

Zaccaria, Massimo. *Anch'io per la tua bandiera. Il V battaglione ascari in missione sul fronte libico (1912)*. Ravenna: Giorgio Pozzi Editore, 2012. ISBN: 978-88-96117-26-2. 264 pp.

The history of the Italian colonialism in Africa is still very much debated issue and a huge number of books have already been written in Italian, English or other languages but it still seems that there are many issues left. The book by Massimo Zaccaria from the University of Pavia, Italy which deals with *ascaris*, or the native soldiers from Eritrea fighting in Libya in 1912 is of this kind. Massimo Zaccaria is an experienced scholar, a historian whose interest lies in Italian colonialism primarily in Eritrea.

The monograph shows a story of the first Eritrean battalion that was sent to the Libyan front. Italy was a late-comer to Africa, just like Germany, and from the very beginning Eritrea was the only stable piece of land that the Italians acquired and where they were able to develop their dream of agricultural colonialism. Just like any other colonial power, or even more, Italy lived by colonialism and the colonial nature was to be seen everywhere, in architecture, on postcards, literature, movies, and elsewhere. Not surprisingly, the largest archive of materials is written in Italian and obviously the Italian scholars play the primary role in research related to the Italian colonialism in Africa.

The book is divided into seven chapters in which the author discusses various aspects of the nature of the colonial army. Libya and Eritrea were the primary concerns of the Italian colonialism and thus it makes logic that mainly the Eritrean *ascaris* were used for the colonial army. It was a natural part of all colonial systems to use native soldiers as the basis of colonial armies, just like *Force Publique* in Belgian Congo, or *Tirailleurs Senegalais* in French West Africa.

reviews

Italian colonialism dreamed of ‘a place in the sun’¹ but after the battle of Adowa in 1896 it had to modify its goals. Therefore, to win, keep and maintain the colonies in Eritrea and Libya was long before Mussolini the ultimate goal of the Italian colonial policy. In Massimo Zaccaria’s book we have an opportunity to have an insight into the rise and activities of the 5th battalion of the Italian colonial army in Libya. Its detailed story accompanied by rich picture material show how these soldiers were received in Libya, completely strange environment but composed of mostly Muslim people, just like *ascaris* of the 5th battalion (p. 56).

The 5th battalion brings together Eritrean, Libyan and Italian societies and socio-political contexts, of course, with its primary setting in Italian colonial culture. Contemporary writings and letters of *ascaris*, various diplomatic documents and other sources enable us to understand the colonial mentality of the beginning of the 20th century. All chapters are dense and deeply researched so that a reader gets very detailed information about all aspects of the colonial army composed of native soldiers from Eritrea. The story begins in Eritrea (chapter 1) where the Italians developed their most effective colonial rule as Eritrea was a country suitable for *colonizzazione agricola* as one of the primary principles behind the Italian colonialism. The *ascaris* used for the military forces were Eritreans who were under the umbrella of the Fifth Battalion sent to Libya in order to extend the Italian colonial Empire.

In the seventh chapter (pp. 215–234) the author gets us into racial system within the colonial pattern in which there was a sharp contrast between the colonizer and the colonized. Everything was formed in such a model which proved the superiority of the colonizer and inferiority of the colonized soldiers. This superiority was also seen in technical equipment and taken as a moral value of its kind so that the soldiers had it in mind that their position was to serve to the white leadership.

¹ The term used from the title of the book *A Place in the Sun. Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* edited by Patrizia Palumbo and published by University of California Press in 2003.

The book is a valuable contribution for all those who are interested in colonial past of Africa, European-African interaction, military history in general, or history of Italian colonialism. The author shows his precision in every detail and information including a colorful and vast pictorial material which enable us to see the ‘greatness’ of Italian colonial empire in many ways and senses.

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