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ITALIAN POSSESSIONS IN AFRICA

I. LIBYA

APART from the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea and recently occupied Albania, Italian possessions lie wholly in Africa; they consist of Libya and Italian East Africa, which comprises Eritrea, Abyssinia, and Italian Somaliland. The total area of Italian African territory is approximately 1,346,000 square miles, with an estimated population of 13,000,000. The following figures show the approximate areas and populations for Libya and Italian East Africa.

Area and Population of Italian Africa

	<i>Area</i>	<i>Population</i>
	Sq. miles	(latest estimates)
<i>Libya</i>	680,000	888,400
Italian provinces	214,000	
Libyan Sahara	466,000	
<i>Italian East Africa</i>	666,000	12,100,000
Eritrea	90,000	1,500,000
Ethiopia	305,000	9,450,000
Italian Somaliland	271,000	1,150,000

LIBYA

Of the total population in Libya, amounting to 888,400 at the end of 1938, 89,098 were Italians, 6,078 other Europeans, and 793,225 natives, of whom 763,179 were Moslems and 30,046 were Jews.

Prior to the conquest of Abyssinia, Libya, taken from Turkey in 1911, was Italy's chief possession in Africa, and in recent years the colonization and development of Libya has made vast strides, in spite of topographic difficulties. In the main Libya is a desert territory, and in the south has ill-defined frontiers; it can be roughly divided into three physical areas, the Mediterranean, the sub-desert, and the desert. The Mediterranean area covers some 17,230 sq. miles, and is to a large extent capable of cultivation; it includes along the coast oases among the most fertile in North Africa, the steppe district, the dunes, and the Jebel Nefusa districts, which in eastern Libya sweep gradually to the coast by fertile hills. Behind these fertile and semi-fertile areas lies the sub-desert producing alfa (esparto grass), and then in the south-east the vast

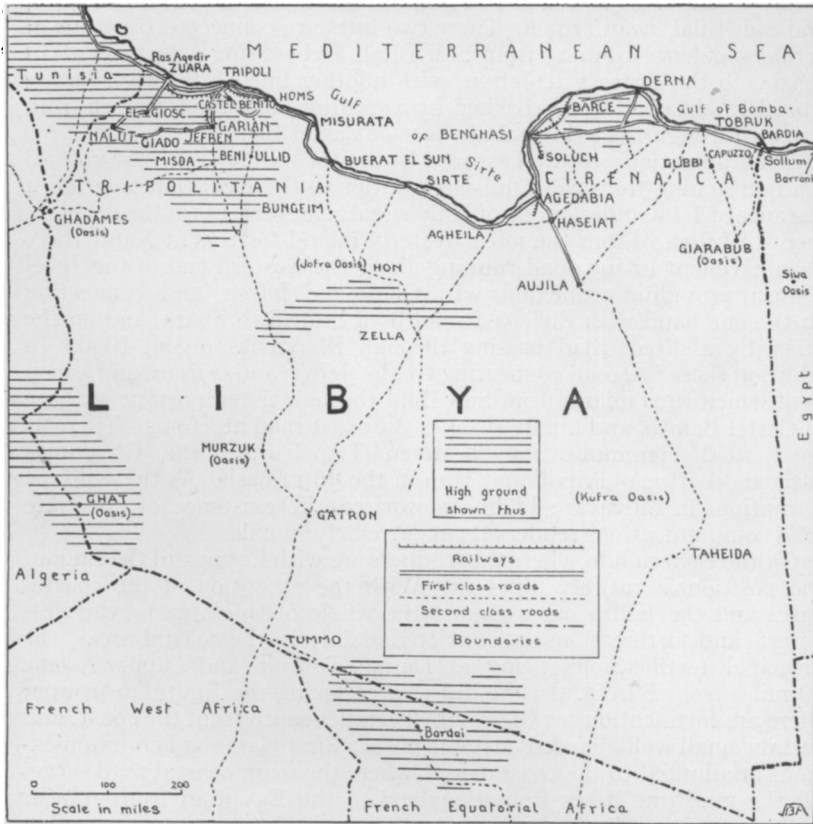
Libyan desert, and in the south-west the Fezzan area. In these desert and semi-desert areas there are rare oases among which, in a line west to east in the more northerly direction, are Ghadames, Jofra, and Giarabub, and farther south Ghat, Murzuq, and Kufra.

Apart from these widely scattered oases in the interior the principal zone of settlement is the narrow coastal belt, which falls naturally into three well marked divisions, Tripoli, Syrtica, bordering on the gulf of Syrtes (Sidra), and Cyrenaica, adjoining the Egyptian frontier. It is in the narrow cultivable zones of hills and coastal plain that in the west are centred on Tripoli, and in the east stretch between Benghazi and Derna in Cyrenaica that Italy has in recent years made such remarkable strides in mass Italian peasant colonization. It was in 1938 that the first mass immigration of peasants on a large scale took place, although systematic settlement of Italian colonists had begun several years before. The first mass contingent of 18,000 left Italy in October, 1938; an absorption of half a million immigrants is thought to be possible.¹ Immigration is highly organized; before the arrival of immigrants new villages are built on the most modern lines of town planning, homes are furnished and equipped on what might be termed mass production methods, land for cultivation is designated, and water supplies are ensured. Each village is a community centre of its own with churches, Fascist headquarters, schools, post offices, shops, etc. In the Tripolitan colonies every effort has been made to reconquer the coastal waste land and the plain south and east of the Tripolitan Jebel Nefusa, which stretches in a curve from Nalut on the Tunisian frontier down to the Mediterranean at Homs. In the semi-desert areas trees have been planted, also special kinds of grass to bind the sand, and wells have been sunk. In the Cyrenaican colonies, where there are areas of fertile soil in the Jebel or hill districts, wheat, vegetables, and vines are cultivated. There are no streams or rivers in Libya, and the cultivable capacity of the coastal plains of Tripolitania, where there is practically no rainfall, is dependent on sub-soil water and the sinking of artesian wells, and on irrigation schemes. In Eastern Tripolitania a series of great artesian wells has been sunk, and concrete channels built to carry the water to large areas of irrigated land, while smaller wells have been sunk for the provision of drinking water. In the Jebel or hill district of Cyrenaica, where boring is impossible owing to rock formation, water must be carried by the new iron viaduct; otherwise lorries transport water between Derna and Benghazi.

Another innovation in Libya has been the granting of Italian nationality to all Arabs in the four coastal provinces if they so desire. The acquisition of Italian nationality in theory puts the Libyan Arab on the same level of citizenship as the Italian. Only natives of the military territories of the interior, forming a very small proportion of the total native population, are excluded from the right to Italian nationality. In addition to the villages established for Italian colonists several villages have been specially built for native farming.

The western boundaries of Libya extend from the frontier on the Mediterranean at Ras Agedir in a curve from west of Ghadames and the oases of Ghat. The southern frontier with French West and Equatorial

¹ See G. L. Steer's *A Date in the Desert*. London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1939, p. 153.



Africa runs along a line passing south of Tummo through the northerly districts of Mt. Tibesti and terminating at the frontier with Anglo-Egyptian Sudan at a point on longitude 24° east. The eastern frontier with Egypt is practically a straight line through the Libyan desert and the narrow area of coastal plain. The oases of Giarabub on the eastern border of Cyrenaica was ceded by Egypt to Italy in 1926, but on the other hand the frontier district of Sollum on the coast was rectified in favour of Egypt.

By a decree of January 9, 1939, the four provinces of Libya, i.e. Tripoli, Misurata, Benghazi, and Derna, were incorporated as part of the national territory of Italy. The territory under military administration in the south is administered from its capital at Hon in the Jofra oasis, and is not affected by this decree.

Libya in the event of war is faced with the problem of two major land fronts as well as coast defence; also the necessity for a covering force in the south. On the Tripolitan side defence, in peace time, was assured by groups of artillery fortresses and provision for anti-aircraft guns by platforms erected in the sand.

The fortresses of Tripolitania are situated in the Jebel Nefusa from

Nalut on the west to Giado and Jefren, and along the coast at Zuara, and Sidi Bilal, near Tripoli. These two lines are connected by a line of artillery defence running from Sidi Bilal, and passing a fortress at El Azizia, to the fortress at Jefren, with another line of defence running from El Azizia to Garian, backed by a frontier line running south from Tripoli through the principal air base of Castel Benito.¹

Communications are well assured by motor roads. The new coastal road stretching from the Tunisian frontier to the Egyptian frontier, a distance of 1,140 miles, is one of Italy's real achievements in the development of Libya. From the most westerly inland fortress at Nalut there is an excellent inland road running along the western end of the Jebel Nefusa, providing connexions with Giado and Jefren, and connecting on the one hand with the coast road by a branch to Zuara, and on the other by a direct road passing through El Azizia to Sidi Bilal. In addition there is a road connecting Giado, Jefren and Garian, and a loop road which runs inland from Sidi Bilal through the important air base of Castel Benito, and finally reaches the coast road at Homs. There is good road communication between Tripoli and the Ghadames oasis and between Tripoli and Hon in the Jofra oasis. As the military formations in Libya are highly motorized the existence of adequate road communications renders them extremely mobile.

On the eastern side, where the frontiers are with Egypt and the Sudan, the position is entirely different. With the exception of the coastal oases and the Kufra oases almost the whole of this area is waterless desert, and fortifications are restricted mainly to the coastal areas, the principal fortifications being at Derna, Tobruk, and Capuzzo some 40 miles from Bardia. In the desert area facing the Egyptian frontier there are fortifications at Giarabub, 200 miles south from the coast, and certain small well-guarded customs posts. First class road communications are limited to the coastal area, where the main coastal road serves all the maritime bases from Benghazi to the Egyptian frontier near Sollum, and has limited connexions with the roads running farther inland via the slopes behind the coast.

Apart from these communications the roads inland are either second class, or in the nature of caravan tracks extending through the desert to Giarabub near the frontier, facing the oases of Siwa; to the Kufra oases at Taheida, and still farther south to the frontier with Equatorial Africa. Owing to this lack of first class communications inland, lack of water, and, incidentally, climatic conditions, any military operations on an extensive scale against Egypt would appear to be limited to the frontier regions in the narrow coastal belt.

Since the French Armistice with Italy military formations in Tripolitania maintained with a view to the possibility of war on the Tunisian frontier are no longer so important. The extent of rapid movement of troops from Tripolitania to Cyrenaica is dependent on adequate transport facilities from west to east. The only main road between the two areas of defence appears to be the main coast road. Railway communications in Libya are not extensive and are limited to the coastal areas; they run from Tripoli to Zuara 68 miles, Tripoli to Garian 61 miles, Tripoli to Taguira 13 miles, Benghasi to Barce 66 miles, and Benghasi to Soluch 34 miles.

¹ See a map in G. L. Steer's *A Date in the Desert*.

Italy has several excellent harbours on the Libyan coast, and has established naval bases at Tripoli, Benghazi and Tobruk, the principal naval base; all are connected by the new coast road. From Tripoli to Syracuse the distance is about 300 miles; the British naval base at Malta lies between at a distance of some 200 miles. Chief air bases in Libya are at Tripoli, Hon, Benghazi, Derna, Castel Benito, and El Gubbi near Tobruk.

The extent of the military forces at present in Libya is not known. They consist normally of three complete army corps, two white and one native, but the large number of military workers who have been engaged in fortifications and road making are reservists under military discipline, and even in peace time these, together with peasant immigrants, form a potential addition to the armed forces. Including military workers and native irregulars it is estimated that the total of fighting men in 1939 was roughly 120,000;¹ this number has no doubt been recently reinforced.²

The area from which extensive attacks on Egypt can be made appears to be limited to the coastal area adjoining the Egyptian frontier, but any massing of troops on the coastal road is vulnerable to naval action. The distance from Alexandria to the naval base at Tobruk is about 360 miles. The only alternative, attack by the desert route from Giarabub in the direction of Siwa, presents considerable difficulty, and it seems unlikely that any attack here by mass military forces can be attempted.

One of the aims of planned colonization and the emigration of agricultural workers from Italy has been to attain for the immigrant population in Libya some degree of self-sufficiency in food supplies. It seems doubtful how far this has been accomplished. In 1938 exports from Libya were valued at 108,962,000 lire, 97,116,000 lire going to Italy, imports at 882,058,000 lire, 786,456,000 lire coming from Italy. The adverse balance of trade with the mother country was therefore very considerable. In the year 1936, of the total imports valued at 622,975,000 lire, some 27 per cent consisted of food supplies, although the resources of Libya are almost wholly agricultural. She has no mineral resources and no important industries. For raw materials, including coal and mineral oils, and for semi-manufactured and manufactured goods she is almost wholly dependent on supplies imported from Italy. The security of communications between Italian and Libyan ports must therefore be a vital necessity to Italy for the maintenance of warfare over any long period. D. P. E.

(To be concluded by a similar article on Italian East Africa in a future issue.)

¹ See G. L. Steer, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

² Speaking in the House of Commons on Feb. 27, 1939, on the Anglo-Italian Agreement, Mr. R. A. Butler said that the peace time strength of Italian troops in Libya was estimated at 30,000 to 32,000 men. He had already announced the recent decision of the Italian Government to increase this number by about 30,000 men.