers” (Scardigli 1996: 15). There was a tangible Sudanese presence among these troops from the beginning. In the two halai (battalions) of the outer horde, the 5th ṭābūr (company) was entirely made up of Sudanese.⁹ A new acceleration in enlistments took place in 1888, when General Baldissera, a staunch supporter of the use of indigenous troops, was appointed as Commander Superior in Africa. Baldissera reorganised the existing departments and transformed the irregular militia into a regular army (Volterra 2012: 60), proceeding with new enlistments. In his report on colonial troops, Baldissera indicated the “races” to be preferred for enlistment: Assaorta and Sudanese were the best, followed by the Abyssinians, Danakils and Hababs (Scardigli 1996: 42). As for the Sudanese, their ancient hostility towards Ethiopians – of which the last episode in chronological order was the battle of al-Gallabat on 9 March 1889, where Yohannes IV, the King of Kings of Ethiopia, had met his death (Seri-Hersch 2009) – and physical prowess were evaluated positively.

In June 1889, a general reorganisation of the army was carried out in Eritrea. The *bāsh-būzūq* Corps was dissolved and the first regular indigenous troops were formed into an integral part of the army using the best elements. As of 1 July 1889, there were 95 officers and 3,265 men (Vitale 1960, 1: 127). An enlistment notice was published every year and deliberately circulated in neighbouring countries, on some occasions seeming to attract aspiring recruits to Eritrea from relatively distant territories, to the extent that there were even reports of the presence of “Niam-Niam” (Zande) among the men of the RCTC.¹⁰

The Italian army also equipped itself with a unit that was intended to be made up exclusively of Sudanese. Established in October 1888, the first artillery battery was ordered, with 6 pieces, 5 officers and 169 men (Stella 2005: 9). From the very beginning, the idea was to recruit only Sudanese personnel for the batteries. Of course, the artillery unit found an inaccessible terrain on the Ethiopian plateau

⁸ On 1 July 1885 there were only 191 *bāsh-būzūq* in the service of the Italians, but by the end of 1885 their numbers had risen to 930.

⁹ It is noteworthy that most of the terms and ranks adopted by the Italians had an Ottoman-Egyptian origin.

¹⁰ G. B. Raimondo 1901: 85–86 quoted in Volterra 2012: 64.

made up of steep valleys and precipices that hindered the movements of troops and supplies. The artillery was only able to make a limited contribution in such an environment, and had to be content with providing mostly support and protection to the troops (Vitale 1960, 1: 27). An Italian colonial officer with substantial field experience and a keen passion for history wrote that artillery was “... the weapon of cautious action and cold immobility in danger” (Vitale 1960, 1: 89). The gunners had to be disciplined, precise, quick and synchronised in their movements, and to demonstrate a cold contempt for danger, but above all they had to have a robust physique, capable of withstanding the fatigue associated with positioning and loading the pieces on mostly rough and steep terrain. These characteristics were very far from what were considered to be the distinctive traits of Eritrean soldiers, who were described by colonial sources as long-limbed, slender and lean, with reduced muscle mass and a nervous temperament (Vitale 1960, 1: 80). When comparing the Sudanese and Eritrean soldiers, Ferdinando Martini, who had visited Eritrea in 1891 as a member of the Inquiry Commission in Eritrea, wrote:

Well, the Abyssinian throws himself into the fray with great ardour: he throws himself into it, so to speak, “with his eyes shut” and his manner of fighting was defined, you know, as “a forward flight”; but as for his endurance, there is not too much to count on. The Sudanese, on the other hand, has less enthusiasm, less impetus, but remains under fire for as long as it lasts, motionless as granite (Martini 1895: 86–87).

Four years later, General Staff Colonel Giovanni Battista Pittaluga made more or less the same remarks in a confidential report on the RCTC of Eritrea, adding a note on their loyalty that sounds decidedly racist today: “... with an imposing appearance, a very correct demeanour; a reflective and subdued expression. My impressions were confirmed and illustrated by the battery officers, who assured me that the Sudanese were very strong in manoeuvres, unaware of their valour, attentive, the way faithful dogs can be at signs from their beloved master”.¹¹ According to the colonial literature, therefore, the Sudanese made ideal artillery soldiers because they were calmer and more robust, and because it was better for the army to entrust the guns to men who had no ties to Ethiopia. The Italians therefore also viewed the Sudanese as a particularly sought-after and appreciated martial race (Streets 2004). For this reason, the 1893 Regulations advised assigning artillery pieces “almost exclusively to young Sudanese ...” (Vitale 1960, 1: 96).

Being a technical, sophisticated expensive weapons system, artillery needed highly-trained men. In addition to loading personnel, pointers, goniometer opera-

¹¹ Giovanni Battista Pittaluga, *Alcune note del viaggio fatto dal Colonnello di Stato Maggiore Cav. Pittaluga nell'Eritrea dal 12 settembre al 16 dicembre 1895*, Museo del Risorgimento di Milano, Biblioteca Archivio del Risorgimento, Archivio di Storia Contemporanea 121, cartella no. 26673, 9.

tors and heliographers were required in order to fire a gun. At a regional level, the Sudanese had been the first to be trained in the use of artillery thanks to the Egyptians, and had gained a reputation as expert gunners. Rumours reached the Italians that these were precisely the reasons that had prompted Negus Yohannes to entrust his artillery pieces to Sudanese. During the battle of Metemma (9–10 March 1889) between the Mahdists and the Ethiopian army, two Sudanese deserted, and informed the Mahdists of Yohannes's death, thus bringing about the final Mahdist victory. These same rumours also had it that among the gunners hired by Menelik there were Sudanese who had previously been in the service of the Italians.¹²



Figure 9: Alessandro Comini, Artillery Fire (c. 1900s).¹³

Vied for between the Egyptians, the Italians and the Ethiopians, Sudanese artillerymen were a rare commodity. In 1893, in the first Eritrean mountain battery, only

¹² Speech by Arturo Galletti Di Cadilhac, Camera dei Deputati, *Atti Parlamentari*, XIXth Legislature, 1st session, 6 December 1895, 2879.

¹³ Author's private collection.

71 of the 116 men who formed it were Sudanese,¹⁴ and there was an even smaller number of them in the second battery (46 out of 115)¹⁵; however, even though in point of fact there was never a prevalence of Sudanese, the mountain artillery nevertheless retained an overwhelmingly Muslim majority.¹⁶

During the long campaign for the Italian conquest and re-conquest of Libya, the Eritrean RCTC batteries were also called upon to make their contribution. With the establishment of the 3rd battery (1913) and the 4th battery (1917), Sudanese artillerymen were employed in Libya (Cona 1929: 185–186), where they took charge of training the first Libyan artillerymen (the first Libyan battery was made up of a section of the 1st indigenous Eritrean battery) (Vitale 1960, 1: 134). The first Sudanese casualties on the Libyan front were also recorded in the same period: Attaib Ibrahim from Gadarif, who served in the 4th Eritrean RCTC battalion, died in Libya on 18 December 1913, and in accordance with the regulations, the authorities gave instructions for his family to be informed, sending them the deceased's belongings and the compensation payable in the event of death while in service.¹⁷

When the Italians landed in Massawa, they did not limit themselves to enlisting the *bāsh-būzūq* they found there. Their attitude was in a certain sense proactive, and having identified the Sudanese as one of the objectives of their recruitment campaigns, they tried to go where this flow of recruits seemed to originate, namely Egypt. The recruitment operation was managed by two Italians who knew Egypt well. The first was Colonel Giacomo Bartolomeo Messedaglia (1846–1893), who had been “mudir del Dar Fur” (governor of the Turco-Egyptian Darfur Province) from May to December 1878 and was now a colonel in the Egyptian army. The second “fixer” was Major Carlo Sanminiatelli Zabarella, military attaché in Cairo. It was Messedaglia and Sanminiatelli who had made a wealth of precious information on the Sudanese units in the Egyptian army available to the Ministry of War (Grosso 1931: 498), and so it was they whom Prime Minister Francesco Crispi asked in September 1888 to enlist at least 500 “brave and robust” men between the ages of 17 and 30.¹⁸

¹⁴ Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale [hereafter ASDMAE], Archivio Eritrea [hereafter AE] 152, “Studi e proposte, 1o Batteria da Montagna, Keren, 8 June 1893”.

¹⁵ ASDMAE, AE 152, “Studi e proposte, 2a Batteria da Montagna”.

¹⁶ As Alessandro Volterra has pointed out, it was only during the Ethiopian campaign of 1935–1936 that Christian soldiers were admitted to the artillery units. Under normal conditions, however, the indication was that preference was still given to Muslim elements. In 1936, General Alessandro Pirzio Biroli recalled in a letter addressed to all the commanders of the indigenous units: “As far as possible, the artillery should be assigned to indigenous people from the Muslim religion” (Volterra 2005: 160).

¹⁷ E. Sailer to the Government of the Colony, Asmara, January 10, 1913, ASDMAE, AE 610.

¹⁸ F. Crispi to the General Diplomatic Agency at Cairo, Rome, 2 September 1888, quoted in Vitale 1960, 1: 177. The conditions of enrolment were detailed as follows: “firm renewable every year,

Crispi was disappointed almost immediately when Messedaglia and Sanmini- atelli telegraphed from Wadi Halfa that they would not be able to obtain more than a hundred men, since the British were strongly opposed to any form of recruitment, and so to unblock the situation it was decided to exert pressure directly on London.¹⁹ From the Italian point of view it was “inamissible [sic] that while all sorts of facilitations were previously granted to us by the British government, today we should come up against unexplainable opposition and mistrust”.²⁰ Italy’s consternation and irritation stemmed from the fact that the British attitude had immediate consequences on the recruitment campaign that the Eritrea RCTC had just launched: it had set a target of 6,500 men, but ended up with only 2,000 (including 200 from Somalia).²¹

Soldiering in East Africa

Italy’s chagrin is understandable in a certain sense. Its expansion in the Red Sea had taken place with British consent. At a diplomatic level, London had provided constant support by managing part of the difficult mediation with Egypt, which had sovereignty and control over the territories that were about to be occupied by the Italians on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. Right before the landing, British aid became very practical, as when during the Italian contingent’s stopover at Sawakin, the British handed a map of Massawa to Saletta, who, in the excitement of his departure, had left his copy behind in Italy. This made it hard for the Italians to interpret the sudden rejection over such a marginal issue as recruiting a few hundred men.

What the Italians perhaps could not have known was that with the appearance of the Mahdist state, Sudanese soldiers had become a rather rare commodity, and even after the re-conquest it was never easy to satisfy the request for *askari* (from the Arabic ‘askarī, which means “soldier” or “military”), so much so that the Sudanese battalions were always under strength (Johnson 2000: 58; Vezzad-

premium for engagement and dressing Lire 50, daily wage Lire 1.60 with progressive increase after 2 and 5 years firm; *buluc basci* Lire 2.70 and *sciumbasci* Lire 5 and Lire 80 and 200 bonuses respectively. Find them, enlist them and send them to Suez for squads”.

¹⁹ Ministry of War to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, 11 September 1888, quoted in Vitale 1960, 1: 178.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Embassy in London, Rome, 16 September 1888, quoted in Vitale 1960, 1: 179.

²¹ A. Baldissera to Minister of War, Massawa, 15 October 1888, quoted in Vitale 1960, 1: 179.

ini 2015: 218–221). Italy's request for 500 men equalled the enlistment quota the British set each year, knowing full well that they were unlikely to reach it (Vezzadini 2015: 218–219).

Furthermore, the Italians were not the only ones to be interested in Sudanese recruits: a few months later, the Germans also asked the British for permission to recruit Sudanese. Germany had begun its expansion into East Africa in 1885, when the Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft (German East Africa Company) leased a territory in what is now Tanzania. In 1888, the Germans had to deal with the first case of organised resistance, the coastal rebellion of 1888–1890 (the so-called Abushiri Uprising or Arab Revolt) (Fabian 2013), during which they lost every town except Bagamoyo and Dar es-Salam. Herman von Wissmann of the German East Africa Company was charged with setting up an expeditionary corps to quell the revolt. Unable to find suitable men locally, Wissmann recruited *askari* from other African countries. The bulk of these men consisted of about 600 "Sudanese" recruited in Cairo, and another 400 men recruited in Mozambique, the so-called Shangaan ["Zulu Warriors"].²² The documentation currently available to us does not enable us to understand the reason that led the British to deny the Italians permission to recruit Sudanese while granting it to the Germans just a few months later.²³ Some reconstructions of this episode have stressed that the "British administrators were only too glad to have them taken off their hands" (Glassman 1995: 250), but considering the obstacles placed in the way of the Italians, this judgment is most likely to be inaccurate. A tentative explanation could be that the British victory over the Mahdists at Tushki on 3 August 1889 may have diminished the British reluctance to allow the recruitment of Sudanese.

The approximately 1,500 soldiers Wissmann managed to recruit between 1889 and 1891 came from at least six countries in North-East Africa, and among these the Sudanese formed the elite. Enlisted mainly in Cairo, the Sudanese troops were well paid and able – at least initially – to rise through the ranks (Kuss 2017: 103), thus finding the opportunity to improve their social and professional status in the German *Schutztruppe*. The wages and conditions of service the German army guaranteed its soldiers of Sudanese origin were a clear acknowledgment of their very considerable and highly sought-after professionalism. Their relatively privileged status was therefore ensured by this form of transnational employment. Relations

²² The Shangaan were soldiers from Southern Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique) who were believed to be of Zulu origin, which was considered to be a warlike society at the time, see Bührer 2018: 74.

²³ A possible explanation could be that the British victory over the Mahdist forces at Tushki on 3 August 1889 may have reduced British reluctance to allow the recruitment of Sudanese.

between the soldiers and the German authorities were governed by a contract and a series of guarantees that were scrupulously respected by both parties. The economic incentives were fundamental, but to understand the close link between these men and the German authorities one must also consider that the possibility of maintaining or improving one's position and social respectability played an equally important role. The concept of loyalty was therefore strongly linked to the ability of the contracting parties to keep faith with their mutual commitments.

At the same time as the Germans were consolidating their presence in East Africa, the British were also expanding their sphere of influence in the region. Recruitment was begun in order to build up the military and security forces of the Imperial British East Africa Company. A substantial Sudanese presence in Northern Uganda immediately caught the attention of the British. In 1878, Emin Pasha [the Prussian-born Eduard Schnitzer] was appointed Governor of Equatoria Province (South Sudan) for the Turco-Egyptian government, but the outbreak of the Mahdist revolution isolated Emin and his men in Equatoria, from where they gradually moved further south into Uganda and the Congo. Henry Morton Stanley arrived in 1888 with the "Emin Pasha Relief Expedition" to bring relief to Emin Pasha, and rescued him by taking him to the east coast, but leaving the bulk of his men behind. Of the few soldiers who followed Emin Pasha and H.M. Stanley, the Egyptians and the Sudanese, still being formally members of the Egyptian army, were repatriated to Egypt.

Since several hundred Sudanese soldiers remained in the West Nile Province of Uganda, Emin Pasha, who in the meantime had passed into the service of the German East Africa Company, returned to Northern Uganda in July 1891 with the intention of enlisting his former men into the service of the Germans. The mission ended in failure, and Emin Pasha was told by Salim Bey, one of their commanders, that because they were still Egyptian soldiers, they were bound by an oath they wished to continue to honour. This episode lends itself to various interpretations, but it is clear that these men had now attained a high level of autonomy, which also entailed the freedom to choose their own future (Johnson 2009: 114). Just a few months later, in September 1891, Salim Bey was approached by Captain Frederick Lugard (Meldon 1908), who, presenting himself as the deputy and successor of the Khedive, was able to obtain permission to recruit 600 Sudanese (Leopold 2006: 186),²⁴ while another 70 Sudanese came directly from Egypt (Parsons 1997: 15).²⁵ In 1894, Major A.B. Thurston brought an additional 350 soldiers of Sudanese origin

²⁴ Salim only agreed to join Lugard's troops after securing the approval of the Egyptian ruler.

²⁵ In East Africa, the term "Sudani", and later "Nubi" refers to the Southern Sudanese soldiers of slave origins who settled in East Africa. Over time, this group absorbed people from other areas, and so the "Sudanese" label only partially reflects the origins of these men.

from Lake Albert (Johnson 2000: 63). In 1894, Britain declared a Protectorate over the Kingdom of Buganda, and all these recruits joined the Uganda Rifles. After the Anglo-Egyptian re-conquest of Sudan, a number of South Sudanese continued to travel to Uganda to enlist in the Uganda Rifles (Johnson 2009: 117), while others found employment in Kenya guarding the Uganda Railway. Consequently, many Sudanese were incorporated into the East African Rifles [EAR], where in 1897 256 out of 1,050 men (24.38%) were Sudanese, and five years later their numbers had increased to almost half (Parsons 1997: 88).

The continuous enlistments led the British to issue a series of measures to contain the phenomenon. As early as November 1890, Francis Grenfell, Sirdar [Commander-in-Chief] of the Egyptian army, wrote in a letter to the War Office that given the difficulties with finding Sudanese to recruit, it would be wise to write to the representatives of the various powers advising them that it would no longer be possible to enlist Sudanese beyond the Khedivial Dominions (Lamothe 2012: 28–29; Bührer 2018). His suggestion was apparently well received, given the apparent difficulties the Germans had with recruiting Sudanese after this date. An episode linked to the tragic end of Captain Emil von Zelewski is especially significant in this regard. During the Hehe revolt in German East Africa in Lula-Rugaro (17 August 1891), a column commanded by Emil von Zelewski was totally annihilated, leaving 320 *askari*, or two-thirds of the *Schutztruppe*, dead on the battlefield (Gewald 2008: 5–8). There was therefore an urgent need to proceed with enlistments to replace the losses, but the operation turned out to be more complex than expected. On the one hand, as we have seen, the British had decided to oppose these enlistments, while on the other, the international context had changed significantly, and relations between Germany and Great Britain had deteriorated in general (Moyd 2014: 37–38). Recruiters were sent from Dar es-Salam to Aden, Cairo, Massawa and Zanzibar. After complicated negotiations, the British surprisingly allowed some enlistments in Egypt, while the Italians allowed the Germans to enlist Sudanese in Massawa. However, the results of these manoeuvres inevitably fell below expectations, and the Germans were forced to carry out part of their recruitment on the coast of German East Africa (Pizzo 2007: 158–159). By the 1910s it had become very difficult to find Sudanese for German East Africa and the King's African Rifles [KAR] (Bührer 2018: 84). The British were forced to find alternative sources of recruitment somehow, and several hundred Ethiopians were recruited in Addis Ababa in 1908 for the KAR, but the experiment produced mixed results and was discontinued (Parsons 1999: 62). The “hunt” for Sudanese recruits created some tensions even within the British territories. When the Foreign Office asked the Sudanese government to be ready to supply men for the East African or Ugandan Rifles in 1901, Governor Reginald Wingate had a very cold reaction (Daly 1986: 160).

From Predator to Prey

The fact that the Eritrean RCTC was constantly looking for recruits did not prevent other powers from trying to enlist in Eritrea. On at least two occasions, the Germans recruited men on Eritrean territory, apparently with Italian approval. The first occasion was in 1894, when the Germans were allowed to recruit Sudanese in Massawa. On arriving in German East Africa, Lieutenant Georg Maercker observed tensions between Sudanese from Egypt and those recruited in Eritrea, whom the former considered to be “Shenzi” [barbarians, uncivilised people] (Moyd 2010: 167), but since there was no feedback from the Italian side, it is not easy to decipher this episode. In late 1906, additional Sudanese troops were recruited from Massawa by Governor von Götzen. In this case, we can hypothesise why the Italians allowed enlistment. After its defeat at Adwa (1896), Italy significantly reduced its forces in Eritrea, and between 1900 and 1902 four battalions, a cavalry squadron and an artillery battery were disbanded (Moyd 2014: 256).²⁶ This reduction involved the demobilisation of a few thousand men, a factor that probably led the Italians to grant permission to the Germans, since the availability of military work made it possible to prevent dangerous pockets of unemployment from forming. Ranging far and wide to be able to enlist as soldiers was still reported to be a recurring practice in 1912. In the same year, writing from distant and isolated Assab, the Regional Commissioner, Dante Odorizzi, informed the Governor General of Eritrea that many inhabitants of Dankalia were emigrating to Ethiopia, Yemen and Somalia, as well as to Kassala and Gadarif, to find employment among the irregular Anglo-Egyptian troops, and even to Dar es-Salam to enlist in the German *Schutztruppe*.²⁷

About six months after this communication, the Italian authorities reported suspicious movements of *askari* of Eritrean origin under the Anglo-Egyptian Sudanese army. Within just over a week, nine had returned to Eritrea to visit relatives, which in the eyes of the authorities was a suspicious number that prompted the Eritrean RCTC Commander to urge maximum surveillance of these men so that “... they do not make propaganda to induce other subjects to join the Sudanese troops”. It was common knowledge, as even the Italians often resorted to this practice, that licensed soldiers often became the best recruiting agents. To prevent this type of

26 In 1906 the number of men in the RCTC was 3,839. See Catellani and Stella 2004, 2: 62.

27 F. Odorizzi to G. Salvago Raggi, 3 November 1912, ASDMAE, ASMAI 115/1/9, “Durata dei distaccamenti di battaglioni indigeni in Libia, 1912–1913”. The term Sudanese underwent a change in meaning during this period depending on the locality. While it is true that in the 1880s “Sudanese” referred only to Black Africans, along the Sudan-Eritrean border region in the early 20th century it began to be used more as a territorial designation than as an ethnic term. Recruits into the Eastern Arab Corps, which was based at Kassala, increasingly came from the local Beja peoples.

manoeuvre, the authorities in Eritrea published an announcement in Arabic and Tigrinya that obliged all those interested in expatriation to apply for authorisation and await clearance before travelling. The announcement was published using a format that, however simple, says a great deal about the climate at that time: it was sent to all the Commissariats, with a recommendation to publish it at different times to prevent the provision from being perceived for what it was – a ban on expatriation without prior authorisation – in order to “avoid cross-border rumours [in Sudan]”²⁸ that might induce the Anglo-Egyptian authorities to adopt a similar measure in retaliation. The following month, the Italians, who were struggling to double their two mountain batteries and were looking for men to assign to the artillery units, reported difficulties since the recruitment of suitable Muslims for this service “comes into competition with Sudan”²⁹

In the border area with Kassala, the problem of “counter-enlistments” was endemic and tended to recur in times of tension and difficulty. In July 1917, Lodovico Pollera, Regional Commissioner of Barka, reported that rumours that his Commissariat was about to be transferred to the British and that the Italians were preparing to leave Eritrea were circulating in Kassala. Furthermore, these rumours always reported that Italy was in the process of forcibly recruiting men to be sent to Europe. Pollera wrote that he had begun an investigation to find out who was circulating them, and recommended expulsion and, in the more serious cases, imprisonment for the guilty parties.³⁰ The investigation failed to shed light on who was responsible, except for the role played by the Eritreans enlisted in the Anglo-Egyptian army, who seemed to have made “. . . hateful and unfavourable comparisons between the administration system adopted in the two countries” during visits to their families.³¹ This is what prompted the proposal to prevent the return to Sudan of Eritreans who had enlisted without authorisation in order to prevent “. . . the constant propaganda in favour of enlisting troops in Sudan, which is practiced mainly by means of soldiers who go on leave, and which is not the least cause of the continuous spread of Sudanese influence, especially in the border tribes”.³²

28 M. Rubiolo to Commissariato of Adi Caieh, Asmara, 3 July 1913, Archivio Commissariato Achele Guzai, Migration I, “Campo concentramento Addi Caieh”.

29 M. Rubiolo to [Ministry of the Colonies], Asmara, 31 August 1913, ASDMAE, AE 610.

30 L. Pollera Orsucci, Commissariato Regionale del Barca, “Relazione del mese di luglio 1917”, ASDMAE, AE 828, fasc. dichiarazioni guerra.

31 L. Pollera Orsucci, Commissariato Regionale del Barca, “Relazione del mese di luglio 1917”, ASDMAE, AE 828, fasc. dichiarazioni guerra.

32 L. Pollera Orsucci, Commissariato Regionale del Barca, “Relazione del mese di luglio 1917”, ASDMAE, AE 828, fasc. dichiarazioni guerra.

These episodes are by no means of secondary significance: they show how potential recruits evaluated the enlistment conditions of the various armies even in comparative terms, and reserved the freedom to choose when possible. At the same time, awareness on the Italian side of how this type of comparison often guided the choices of the recruits is evident, hence the constant attention to the conditions of service offered by the other colonial armies and their attempts to offer competitive terms. Good service conditions resulted in higher enlistments, as Ferdinando Martini noted in 1896, relating how an Ethiopian soldier was paid the equivalent of 20 lire a year, but all it took to earn 600 lire was to cross the border and enter Eritrea (Martini 1895: 116–120; Amanuel 1988: 254; Volterra 2012: 69). This type of dynamic ended up by unifying many aspects of military work at a regional level, eliminating practices that in the new context inevitably seemed obsolete. Accordingly, lifetime enlistment in the Egyptian army was reduced to ten years after 1903 (Vezzadini 2015: 219), a significant improvement, but still a long way from the yearly contract with the possibility of renewal offered by the Italian army. If they could, soldiers tended to go where terms of service were better, as when in 1910, the KAR underwent forced reductions by discharging many *askari*. The British officers intended to take some of these men back by recruiting them into the KAR Reserves, but the wages on offer were not considered to be competitive, and many *askari* crossed the border to join the *Schutztruppe* (Parsons 1999: 17).

Charting a Transnational Recruiting Ground

In the period preceding the First World War there was a marked increase in the demand for military work in the Horn of Africa. At a local level, the revolt of Muḥammad ‘Abdallāh Ḥasan (c. 1856–1921)³³ in Northern Somalia and the subsequent arrival of Lijj Iyasu as the Emperor of Ethiopia caused a rise in regional tensions. From a military standpoint, however, the most important event of this period, which led to massive consequences for the region’s military labour market, was Italy’s decision in 1912 to use Eritrean *askari* in the war to conquer Libya, an involvement that lasted about 20 years. The first result of this decision was the doubling of the Eritrea RCTC: in 1911, this corps had just over 4,000 men and four battalions (Catellani and Stella 2004, 2: 84), but two years later the number had jumped to 9,210 men, spread over 10 battalions.³⁴ This placed enormous pressure

³³ The Sayyid or, for his detractors, “The Mad Mullah”.

³⁴ ASDMAE, AE 849, “Specchio indicante la ripartizione numerica dei militari indigeni alle armi per paesi di provenienza, 15 luglio 1913”.

on a country that was estimated to have about 330,000 inhabitants in 1911 (*L'economia eritrea* 1932: 43), and in commenting on it the RCTC leaders were aware that a situation such as this “. . . is hard to find in other countries of the world”.³⁵ In this phase, there were 1,760 non-Eritrean soldiers in the RCTC (19.1%), and among them there were 101 Sudanese (5.7%), of whom 65 in artillery (64.3%), confirming the continuation of a close relationship with this type of weapon.



Figure 10: Alessandro Comini, Artillery Battery before deployment in Libya (1912–1913).³⁶

Little Eritrea could not give any more; the alternative might be the introduction of compulsory conscription, a measure the Italians preferred not to adopt because they were convinced that it would prove counterproductive.

Meanwhile, the operations in Libya deteriorated until 1914, when the situation precipitated and the Italians were forced into a disastrous retreat to the coast. It was not possible for reinforcements to arrive from Italy because despite its initial

³⁵ Col. A. Dusnasi, *Relazione annuale*. Anno 1920, Asmara, 1 March 1 1920. This is a “highly confidential” report on the state of the RCTC (quoted in Volterra 2005: 43–44).

³⁶ Author’s private collection.

neutrality, the imminence of the First World War meant that no weakening of the national defence system could be permitted. This was such a delicate and complex situation that the risk of losing Libya could not be entirely excluded. In the frantic search for men to send to Libya, the authorities also turned to Eritrean prisons, where foreign prisoners were offered cancellation of their sentences if they accepted enrolment for Libya. According to the Italian authorities, the measure was so enthusiastically welcomed that some detainees “have insistently and enthusiastically begged to be sent to Libya”.³⁷ So it was that Farrāj ‘Ali of Khartoum, who had been sentenced to one year for theft, volunteered to be sent there.

However, the ultimate solution was found by encouraging enlistment from neighbouring Ethiopia, from where numerous recruits had been taken ever since the origins of the RCTC. In 1913, the recruits from “beyond the border” [Ethiopia] were concentrated in three Eritrean-Libyan battalions (which from 1920 were called *Eritrean-Mixed*), which very soon became the most important element of the Italian army in Libya, both tactically and numerically (Maletti 1927). In December 1925, there were 8,955 men in the Eritrean-Mixed battalions, a substantial number, just slightly higher than the entire RCTC of Eritrea (7,524 men).³⁸ “Ethiopians” is a term that only provides a partial photograph of the composition of these troops. Some documents will help us better understand this. The colonial bureaucracy was well aware of the importance of the origin of recruits, and it was usually recorded because it made it possible to have a better grasp of recruitment trends. Some of these lists have survived, and they provide an interesting, though not exhaustive, picture. In April 1915, two groups of non-Eritrean recruits from Ethiopia were sent to Libya. When they communicated their departure, the authorities also indicated their presumed nationalities. The first group was made up of 52 recruits, including 12 Ethiopians (23.07%), 16 Yemenis (30.7%), 2 Sudanese (3.8%) and 22 Somalis from Somaliland (42.30%)³⁹; a second group of 312 recruits included 133 Ethiopians (42.6%), 31 Sudanese (9.9%), 106 Arabs (most probably Yemenis, 33.9%) and 42 Somalis (13.4%).⁴⁰ Also of interest are the numbers relating to the XIIIth Eritrean-Libyan battalion for 1919: of its 843 men, the majority were Ethiopians

³⁷ V. Fioccardi to Governo della Colonia, Keren, 3 April 1915, ASDMAE, AE 694.

³⁸ “Riepilogo della forza presente nelle varie Colonie alla data 1° dicembre 1924”, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero Africa Italiana, Roma, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Archivio Segreto, 1, “1.2.1. Riepilogo della forza presente”.

³⁹ L. Talamonti to G. Salvago Raggi, Asmara, 29 March 1915, ASDMAE, ASMAI 115/2, “Reclutamento ascari in Eritrea e Somalia (febbraio-aprile)”.

⁴⁰ Serra (Cairo) to Ministry of the Colonies, Cairo, 29 April 1915, ASDMAE, ASMAI 115/2, “Reclutamento ascari in Eritrea e Somalia (febbraio-aprile)”.

(84.6%), but there was no lack of Eritreans (7.5%), Yemenis (5.2%) and later on Swahilis (2.4%) (Maletti 1926: 197).

These men usually signed a one- or two-year contract, with the possibility of renewing their term of service. Despite Italian pressure, the soldiers did not always decide to renew their service for Libya. In this case, too, one of the reasons for non-renewal was that given the accumulated experience, their professional profile was significantly heightened, giving them an edge when it came to evaluating alternative offers. In Asmara, the Ethiopian Consul, Wesene Zeamanuel, encouraged Ethiopian veterans of Libya to return home, guaranteeing them quick employment. In 1912, for example, *Aläqa Gäbru Sankaye* was appointed commander of the Addis Ababa urban guard. The men under him were nicknamed *tiribuli* (or *Trinbulee*, *Trubuli*, a distorted form of Tripoli, the Libyan capital) since like him, many of them had served in Libya with the Italian Colonial Army. Other *tiribuli* found work in the Ethiopian armed forces (Dechasa 2017; Schröder 2010; Getahun 2006).

The Italian recruiters looked for men in Yemen, Benadir and Ethiopia. Against the background of this frantic search for recruits there is a minor but significant episode that provides further elements for gaining an understanding of the geography of military recruitment in this region of Africa. In search of new recruiting territories, the Italians turned their attention to Zanzibar, and subsequently to the Belgian Congo. They had been informed that the island of Zanzibar had provided one of the main contingents to the Congo State. Through the offices of the local Italian Consulate, General Cesare Del Mastro suggested putting out feelers for enlisting recruits in Zanzibar to be allocated to Benadir.

But it was the Congo that the Italians looked at with the greatest interest and hope. Here, too, the creation by King Leopold II of the Belgian *Force Publique* (1885) had taken shape with enlistments from outside the country. Together with Zanzibari, the Congo had hired men from Sierra Leone, Liberia and other locations in the Gulf of Guinea. This is why the Italians first explored the idea of recruiting men from West Africa, in this case also by relying on the consular network. In Congo, the preference was to go to the Bangala, Batetela, Hababua and Zande ethnic groups, which were identified as martial races that formed the backbone of the Congo army. Since the Italians needed “a few thousand” men, it was thought that Belgium would not raise any objections since Italy had given Belgium a hundred officers for the *Force Publique* at the time. And it was to one of these former officers that the Italians suggested entrusting the recruitment campaign, perhaps giving him a bonus of some “coloured” non-commissioned officers. The wages offered ranged between 1.5 and 2 lire a day, well above the “few cents a day” paid by the Belgians. In case the Belgian Congo authorities did not cooperate, it was always possible to organise recruitment “in dribs and drabs”, through envoys who would send the recruits to Kisimu, Mombasa, and from there to Mogadishu. The last suggestion concerned the

officers who would command these men. It was recommended that they should be entrusted to the same officers who had recruited them, who would then do their utmost to “dispel the darkness of the mystery in which the distant countries where they must go are shrouded to serve for a few years and whose name they have never even known.”⁴¹

Conclusion

Using the observation that scholars from Sudan and Eritrea have long carried out their research in “splendid isolation” as its point of departure, this chapter has tried to overcome this evident, and at times incomprehensible, limitation by using one single instance, that of the presence of Sudanese in the Eritrean RCTC between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. During this period, the RCTC had a constant Sudanese presence among its ranks. In the case of artillery, this was codified in the 1893 *Regulations*, which expressly favoured the recruitment of Sudanese. The fact that there were considerable percentages of men from other territories and colonies among the Eritrean troops coincided with a highly active trend in other African colonies as well. In the extreme case of Somalia, the regulations provided that 90% of the troops had to come from outside the colony. Hence, in many African contexts during this historical phase it is difficult to speak of “national armies”, since a closer look reveals far more fluid situations. To grasp the characteristics of military work in this part of North-East Africa, it is advisable to abandon the hitherto predominant approach based on the study of individual national cases. Instead, it is more effective to modify the dominant spatial framework by analysing the military labour market from a regional perspective.

The data that emerge if this approach is adopted reveal how the profound restructuring and reduction of the Egyptian army took place alongside the creation of various regional and colonial armies: the Sudanese Mahdist forces, Menelik’s Ethiopian imperial army and later on the military needs of the Italians, British, Germans and French created the conditions for a strong growth in the demand for military expertise. In this new context, considerable opportunities opened up for men in Sudan who until a few generations earlier had for all intents and purposes been considered to be slaves. An analysis of the transnational market for military work in this part of Africa reveals the existence of a group that was also made up of slave soldiers who were able to progressively change their professional and

⁴¹ Report no. 435, 20 March 1914 by the Commander of the troops Maj. Gen. Del Mastro, ASDMAE, ASMAI 115/2, “Reclutamento ascari in Eritrea e Somalia (febbraio-aprile).”

social status in the course of less than a century, passing from a non-elite group to a professional elite. In many cases, their military know-how transformed the stigma that had been attached to their slave origins. They were former slaves, but equally importantly they were a labour aristocracy (Parsons 1999: 5) who played a fundamental role in the functioning of the colonial machine. They represented a class of skilled workers that the colonial powers long vied for, confirming what Myron Echenberg has claimed about the *tirailleurs sénégalais* – that military work contributed towards removing these men from their slave origins, transforming them into a new middle class (Echenberg 1991), a privileged section of colonial society. These men, and in particular the non-commissioned officers, who were those in possession of the greatest level of professionalisation, were the subject of fierce competition among the various armies, which often drove their bids upwards in order not to lose these precious men. It was a constant, and at times frantic, quest that led to increasingly distant territories being scoured as recruiting grounds, as is clearly evidenced by Italy's attempt to recruit in Congo. This episode also sheds light on the strong mobility linked to military work. It had always a characteristic feature of this profession, but in the period under consideration, the territorial mobility of the African military emerges with even greater clarity.

This mobility was linked both to the use of armies outside national borders, as in the case of the Sudanese contingent in Mexico, and to the movement of individuals to market their enlistment. This latter situation recalls what saw some veterans of the American Civil War become protagonists: the reduction in the size of the post-Civil War Federal Army and the fact that it was impossible for ex-Confederates to find employment with the U.S. Army led hundreds of experienced officers to travel to Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Between 1869 and 1878, 48 American officers found employment in the Egyptian army (Jesman 1958: 303), and alongside this phenomenon, towards the end of the 19th century, some Sudanese began to offer their military expertise to anyone who could offer competitive wages in North-East Africa. At the end of the 19th century, therefore, a situation was created in which Sudanese soldiers with good military experience could exploit a variety of options that significantly strengthened their decision-making autonomy and, ultimately, their freedom, with at least one important distinction, however: while in the past the link had been between these men and the state, individuals now negotiated their professional skills outside the state, in an often direct relationship between them and the army that needed their military expertise. There may have been mediators and people with whom there was a strong bond and attachment (a local commander), but it is clear that it now became increasingly difficult to talk of slave soldiers, or of the existence of a patron or local commander who imposed his will on these professional soldiers.

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