

## WHEN OWNERSHIP HURTS: REMEMBERING THE IN-GROUP WRONGDOINGS AFTER A LONG LASTING COLLECTIVE AMNESIA

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**Abstract:** This study explores the effects of two different kinds of text addressed to young Italian students, which convey past in-group war-crimes either in a detailed or in an evasive way. After completing a first questionnaire (and confirming the social amnesia on these crimes) a sample of Italian university students (number: 103; average age: 21.79) read two versions (factual vs. evasive) of a same historical text on Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935-36). The results show that participants reading a detailed text feel react more emotionally and feel more involved. However, the more negative reactions linked to the detailed text were also associated to a stronger will to repair intergroup relations with the descendents of ancient victims of the in-group crimes. Positive consequences of negative emotions linked to detailed text that challenge a widespread collective amnesia of war crimes are discussed.

**Key words:** collective amnesia; historical narratives; war crimes; colonialism

In order to understand how young people develop ownership of historical memories of their communities, it is interesting to explore how memories of wars that involved their in-group are narrated to them (Leone, Mastrovito 2010).

Seminal studies on the importance of narratives of in-group history to newborn individuals had already been conducted during the first decades of the last century by relevant European scholars, trying to understand the controversial social situation they were living in that would lead, only a few years' later, to the traumatic collapse of totalitarian régimes and World Wars. In his classic book on the revolt of the masses, Ortega y Gasset (1930) pointed out that the "strange condition of human person" is "his essential pre-existence", i.e. the fact that the life of each human person does not begin with his or her birth, but is pre-shaped by the history of the community where that life starts. However, these historical circumstances, although imposing themselves on the newborn individuals living in that period, cannot determine their lives. At the very moment in which he describes our life as historically funded, in fact, Ortega y Gasset argues that the past of the community in which we happen to be born "instead of imposing on us one trajectory, ... imposes several, and consequently forces us to choose" (Ortega y Gasset 1930, 31).

Two aspects stem from this theoretical stance.

The first is the importance of historical continuity, linking together the different generations of the same community. As generations change, this continuity is assured by the historical narratives through which older generations introduce younger ones to the past of their group (László 2003; Hammack, Pilecki 2012).

The second is the change due to the fact that natality (Arendt 1958) brings new individuals onto the social scene, while the old ones gradually disappear.

In our opinion, both these aspects account for the participation of younger generations in the civil life of their communities—participation that could be understood considering both their critical interiorization of historical narratives of the past of their group, and their personal choices on the kind of contribution they decide to offer (or withhold) vis-à-vis the general well-being of their community (Albanesi, Cicognani, Zani 2007).

Among these collective memories of the past of their group, however, there are some that younger generations may find difficult to cope with. The ones that are more threatening to the identity of communities are perhaps those war crimes committed by the in-group. That is perhaps the major reason why these war episodes may be subverted by or even exposed to collective amnesia (Pennebaker, Paez, Rimé 1997), therefore excluding them from the community's shared narratives.

In this paper, we intend to suggest that, although apparently convenient, in the long run collective amnesia of in-group war crimes ends up not only being a threat to social identity, but can also prove to be detrimental to the ownership of the historical memories of their community that young people are supposed to share although being born after the end of that violence have in their community (Leone 2011). Moreover, we propose that collective amnesia of the in-group war crimes prevents younger generations of the perpetrators' group from opting to take restorative action towards the group of former victims, turning amnesia into a serious obstacle on the risky path to intergroup reconciliation (Nadler, Shnabel 2008).

In this paper we explore the possibility that the way in which information about past wrongdoings is transmitted to a new generation may play a pivotal role in breaking down collective amnesia and in fostering intergroup reconciliation.

Within this general theoretical framework, more specifically, this study deals with the current memories that young Italians have of the serious wrong-doings committed by the Italian army during the colonial wars of the last century. We focus our attention on the Ethiopian war. In short, we remember that in 1935-1936 the Italian army invaded Ethiopia. Among other serious war crimes, the Italian army was ordered to use chemical weapons. Roughly 2,500 poison gas bombs were used (breaking the Geneva Convention), and the war resulted in roughly 200,000 Ethiopian civilian casualties.

Many studies have shown that young Italian people today have little awareness of these war crimes committed by their in-group, or are completely ignorant of these facts (Del Boca 2005). Indeed, there seems to be a very widespread historical myth, claiming that Italian soldiers are universally known as very decent people, utterly incapable of using cruelty and extreme violence. To understand better some of the processes that have led to this astonishing amnesia (Pivato 2007), we decided to explore how textbooks currently narrate these war crimes to students in their last year of Italian high school (usually aged 18). A quanti-qualitative analysis of seven textbooks revealed that this topic was barely covered, and was related only to the Fascist era (in spite of the fact that Italian colonial interests

began long before Mussolini's decision to attack). Also the images used to accompany the text were almost all taken from the archives of Fascist propaganda or appeared strikingly childish being imported in a book for 18 years old readers from books of images meant for Italian children of the time, when the colonial war was presented in a light-hearted way. But the most important observation was related to the kind of narratives used to communicate this knowledge to young students. Only a minority of texts, in fact, used detailed, matter-of-fact language, while the majority brushed over facts, presenting them in an evasive manner (Leone, Mastrovito 2010).

Starting from this first study, we decided to explore whether different kinds of historical texts on the war in Ethiopia might have different effects on young participants. Though keeping a generally explorative attitude, our study nevertheless proposed some anticipated theoretical findings, related to recent advances in reconciliation studies. Before presenting these anticipated findings, it is necessary to discuss some theoretical frames.

The first theoretical proposal relevant to our research interests refers to the idea that the needs of the groups of perpetrators and the victims differ, since the perpetrators need to avoid moral exclusion and the victims need to regain a sense of control over their own destiny (Nadler, Shnabel 2008). These different needs may, in our opinion, lead to different narrative strategies.

A second important field of research related to our topic focuses on the descendants of the group of perpetrators. Empirical findings show that these new members, born long after the end of war, often claim to feel guilty about their in-group wrong-doings (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, Manstead 1998). To restore the social image of their in-group, young members claiming to feel guilt for these past wrong-doings usually declare their readiness to help the group of their past victims. Intriguingly, empirical findings assessing the relationship between "guilt by association" and the degree of national identification of the participants are not conclusive.

If we consider these two fields of research (the need-based dual model for victims and perpetrators, and the exploration of "guilt by association" of new members of the group of perpetrators), we may observe that both require, as a pre-assumption, that a clear-cut definition of responsibilities for war cruelties be already made, thus distinguishing between the group of victims and the group of perpetrators. Obviously, that is not always the case.

The Italian war against Ethiopia seemed to us to be a fine example of another kind of intergroup situation, in which neither the victims nor the moral weight of a powerful third party were strong enough to force the group of perpetrators to assume personal responsibility for past wrong-doings. Therefore, amnesia prevented any further elaboration of the in-group's immoral behaviour, which might eventually lead to a shared sense of "guilt by association". In this case, therefore, we expected that the act of narrating the past facts might assume a central role. More specifically, we expected that a factual, detailed narrative might be more effective than an evasive narrative (similar to those that we discovered in the majority of Italian textbooks) in causing emotional uneasiness in our young participants about these past events. We expected, in any case, that their emotional reaction would not be described by our participants as "guilt by association" (a concept that we consider, in agreement with criticisms expressed by Arendt (1964), to be related more to a confusion in moral judgement than to be an expression of a successful re-elaboration of past wrong-doings). Finally,

we presumed that willingness to help the group of former victims may be stronger when participants were exposed to a detailed and factual narrative than when exposed to an evasive one.

Participants and procedure

The participants were 103 young Italians (of whom 75 were female, mean age 21.7).

The procedure followed a repeated measures design. Participants were first asked to fill in a questionnaire measuring personal knowledge and exposure to family narratives on Italian colonialism, attitudes and feelings connected to the Italian colonial past and agreement with a question summarising the myth of Italians as good fellows. This last scale was constructed ad-hoc and included two dimensions; in this paper we will discuss only the items referring explicitly to war situations (*Italian as good fellows in war*).

After filling in the first questionnaire, participants were randomly assigned to receive either a detailed text or an evasive text (Table 1). Both texts described the Ethiopian war and were identical except for the way in which the Italian war crimes were described. After the reading task, the participants filled in a second questionnaire. This included the same question on feelings about Italian colonization, and two questions on their willingness to help the ex-colonies by distributing economic resources to build hospitals and schools.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of participants

		Gender		Age (mean)
		M	F	
Text	Detailed	12	45	20.6
	Evasive	16	30	21.9

These are the detailed (in bold) and the evasive (in italic) versions of the texts used:

- At the end of 1934, an incident on the border between Italian Eritrea and Ethiopia gave Italy occasion to enter Ethiopia.
- In the preceding years, Ethiopia had made important advances, building a road network, a railway, schools and hospitals.
- It had, moreover, started the abolishment of slavery and thanks to this decision had joined the League of Nations.
- Border clashes **gave Mussolini’s Italy the pretext to break international treaties to the detriment of Ethiopia** (*caused a diplomatic incident between Mussolini’s Italy and Ethiopia*).
- Both countries turned to the League of Nations for assistance, but the League stalled.
- **Exploiting** (*In*) this situation of uncertainty, in October of 1935 **Italy attacked Ethiopia** (*Italy entered into war with Ethiopia*), which had no heavy guns, let alone an air-force.
- The League of Nations **rightly** (*---*) placed sanctions on Italy for having entered into war with Ethiopia, **breaking article XVI of the League of Nations itself** (*---*).

- England and France had no intention of fighting for Ethiopia, although public opinion was indignant at the Italian aggression.
- Not even the Church opposed the action, in spite of initial disapproval.
- Italy used heavy bombing, from 1936 also **poison gas bombs, formally banned by international treaties (*non-conventional weapons*)**; **it dirtied its hands furthermore committing serious violence against the civilian population, breaking the Geneva Convention** (*the force of the fighting resulted in many victims, also among the civilian population*).
- The Ethiopians fought for eight long months, but their army could not cope with an expedition force containing many men and making use of tanks and planes.
- On May 5th 1936, Italian troops entered Addis Abba.
- On May 9th, on a warm Italian evening, from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia Benito Mussolini announced to the elated crowds “the reappearance of the Empire on the fateful hills of Rome” and offered the King the crown of Emperor of Ethiopia.
- Guerrilla warfare in Ethiopia continued for a while, but **was suppressed by the Italian army with summary executions, the use of gas, and bloody terrorist actions** (*the Italian army succeeded in restoring order*).

## Results

The data collected in relation to the preliminary questionnaire confirmed our general assumption of a collective amnesia concerning the period of Italian colonialism: the participants had no shared knowledge on this period nor had family narratives been passed down on it.

### *Italian as good fellows in war*

The measure that we called *Italian as good fellows in war* (Table 2) shows good reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha > .77$ ). The right-skewed distribution shows that participants overall tend to disagree with almost all the items, and thus do not endorse the idea that Italians, even at war, are good fellows. However, a closer examination of the items reveals some interesting details.

The item that evokes “Faccetta Nera”, a fascist song that is still well known, is one that provokes a sharper positioning. Strong disagreement is also expressed toward items that are in some way broadly related to political violence during fascism and to the wars. Our participants are also well aware that Italian colonization was not very “humane”.

Nevertheless, together with a defensive stance on racism, our participants tend to express minimal disagreement when asked about the useful work conducted by Italians in their colonies, and about the absence of cruelty on the part of the Italian occupiers. That is, although less than expected, our participants partially endorse the nationalist myth that war is not nice, yet Italians are not so cruel and, in the end, they contributed to the development of occupied countries by building schools and hospitals.

Finally, the two items that do not differ from the central point of the scale, which may suffer from issues of wording, indicate that our respondents do not know whether to nor how to compare Italian experiences with other colonial experiences.

**Table 2.** Descriptives on items of the Italian as good fellows in war subscale

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
The behaviour of the Italians towards their colonies was not similar to that of the other colonial empires.	4.15	1.41
The Italians have always been unparalleled in constructing buildings, also for the benefit of foreign populations.	3.77	1.55
The majority of Italians are not racist.	3.69*	1.58
Even during wartime, Italian soldiers undertake work beneficial to the peoples with whom they were in contact.	3.58*	1.25
The Italians didn't dirty their hands committing cruel crimes against the civilian populations of the countries occupied during the Second World War.	3.51*	1.51
Our colonisation had fewer negative consequences than that of the other colonial empires.	3.49*	1.42
Italian soldiers have committed fewer cruel acts than the soldiers of other countries.	3.46*	1.46
I think that historically the Italians behaved in an admirable fashion toward the peoples with whom they had relations.	3.33*	1.51
During the conflicts they took part in, the Italians always played a humanitarian role.	2.91*	1.31
Italian colonialism was colonialism with a human face.	2.55*	1.25
During the conflicts they took part in, the Italians always behaved in a responsible manner.	2.54*	1.33
The Italians have never tortured political prisoners.	2.53*	1.43
"Faccetta nera" is a sign of the benevolence that the Italians have always had towards the Africans.	1.63*	1.03

Note: the scale ranges from 1 (I totally disagree) to 7 (I totally agree); \* indicates a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) from the central score 4 (single sample t-test). Items have been reversed so that a higher level of agreement also indicates a more positive attitude.

### *Emotions*

Two distinct paired sample t-tests were conducted in order to assess if and how the emotions evoked by Italian colonization changed on reading the detailed or the evasive text. Our general hypothesis is supported and the specific variation in emotions we observed points the way to further developments.

All the emotions, except for guilt, varied significantly after the detailed text had been read. While positive emotions (feeling pride and honoured) decreased, a general increase was observed in emotions expressing rage and arousal. This is, in our opinion, a particularly relevant result given the fact that negative and disturbing information about the in-group may lead to a rebound effect: a well known form of defence, albeit a dysfunctional way of handling bad news by ignoring it. Our participants, on the contrary, associate rage and anger with a similar, and even stronger, increase in feelings of surprise and involvement.

**Table 3.** Emotions evoked by Italian colonization before and after reading the detailed text

	Mean pre	SD	Mean post	SD	P<
Furious	2.75	1.64	3.68	2.05	.05
Indifferent	2.78	1.59	2.23	1.25	.05
Angry	2.80	1.54	4.00	1.82	.05
Involved	2.80	1.43	3.53	1.54	.05
Struck	3.17	1.68	4.40	1.95	.05
Surprised	2.05	1.46	3.30	2.11	.05
Proud	1.62	1.13	1.12	0.33	.05
Honoured	1.58	1.17	1.14	0.35	.05
Enraged	2.16	1.46	3.34	1.98	.05
Guilty	2.33	1.75	2.49	1.82	N.S.

**Table 4.** Emotions evoked by Italian colonization before and after reading the evasive text

	Mean pre	SD	Mean post	SD	P<
Furious	3.11	1.79	3.64	1.84	N.S.
Indifferent	2.64	1.43	2.16	1.20	N.S.
Angry	3.38	1.78	3.98	1.95	.05
Involved	3.27	1.68	3.22	1.69	N.S.
Struck	3.91	1.78	4.11	1.76	N.S.
Surprised	2.31	1.65	2.84	1.67	.05
Honoured	1.66	0.94	1.29	0.51	.05
Engaged	2.43	1.55	3.31	2.03	.05
Guilty	2.55	1.77	2.91	1.82	N.S.

The participants who read the evasive narrative showed a similar reaction but less emphatically. They also expressed less pride and more anger and attention after reading the text. Interestingly, participants who read the evasive text did not express variation in feelings of indifference, involvement and they were not struck.

Finally, and again pointing the way to further investigation, feelings of guilt did not vary after reading either of the two stories: our participants did not feel guilty about the colonial past nor about the crimes committed by Italians, even when they were clearly stated in the text.

Thus, a (initial) challenge to social amnesia triggered relevant emotions such as arousal and rage and caused a decrease in pride, but it did not affect guilt.

### *Restorative actions*

In order to assess intentions to carry out restorative actions, we asked participants to distribute resources amongst the “ex colonies” and “other African countries” (the total had to equal 100).

As expected, participants who had read the detailed text expressed their intention to distribute a greater amount of resources to ex-colonies, for improving healthcare ( $t(99) = 1.93$ ) and for education ( $t(99) = 1.79$ ), than those who had read the evasive text.

**Table 5.** Willingness to help ex-colonies expressed by participants reading detailed or evasive texts

	Detailed text		Evasive text		p<
	Mean	D.S.	Mean	D.S.	
Healthcare	54.20	14.52	48.11	17.17	.05
Educational	52.99	15.34	47.33	16.29	.05

Note: scale ranges from 0 (no intention to cover healthcare costs) to 100 (intention to cover all healthcare costs).

Partially confirming the importance of the myth of the Italian as good fellow, those who endorsed this idea expressed a greater intention to donate resources to ex-colonies for building schools (the two variables were correlated,  $r(101) = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but not for building hospitals ( $r(101) = .05$ , n.s.).

## Discussion and conclusive remarks

The results of our study may be considered as two sides of the same coin: on the one hand we started to explore social amnesia regarding the Italian colonial past, on the other hand our results show that a detailed or evasive text designed to challenge this silence may produce different effects.

The answers our participants gave suggest that the young generations slightly disagree, at least explicitly, with the myth of *Italians as good fellows in war*. This self-representation, that was widely shared by previous generations (Leone, Sarrica, submitted), and that is still part of the rhetoric used when discussing Italian participation in international military missions, is partially rejected by the young people we interviewed. It should be noticed, however, that some of the myth is totally rejected while other parts are only partially rejected (e.g. the idea that Italians contributed to the development of occupied countries).

These results point again to the simple yet important role that natality has in societal change (Arendt 1958) and to the active role that the younger generation have in re-constructing shared knowledge and social representations.

However, as we have already stated, continuity is assured by narratives, or by the silence of stories, via which older generations share the history of the in-group with younger ones (László 2003; Hammack, Pilecki, in press). In this regard, our results confirm the presence of a social amnesia, with young people sharing little or no information on this historical period (Pivato 2007).

Our results indicate that it is possible to challenge this amnesia by designing detailed narratives, and that a detailed text may prove useful in reconciliation processes, even though



its impact may be harder. While both texts increased feelings of unease and arousal in our participants, it was mainly the detailed text that elicited more attention and a greater feeling of involvement. Moreover, those who explicitly faced war crimes committed by the in-group were more prone to engage in restorative behaviors. In other words, the explicit recognition of in-group wrong-doings encourages participants to opt to actively contribute to the restoration of the in-group social image more than a mild description of history does, thus empowering intergroup reconciliation processes (Nadler, Shnabel 2008).

Finally, albeit at an exploratory level, our findings suggest that other motives, along with collective guilt (Doosje et al. 1998), may be involved in restorative action. In fact, in our convenience sample, guilt did not vary between the participants who read the evasive text and those those who read the detailed one.

In accordance with the theoretical frames discussed, these processes change when generations change. When aimed at young people born after the end of war violence, clear narratives of in-group blame seem to play a positive role both in the need for historical continuity, that firmly underpins the existence of newborn members in the community, and in the need to motivate them into civil participation.

Of course, our findings are only a first step to having a greater understanding of how negative emotions may play a positive role in intergroup reconciliation, and more specifically, of how prosocial choices may enhance the participation of young generations in the life of their community, when they have to face the knowledge of the crimes that tarnish the past of their community.

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