



THE OTHER ALBUM

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regained memories from the italo-ethiopian war, 1935-36

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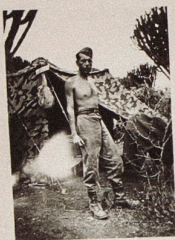
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“I would like to know, said the second lieutenant, Lazarus’ reply to those who asked him what he saw on the other side. Probably Lazarus, his head always in the clouds, replied that he had not bothered.”

—Tempo di Uccidere, Ennio Flaiano





introduction

According to records, it was pouring on the day that Domenico Lucidi, my maternal grandfather, set foot in Naples after over one year in East Africa, where he had been fighting in the second Italo-Ethiopian war as a member of the MVSN, the Voluntary Fascist Militia. It was November, 1936¹. Among his few possessions, that day Domenico was carrying back home with him a collection of photographs, most of which he had taken himself in the course of the months spent overseas.

After his return, the photographs, 281 in all², were neatly arranged and stored in an album with a soft leather and silk cover. On its front, in bas-relief, was a classical victory scene, garlanded by flowers, depicting horses and people in flowing garments, among which a winged figure on a Roman biga stood out. With the exception of the last seven, all the cardboard pages of the album, of a dark anthracite color as it was fashionable in those years³, were densely filled with photographic prints of various sizes, produced during and shortly after the Ethiopian campaign. No name or label was attached to the album.

Not much happened to the album in the following eighty years. After crossing the seas in 1936, the photographs settled down. The original owner passed away, his children had children of their own and grew old. I too was born, sometime in the middle of all that. After its compiling, the album moved houses a couple of times, and after that it transited through a number of shelves. For a time it was keeping company to grandmother's edifying homemaking literature; when she died too, it was allowed to sit together with a pile of expensive art books. That's where I saw it last, nine years ago.

I was reunited with grandfather's album last January, after it traveled a distance of about 1,600 kilometers, via land and air. As I held it in my hands for the first time in years, I could at first only make sure of its weight. It was wrapped in a crumpled plastic bag that was likely around for a while. I remembered that kind of bag, with its orange logo sitting on an expanse of green, one dubious line of text in white underneath. "We know you well," promised the bag, and the unintended irony of that threat made me rather uneasy.

As I unfolded the bag, the musty smell of decay assailed me. It was a gust of foul air, the kind that meets one when entering a sealed room, or a crypt. I was put off. I wrapped the album again and locked it away. It would be another eight months after the reunion before I decided to open it again.



I

As I approach grandfather's "African" album after a break of nine years, I realize now that for a long time I confused its smell with that of home. It was a smell of no season, belonging both to torrential summer rains and to December's blackest afternoons. Diluted in rooms that had other smells of their own, it created a continuity between the many before and after in a familiar chronology made of houses and people left behind, some of which I had known firsthand while others I could only meet when evoked by remaining family members. Grandfather was a specimen of the latter group, as he had died almost a decade before I was born. Even so, traces of him were still attached to our daily life: for instance, his was the name connected to our number in the phone book, his the name on our utility bills. Besides, all around were still scattered objects that he had owned or made. It seemed that, as a family, we would mostly exist within the sphere of influence of his persona, of his belongings, of the simulacra he had left in place. The album of photographs he had taken in Ethiopia was perhaps the most formidable simulacrum he had created: it was a construction fully enveloped within itself that seemed to exist in another time from ours. Only grandfather possessed the key

to reading its contents, and he had never shared it. Thus this strange place populated by mysterious images, seductive and sinister at the same time, was like a private shrine of sorts that one would enter, explore for a short time, and then depart, leaving its enigma alone, as willed by its maker. Hands and eyes visited the pages for years, wearing them out little by little, and yet they didn't manage to break the album's silence, to unravel its riddles.

It's therefore for lack of understanding that the album came to acquire its mystique, an impenetrable opaqueness that would only be matched by the intense smell of decay emanating from it. Grandmother, who was the keeper of the album between her husband's death and her own, seemed to consider the book of photographs a vestige of past greatness, even though she couldn't tell what this greatness entailed. Besides, there were clearly many elements in it she couldn't place, since they didn't have a direct relation with her own life. She would therefore just acknowledge a handful of photographs, always the same, mostly of women and animals, and then move on to chatter about other things. Her attention to images of animals and

women—which included an alleged African “girlfriend” of her husband—expressed a desire to reduce the unexplainable to a kind of reassuring known, to find a kind of domesticity even in the exotic, depriving it of its threatening traits⁴.

The next generation, that of grandfather’s children, also seems to have missed the opportunity to earn a firmer grip on the matter. My mother and her brother always affirmed that they “knew nothing,” that their father “never said much about the war” or about anything connected with it. All they were told were curious anecdotes, about troops eating crocodile tails when suffering from extreme hunger for example, or about horses dying off in the desert. These anecdotes however had the taste of fables and cautionary tales and didn’t allow to seriously question facts depicted in the album. Perhaps in accord with tendencies in post-war Italian society that preferred to ignore or forget controversial items from a certain historical period instead of giving them the means to communicate, a discussion on the album and its meaning was never even attempted from either side.





At a young age, I naturally accepted the state of things without really grasping it; all the same, I often wondered who the intrusive *guest* that continued to exist within the paper boundaries of the “African” album was. Casual inquiries on the matter often proved to glide aimlessly at the surface level, leaving its core untouched, so with time I stopped bothering. Of course, basic information could be pieced together from various sources, and if I were to compile a biographical note about my maternal grandfather now, it would more or less read as follows:

Domenico Lucidi was born in Montereale, in the province of L'Aquila, on April 27, 1907. He was the oldest son of Giovanni and Maria D'Amato (colloquially known as “Regina”); he had one brother and three sisters. Giovanni was working for the local prison, being in fact the only employee there; he died of cancer when Domenico was sixteen. Unable to care for the whole family, Maria sent Domenico to her brother David who was living in L'Aquila, so that he could finish school and find a job. There he studied technical drawing, acquiring his diploma after three years. In the meantime, he worked as *canneggiatore*⁵, a job that didn't pay much but allowed him some independence and eased the financial burden off his family.

In his twenties, Domenico became a member of the PNF, the Fascist National Party; he then joined the Fascist Militia (MVSN), also known as the “black shirts⁶,” volunteering to fight in the second Italo-Ethiopian war (1935-36) on behalf of the regime of Benito Mussolini. After a period of intense military training, he enrolled with the 202nd battalion “Cacciatori del Tevere,” part of the 1st CCNN Division, the “23 Marzo⁷,” whose boisterous motto was “Implacabile” (merciless, unstoppable). In the summer of 1935 he sailed from Naples to Massawa to take part in the war operations.

In the early 1930s Domenico moved to the city of Rieti, which

had become province through a decree in 1927. Rieti wasn't far from his native Montereale and had the advantage of being relatively affordable. In 1937 he won a public contest and was hired by the local land registry⁸. It is in Rieti that Domenico met Assunta Ermini, a young woman from Rome. Assunta was from an extremely affluent family, but her father, Gustavo, had squandered everything before dying of Parkinson disease, leaving his daughter in indigence. Domenico was engaged to another woman, but became infatuated with the destitute *signorina*⁹ from the capital and was finally persuaded to marry her. They were married in 1938 and had two children, Gianfranco and Anna Rita, born respectively in 1940 and 1946.

In 1941 Domenico volunteered again with the black shirts, fighting in World War II in Albania on the Greek front; in 1943 he was drafted to fight in Sardinia, where he remained until the armistice.

After the end of the war, like a number of other public servants, Domenico risked losing his appointment because of his involvement with the Fascist Party. He was eventually allowed to keep his job and continued working, retiring with the maximum number of years of service. He died of cancer on May 12, 1972.

The impression is that these words and the facts they describe are not revealing much of the actual person they refer to. They remain generic. As a result, I struggle to connect the character of such a biography with the person depicted in the photos.

One of the issues about connecting biographic information with lived experience is one of balancing perspectives. In the scope of grandfather's biographical overview for instance, the space allotted to the war in Ethiopia should occupy at most a few lines. Yet it is clear that for him that war was a momentous event, something that would need a special care in being safeguarded as a memory. Mere biography states that Domenico Lucidi took part in other wars beside the one in Africa in 1935-36, yet traces of these events were barely, if at all, preserved. Weren't any mementos from these other wars worth saving, not even for an "avid amateur photographer"? Evidence suggests that, in fact, they weren't: just a dozen pictures remain from Albania; none exists from Sardinia. One could point out that these were different wars, fought in different circumstances, and that indeed the tide had already started turning at the time of the Greco-Italian war in 1941, and that the situation was even less promising for the Italian forces in Sardinia. Besides, it is perhaps even more relevant to note that the spirit with which these wars were fought was not the same.

Much has been written about how the fascist government reached the apex of its popularity in 1936. The historian Renzo De Felice is among those who, examining at length in his biography of Benito Mussolini¹⁰ the ascent of fascism, connected the climax of its success with the handling of the war with Ethiopia. Not only this was intended as the first ever fascist war, but it would also put to the test “the virility of the Italian people.”¹¹

From the very start it was clear that this was not to be mistaken with just another war, but it was supposed to be an epoch-making event, one that would finally restore Italy to its imperial Roman ancestry and contribute to the shaping of a “new man,” envisioned as “serious, intrepid, tenacious”¹². The “new man” was hailed by the regime as the answer to the crisis of the modern European male, which had worsened after the Great War; he was not supposed to be a professional soldier on the army’s payroll, but rather a militant citizen, one in a nation of others just like him. Such a “man” was at the same time same time conqueror of empires and hardworking settler, the paradigm on which the black shirt militia was to be modeled.

But it wasn’t the “new man” who won the colonial war against Ethiopia or, as it was called later, the “seven months war”¹³. What

won it was, rather, lack of courage from international diplomacy, a number of tactical mistakes on the Ethiopian side, and last but not least, Italy’s massive deployment of troops and modern warfare machinery¹⁴. Regardless of its classification, the “seven months war” wasn’t fought as a colonial campaign; it was effectively fought as a national large-scale conflict. It was calculated that Italian forces amounted to around 500,000 units between national and indigenous troops¹⁵; out of these, about 80,000 were volunteers from the militia, like my grandfather¹⁶.

Writing a full account of the war is beyond the scope of these pages. Yes, the campaign officially lasted only seven months, from October 3, 1935, when the Italian troops crossed the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia, to May 5, 1936, the day they entered Addis Ababa¹⁷. But the effort was not only the one undertaken at the front. Before there was a substantial period of preparation. Fascism put enormous emphasis on the conflict that would finally bring forth Italy’s virile spirit and fulfill its imperial dream, hence the regime mobilized the many far-reaching arms of its propaganda machine in an attempt, for the most part fruitful, to construct a phantasmagoria that would appeal to the masses and be able to unite the nation in its belligerent endeavor. Newspapers, magazines, other kinds of

publications, and besides these, radio and cinema, all contributed more or less in unison to the construction of the phantom that would hold the country in its grips over the period of 1935-36.

“For almost two years, from the spring of 1935 to the autumn of 1936, Italians forgot [...] everything, just so they would not break the illusion created by the promise of the Duce that Italy too shall have its empire, its ‘place in the sun’.¹⁸”

It must be noted however that the illusion with which the regime blanketed the nation over these years was not self-contained or intended only to be passively absorbed; people actively contributed to it and were encouraged to do so. State-promoted “informative¹⁹” material and widely distributed entertainment films and publications were used as examples, as templates on which the common citizen could also build. Photography naturally became the ideal medium even for the less sophisticated, not only to tell their stories but to show they were part of something bigger than themselves, that they were one with the aspirations of their time.

In the 1930s the figure of the soldier photographer was nothing new. Already during the Great War a number of soldiers had been taking photos. Many carried along small folding cameras that were

lightweight and easy to use²⁰, documenting their life directly from the trenches. It’s therefore not strange that soldiers taking part in the colonial war of 1935-36 made use of photography as well. It’s even less strange perhaps that, given the circumstances, soldiers like my grandfather—that is to say, those who had volunteered—were the most eager photographers of the campaign: during the war, these soldiers used the medium as an instrument to record their first-person involvement in the virility test that fascism had devised for its people, in the construction of the empire; upon returning home, photography granted them a means to make sense of their experiences, to sublimate them as a personal epos.

Looking at the photographs in the “African” album, at their elaborate arrangement, I wonder, what kind of epos did grandfather actually wish to narrate? How did personal sentiments stack against impressions absorbed from the outside? What kind of illusion does the album preserve?



II

Domenico's illusion opens with ghosts of himself. Upon entering the shrine of his African memories, on the first page one is met with eight small vertical prints, all but one portraits of him. Albeit quite diminutive at 5.5 x 4 cm in size²¹, these are "proper" prints, made on deckle-edged sheets, of the kind that is supposed to remind one of handmade fine art paper. The message of these photographs is clear: make no mistake, this is my story, and it's a remarkable one. From a narrative angle, the intent of this introduction is not unlike that of old-fashioned silent films that opened with establishing shots of their main characters.

The overall effect is almost intimidating. Grandfather shows himself from the beginning as the truthful image of the "new man," his chest bare²², facing the camera with a certain masculine defiance. In two of the photographs he's holding a dead serval. The backdrop is often the wilderness, with its rugged terrain and exotic vegetation. There won't be other pages so obviously devoted to himself elsewhere, so the placement of these portraits is all the more emblematic and it's hard not to discern lacanian echoes in them.

Supporting actors appear in three of the opening photos, one showing a man in civilian clothes on his own in front of a minaret, probably in Asmara. The presence of others and interaction with them is a recurrent theme. Throughout the album numerous photos are about camaraderie, about men bonding together in different ways: and why wouldn't it be so? This is after all the account of a choralepos, of the heroic struggle for the "place in the sun" of a whole nation, even if told from the perspective of a singular protagonist.

It's evident from the way one is ushered in, that the story of the album doesn't progress in a chronological order. As with classic epic poems, it commences *in medias res* (the portraits show grandfather already in Africa, and images of the journey via boat to get there only make their appearance on page 6), tracing its trajectory through associative ideas and motifs, interlacing events rather than stringing them together one after the other. The narrative roams through broad themes—landscape, feminine beauty, death—that are staples in most colonial war albums from the period²³. This way of organizing visual memoirs is not dissimilar from what de Certeau identifies as a tour

narrative²⁴, which reveals a story by moving through its salient points. The comparison with cinema once again comes to mind.

The first page serves also another purpose, that of setting the stage for the clashing with another kind of otherness, that of the “natives”. With the exception of two photographs, the second page is entirely occupied by pictures of Ethiopians—or Abyssinians, as they were called back then. These prints, similar to those in the previous page, are mostly domestic vignettes—a woman searching a grimacing girl’s hair for lice, a young woman selling live chicken, people sitting and standing, unaware or openly posing for the camera—taken around villages and indigenous marketplaces in the areas of Mekelle and Samre, in the north of Ethiopia, where the 202nd battalion was stationed for a good part of the war. What the images show is slowness, idleness, a way of life that is just barely industrious, if not by childlike standards. By comparison, the photographs of the soldiers in the same page seem full of peril and action. In the first a man, cigarette in his mouth, is jokingly holding a snake in his hands, just above his head; in the other, a group photo, soldiers are posing with radio and pieces of artillery, a meaningful sample of the modern warring apparatus they are endowed with. Domenico, crouched in the middle and looking out of the frame, mimics operating a machine gun.

One of the first things one notices after just two pages into the album—which is reinforced also looking at the rest—is the different attitude in front of the camera assumed by Italian soldiers and locals. In an article titled “Art and Morality” published in 1925, a critical D.H. Lawrence commented on “the habit we have formed: of visualising *everything*,” noting that, “man’s idea of himself developed towards the snapshot. [...] each of us has a complete Kodak idea of himself.” That of Lawrence was a general statement about modernity and certainly not specific about soldier photographers—let alone Italian ones photographing in Africa a decade later—but it seems quite accurate to describe this divergence in stance, without any doubt cultural as suggested, of European and African subjects in the pictures. If on the one hand the soldiers obviously act for the camera, use it to bring forth precise qualities, managing sometimes to stay “in character” even in the most candid snapshots, on the other the locals always give the impression of being caught partly off guard, to the point of appearing awkwardly vulnerable. Everything, from respective facial expression to body language, contributes to strengthen this feeling. The photographer and compiler of the album seems to play with this, exacerbating the divergence further by clearly putting side by side images that both echo and resist each other, thus frequently invoking a notion of “us” and “them,” as it happens on page 2. A similar visual artifice

is iterated in other occasions, as for instance on pages 5, 7 and 8. But the same concept doesn't repeat only through superimposition of different images; sometimes it's adopted within the same frame, for example in the last image of page 8, where indigenous people are captured sitting idly in the foreground, while soldiers are bustling at the back around a column of trucks. Far more than the single photograph however, it's the conscious use of montage, akin to that seen in filmmaking, that succeeds in conveying this effect.

To be fair, this isn't all Domenico's doing, or even the doing of other soldier photographers. This kind of illustrative dualism borrowed heavily from other sources, first of all from printed material from those years, as mentioned in the previous chapter. I had the chance to scrutinize what remains today of grandfather's personal library. Among the books that belonged to him figured a series of hardcovers titled "Intorno al Mondo" (Around the World) published in the first half of the 1930s. The volumes have exciting titles as "I segreti del Mar Rosso" (The Secrets of the Red Sea) and "Verso le terre ostili dell'Abissinia" (Towards the Hostile Lands of Abyssinia); two of them, authored by French adventurer Henry de Monfreid, are specifically about Ethiopia. These books, which Domenico may have acquired shortly before his participation in the war, featured suggestive accounts of the lands de Monfreid visited, plus maps

and several illustrated plates. The plates especially may have been an influence for the photographs grandfather took during the campaign, with most of them showing Africans living a primitive life, as opposed to the cultivated European author and his readers.



There was more than de Monfreid's books however that may have been an inspiration, even indirectly. Several publications from that period, including illustrated magazines and collections of postcards, emphasized the barbaric exoticism of the Abyssinian people and the deviousness of their rulers through simple yet deceptive use of photography, providing fascist leaders with "objective" justifications to proceed with their imperialist endeavor



and their acolytes with ways to interpret its unfolding. The diffusion and allure of such imagery was so pervasive, so effective, that in one way or another even a "thrifty spender" like my grandfather who, at least according to his children, didn't waste money on leisure activities such as filmgoing nor usually purchased books and periodicals, was affected²⁵.

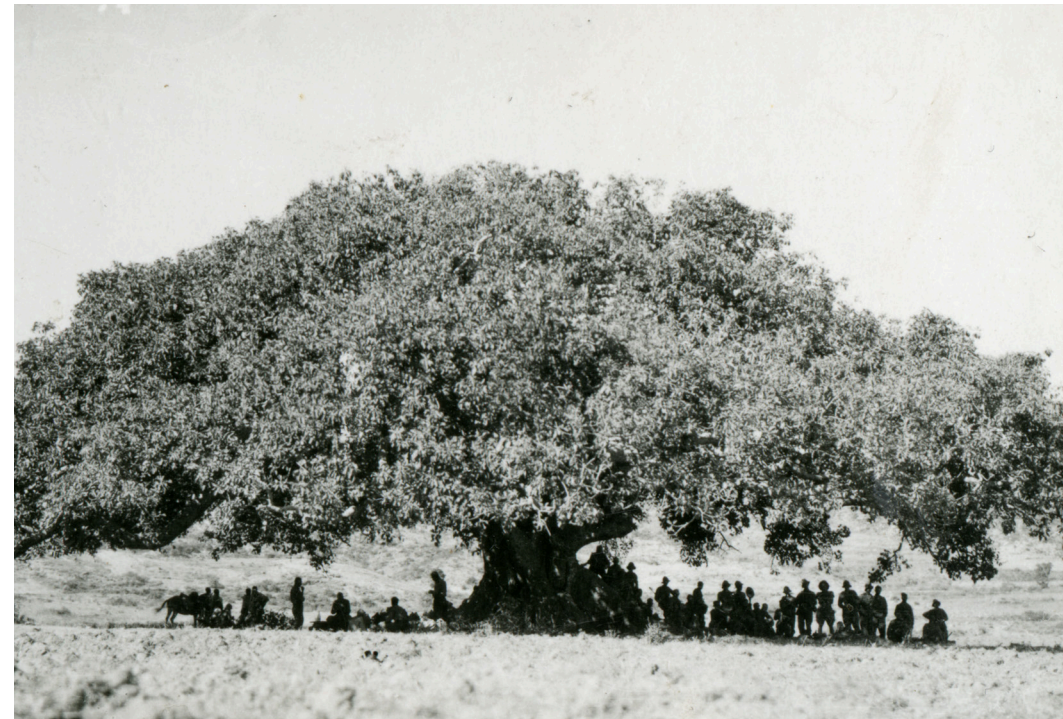
Allure, attraction for the exotic, had a stronger pull than grandfather's children perhaps imagine through being acquainted with their father's habits from later years. It's worth remembering that when Domenico left for the colonial war he was twenty-eight and yet unmarried²⁶; the acquisition of "Intorno al Mondo," which is essentially a series of travel books, suggests that his volunteering was not only motivated by political beliefs or love for the fatherland, but also, at least to a degree, by a thirst for adventure that may have been particularly strong in a young man standing at the threshold of mature age. The portraits of him scattered throughout the album, and besides, the many images he made of and with his *camerati*—hunting wild animals (pp. 14, 22, 33), dipping in brooks (p. 21), dealing with locals, especially women (pp. 8, 21, 22, 28), or simply relaxing outdoors—depict moments taking place in the gaps of the actual war that have the flavor of the account of an adventure.

The African landscape, which occupies a predominant position in the album's narrative with many of its pages devoted to it, can be seen as something more than mere backdrop. A number of photographs portray it as a domain of fierce lyrical beauty, but also show it as unquestionably inhospitable, as oblivious not only of man's needs, but also of his presence. Several shots are views of mountain ranges and ravines, of cliffs, valleys, lakes, but also of newly built roads twisting and turning, sliding into the unknown. Now and then clusters of tukuls, circular indigenous huts, make their appearance, partly disguised and blending with their surroundings. Troops are shown crossing the outlandish African spaces, on foot or aboard trucks and tanks, the pride of fascist technological power, symbol of the will and ability to dominate adversity.

Swarms of soldiers populate frames literally and metaphorically, bearing the weight of writing history in sweat through the resilience of their bodies. Men are shown marching in columns or crouching behind rocks and bushes before battle breaks out; other times they are seen carrying weights on their backs and working under the scorching sun, delineating roads, building fortifications, inscribing human traces where previously there were none. These photographs, which come back again and again, attempt more than others to convey the dimension of the event, its unspeakable

magnitude. It's a katabasis they want to document, a descent into hellish regions for a supposedly greater good.

Beyond the rhetoric of fulfilling a people's destiny in hostile lands however, there is also a more personal take to the images of Africa as seen in the album. For someone like Domenico, who had lived all his life in central Italy with its choked valleys obstructed on



all sides by hills and mountains, the incommensurable breadth of the Ethiopian plains, the steepness of its ridges, the crooked beauty of its alien vegetation, must have felt rather unsettling. If on one hand these images illustrate the magnitude of the colonial endeavor, on the other they also show a sense of wonder that has some authenticity in it, even though to detect it through the rhetoric one must look closely. In the midst of the overpowering African wilderness man is almost invisible at times, and this is something that seems to fit better former romantic aesthetics than that of fascism.

What kind of role does landscape play then—a landscape that is at the same time backdrop, stage on which history is played out, and magnificent, seductive, horrifying entity ready to swallow up whole the photographer and his kin? There's no clear-cut answer to this question in the pictures, and perhaps one shouldn't try to find one. "Everybody saw in Africa what they wanted to see," noted historian Nicola Labanca²⁷ in relation to the territory, and while this is certainly true, it's not necessarily limited to one specific character of the African experience.

There seems to be a similarity between nature and the feminine, also concerning the ambiguous closeness of both with those who joined the colonial campaign. This is reflected in the pictures of indigenous women that grandfather took and put together. The album focuses on portraits of women on pages 27 and 28, even though more can be found scattered elsewhere. Most of these women are barely young girls in their teenage years, although some already show on their bodies signs of the maturity that comes with motherhood. The figure of the woman is often isolated from her surroundings, at times set against an unobtrusive background with which she merges almost seamlessly. Some photographs are definitely less "innocent" than others. A few shots show soldiers harassing girls who are drawing water from a well, gazing at them insistently or trying to hold their hands. Others are simpler portraits where alone or in groups of two, three, sometimes more, women glance at the camera, half-smiling and half-frowning. In many of these portraits, though not in all, they bare their breasts for the photographer, showing necks and chests adorned by metallic little crosses²⁸.

Once again the books by de Monfreid and similar publications, which all contained images of this type, become relevant to understand the reasons soldiers so consistently pursued and



photographed this kind of femininity as an integral part of their adventure. The “Black Venus” was a trope in photography depicting females from the African continent; it disregarded actual ethnographic accuracy in favor of generic exoticized sensuality. Propaganda undoubtedly abused the idea of docile and available “African beauties” for its own purposes, but it could do so because the Italian society was inherently repressive. Comparing the images of indigenous girls with photographs of Italian girlfriends grandfather took back home, one can immediately see how the two typologies of the feminine stack against one another, and how for a European man they represented a promise to opposite ways of life, one safe, disciplined, predictable, the other barbaric, simple, unfettered, at least for the colonizer.

Looking at the pictures, one cannot help being drawn in by these women’s enigmatic presence, by the strange awkwardness in front of the camera that transpires from it. Even for grandfather’s children, these remained for years the most memorable album images, those they remember gazing at for hours on end in their childhood. Interestingly, one photograph is missing from page 27 which supposedly was of grandfather’s Abyssinian girlfriend²⁹. The gaping hole the missing picture left behind is the only conspicuous rip in the otherwise solid texture of the album’s narrative.









The constant presence of mortality is another theme on which the album returns with insistence; unsurprisingly, as death is a defining element of war and of every retelling of it. The depiction of death encompasses the human and the animal, but while there's affinity between animals and Ethiopians, there's a neat separation between them and Europeans. As the character of the smuggler in Ennio Flaiano's "Tempo di Uccidere," the photographer and compiler of the album is "convinced that the dead must bury their dead," that a divide runs deep between peoples, even in death. He states so through the visual treatment attributed to the fallen on both sides of the conflict.

The death of Italian soldiers is always shown through metonymy, with photographs of orderly cemeteries, with upright crosses and carved tombstones. Once buried, the dead become sacred: the grave, even the simplest, is the apex of European civilization, embracing a custom of *pietas* reaching back to classic poems as the Iliad and the Aeneid and passing through the "rightful" Christian tradition. Most of the cemetery photos were shot in the proximity of the fort of Enda Jesus, formerly Fort Galliano, near Mekelle, where remains of the dead from the fights at Gabat-Kalamino (January 19–21, 1936) that saw the involvement of the "23 Marzo" division were laid to rest. The sameness of the graves unify the

fallen, and if on one hand this deprives them of individuality, on the other it transfigures their death as yet another form taken by the album's retelling of its choral epos. Cemeteries and monuments appear on multiple pages (pp. 9, 13, 16, 34); the sense of scale given by memorial markers and rows of graves filling several frames renders the sacrifice imposing, magnifies its message.

There is no magnification, no discourse on heroism clothing the dead on the enemy's side. Referring to Virginia Woolf's comments on war photographs, Susan Sontag wrote about the way photography makes "anonymous victims" out of human beings, about "war's murderousness [that] destroys what identifies people as individuals."³⁰ This reflection may apply to the photographs of the fallen Ethiopian fighters. The mortality of their bodies is considered from a distance; it's observed, but not understood. A sense of uneasy respect transpires for death as phenomenon, for factual decay running its course in the open, in silence. This respect is not a given, however. Domenico never poses with dead enemies as other soldiers who took part in the Ethiopian campaign and doesn't display gratification in taking their pictures³¹; for him the bones of the enemy are not "trophies," unlike the dead animals of his portraits. At the same time, the enemy's fragility is in full view: corpses are sprawled in the wild, sometimes together with

equine carcasses. The dead all look frightfully small, isolated. They are mangled, partly decomposed; there are no markers to identify them. Their sameness however is different from that of the Italians: it's not choral. The photographs of dead Ethiopians are crammed together (p. 31), as if all their bodies were the same body, a vanquished unfamiliar body, shot from different angles. It's the portrayal of a single disfigured enemy wasting away all over the Eastern African plains.





The album's last page feels at odds with what comes before, yet in the context it's an example of skillful storytelling. Its photographs show grandfather looking older; his hairline has receded and his face is no longer that of a youth. His attitude is not boastful, his gestures look controlled. He also got promoted, as grades on his uniform's sleeves attest. It is clear that several years have elapsed, and in fact these are images from Albania in 1941. Still, there's a sense of continuity, at least in intention, between this page and the previous ones. The adventure of a lifetime may be over, but the protagonist is still somehow part of the historical flow. Much has yet to happen at this point: defeat, the fall of fascism, the end of the war, the return to a life not of extraordinary feats but of everyday struggles. The following pages are empty. As narrator, Domenico left any attempt to connect the events of the album with their aftermath open.





“[...] they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them.
That forced hope is religious in all of them. It deserves attention.”

— Le Mythe de Sisyphe, Albert Camus

conclusion

As of late I started noticing that the smell of decay emanating from the album has grown fainter. Perhaps it's just a trick of the imagination, but the past six months which I spent wrapping and unwrapping it, looking at it, leafing through it, taking it apart, making copies out of it, turning it around, measuring it, all of this may as well have caused some disruption in the benjaminian "here and now" of the object³². But I would like to think it's not been only the physical thumbing and fondling that it went through that contributed to opening a breach in the album's hardened reticence. After decades of sitting composedly on shelves with more loquacious companionship, silently soaking its surroundings in its totemic aura, the album had at last a chance to tell its story to someone who wasn't its original creator. It's a different story perhaps from what was intended; yet, ironically the object had to be removed from its "natural" environment in order to acquire a voice.

Grandfather's experience of Ethiopia was tainted by a number of preconceptions and beliefs that were largely the product of cultural bias. Even though it demonstrates remarkable narrative skills, the

African epos he composed matches almost to the letter the one contained in other photographic albums from the same campaign, with their collection of images oscillating between exotic beauty and grisly violence. These themes had already become part of the visual lexicon of soldier photographers-turned-storytellers thanks to the diffusion of photographic material approved and sponsored by the government. More than being a memento of the war, Domenico's album is therefore a portrayal of him as the Lazarus who went to the other side and only actually found there what he already longed to see. It was indeed a katabasis that which he chronicled in his pages, that of a nation lost in absurd mass-delusions scripted and choreographed by fascism.

As a creative object, the album documents an attempt at transcendence, first experienced directly and then preserved in the guise of a story of extraordinary scope. This attempt however feels more than anything as an act of revolt against state-imposed mediocrity and restrictive way of living, a way to voice dissatisfaction for a broken, stagnating society. Fascism itself,

with its emphasis on virile energy and dynamism, was perceived by its followers as the cure to the immobility of a society that had inherited decrepit structures that reeked of privilege. Even so, the one documented in the album is a destructive desire for transcendence or, to borrow Huxley's terms, a form of "downward self-transcendence"³³, which was artfully exploited by a ruthless regime to further its own purposes.

The way the story of the war has been passed on by those who actively participated in it, that in which they retreated into the space of their photographic memories, enshrining and isolating them from their social contexts—families, in the first place—contributed to an acritical absorption of the events into popular subconscious instead of into a proper historical discourse. Facts surrounding the war of 1935-36 are today known thanks to retrieval and analysis of historical documentation, some of which was lost or shelved for decades, not unlike my grandfather's album; lasting effects on both sides involved in the conflict however are yet to be fully assessed.

As far as I know, grandfather never disavowed the beliefs that pushed him to volunteering in the war against Ethiopia and continued all along to see the album as a truthful testimony of his personal contribution to the history of his country. His unwillingness to talk of his experience later in life was therefore not dictated by remorse or a change of heart, but more likely by fear of tainting his memories.



All in all, I feel that in the past six months I have been engaged in an exercise in attention, but this exercise I was only able to undertake once I distanced myself from the object of my inquiry. The album and I met in the zona franca of the research connected to my own artistic practice; there we could finally establish a relationship based not on intimidating myths, but on the need to look closer and understand. There are still many obscure points in the photographs that I may have to come to terms with, things I overlooked, that I failed to take in, or that require more time to comprehend. The discussion has perhaps only just started.

1. For an account of the event as published by the national press of the day, see *La Stampa* dated November 16, 1936.
2. To this count must be added the additional 12 photographs that were taken in 1941 in Albania. Besides, more photographs, mostly copies of those contained in the album, were mailed to family and friends during the campaign.
3. The plain page format in a dark hue gradually became the standard after the dismissal of the old *carte-de-visite* album, which usually featured bright paper stock and ornate frames around photographs. Albums from the 1920s and 1930s were either completely blank inside or had slits to keep the prints in position. The Ethiopian album is an example of the former type without slits. See Langford (2001) and Stokes (1992) for comparisons between the Victorian *carte-de-visite* and later album designs.
4. Compare with the Freudian notion of *heimlich*, familiar vs *unheimlich*, uncanny (Freud, 1919).
5. A *canneggiatore* was an assistant who helped building surveyors with transportation and handling of heavy instruments, as leveling rods and poles, used for taking measurements. It was

a menial job frequently taken up by young boys who had yet to finish their technical studies.

6. The nickname comes from the color of their garments.
7. Several black shirt divisions were named after dates that were meaningful in the chronology of the fascist movement. March 23, 1919 was the day in which Fasci Italiani di Combattimento (Italian Fasces of Combat, predecessor to the PNF) were founded.
8. For the results, see *Gazzetta Ufficiale* dated December 10, 1937.
9. That's how, according to other members of the family, her mother-in-law would call Assunta, not without contempt.
10. The volume on the years with a close connection with the present research is the fourth in a series of eight tomes. See De Felice (1974).
11. In Mussolini (1934, vol. X, p.31).
12. In Mussolini (1934, vol. V, p.197).
13. This is the title of a volume on the war by Luigi Pignatelli, first published by Istituto Editoriale Del Mezzogiorno in 1961 and re-issued by Longanesi in 1965. The denomination has been used since by several historians when referring to the colonial

war of 1935-36.

14. For analysis and documentation on the role that advanced war machinery, such as artillery, automotive vehicles and airplanes—which also includes use of forbidden poisonous gas—played in the outcome of the conflict, see Rochat (2008) and Del Boca (2014).
15. Indigenous troops were mostly made of trained askari (colonial soldiers) from Italy's other colonies (Lybia, Somalia and, especially, Eritrea); mobs of untrained mercenaries from Ethiopia were also employed.
16. Other than being massive in scale, it's been noted that the colonial war of 1935-36 was grossly anachronistic. It was the only war of its kind fought well into the 1930s, at a moment when, rather than on conquering empires, the largest colonial powers were focusing on their dominions' administrative decentralization and on consolidation of their exploitation. See Labanca, N., 2003. *Studies and Research on Fascist Colonialism, 1922-1935*. In Palumbo (ed., 2003, pp. 37-61).
17. It must be recalled that when Mussolini announced the birth of the Empire of East Africa (AOI) from his balcony in Piazza

Venezia in Rome on May 9, 1936, Italy actually controlled roughly one-third of the country.

18. Caccia, P., Mingardo, M., ed., 1998. *Ti saluto e vado in Abissinia*. Quoted in Labanca (2005, p. 56).
19. Quotation marks are necessary. Even when they were not totally misleading, these materials were still propaganda riddled with prejudice and inaccuracies. Known examples are the many newsreels produced by Istituto Luce before and during the campaign.
20. The Kodak Vest Pocket is an example of a popular camera among soldiers during World War I. See the entry from the Smithsonian Museum: http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1168358.
21. Photos in the album vary in size, evidencing that at least two different cameras, of the small foldable type, were used for taking them. Many photographs are contact prints made from 127 film, others are from 120 or 620 film. Paper stock condition also varies greatly, and most prints cannot boast the quality of the opening portraits.
22. Benito Mussolini may have been "galvanized" by this kind of

imagery from colonial troops. Evidence is photographs of him wheat threshing throughout the 1920s–30s. Early on, he’s portrayed working in the fields fully dressed in a formal suit—necktie included. In later images, like those of Sabaudia from 1938, not only he has switched to a more “dynamic” outfit, but he fully displays his barrel shaped chest, adorned by what writer Carlo Emilio Gadda hilariously describes as “du’ pelucchi [...] torno torno i capèzzoli” (a coupla hairs round the nipples). It seems the foremost “man” of the nation wouldn’t accept being outdone.

23. See Bognari (ed., 2012) for published samples of other albums from Italian soldiers in Ethiopia that have a strong resemblance with that belonging to Domenico Lucidi.

24. See De Certeau (1984, ch. 9).

25. For a detailed overview on the visual output of popular media from the war years, see Mignemi (ed., 1984).

26. Historians as Labanca (2005) and Del Boca (2014) underlined how demographics were different for regular army and black shirt militia, with the members of the militia being significantly older on average than their counterparts from the army.

27. In Labanca (2005, p. 231).

28. The cross pendants are the sign of their Christian faith.

29. The term “girlfriend” was used by Domenico’s family as a nebulous term to describe his relationship with the unknown woman. It’s not unlikely that the woman may have actually been a *madama*, an indigenous wife whose services were temporarily bought from her family in exchange for money. For an introduction on the custom of *madamismo* in the former Italian colonies, see Trento (2011) and Ponzanesi (2012).

30. In Sontag (2003).

31. For comparison with “trophy” photographs of dead Ethiopians, see for instance the chapter on military driver Francesco Patanè in Bognari (2012, pp. 125–138).

32. In Benjamin (2008, p. 21).

33. In the epilogue to *The Devils of Loudun*, Aldous Huxley describes transcendence as a profound human need, but indicates some forms of transcendence as aberrant, which makes them easily exploited by authority.

illustrations

- p. 3: manipulated photograph of the Red Sea, original image from album p. 29.
- p. 11: the album's front cover.
- p. 12: the album's insides, cover removed.
- p. 15, p. 49: the first print, originally from p. 6, shows the outward journey to Africa by boat; the second, from p. 29, the return trip to Italy. Even if the prints vary slightly, the photo is identical. It's possible that images from the return trip were missing and the same photo was used twice to fill gaps in the album's story.
- p. 19: sorting out family photographs.
- p. 20: young Domenico working as an assistant chartered building surveyor, early 1930s.
- p. 25: Domenico posing at the construction site of a bridge that legionnaires are building with gabioned rocks.
- p. 29: illustration plate from de Monfreid's "Luce sull'Abissinia" depicting a poor village in Eritrea.
- p. 30: a group of *camerati* posing in front of a tent. The same faces appear in several other photographs, evidencing the bond Domenico established with these men in the course of the campaign. A number of photographs were likely taken by a member of this group and swapped with Domenico's.

- p. 31: soldiers resting in the shade of a large sycamore fig tree.
- p. 33: illustration plate from de Monfreid's "Verso le terre ostili dell'Abissinia" portraying a Somali girl following the trope of the "Black Venus".
- pp. 34-35: unknown Ethiopian girl with customary cross necklace (left); then-girlfriend Assunta languidly posing with fashionable clothes and parasol (right). The photos, both from 1936, illustrate embodiment of types of feminine beauty.
- p. 36: view of the military cemetery located near fort Enda Jesus in Mekelle. Although it changed considerably from the time of the photograph, the cemetery is still standing today.
- p. 37: a curious pairing of images from p. 9 compares visually cemetery tombstones and military tents in a camp, and evokes through them a sinister longing for heroic death.
- p. 39: one of the several photos of the faceless Ethiopian fighters killed in battle. This picture from p. 32 is the only one of dead enemies displayed outside the "mass grave" that is p. 31.
- p. 40: Domenico in Albania, 1941.
- pp. 42-43: troops marching in the vicinity of the Amba Aradam (detail). The photograph was taken around the time of the homonymous battle (10-19 February, 1936).

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