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War and Imperialism in the Aerial History of World Politics

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ITALO BRANDIMARTE, JUL 28 2023

The Italian Air Force is celebrating its centenary this year. An event that sounds seemingly irrelevant beyond national borders, the centenary is instead – as the Air Force emphatically claims – an occasion to reflect upon the history of aerial warfare and its importance to world politics. This is a history in which Italy undoubtedly enjoys pride of place for several reasons: the 1911 war in Libya saw ‘the first ever deployment of the aerial weapon in reconnaissance and bombardment actions’; Italian general Giulio Douhet formulated a philosophy of aerial war that ‘has proved its relevance up until these days’; and a number of Italian pilots, thinkers, and politicians have been central to the development and celebration of the ‘Weapon of the Future’ from the First World War onwards (Aeronautica Militare, 2023a). This is a history that the Air Force wants to recover and celebrate. To this end, even the centenary logo is meant to link back to the philosophical and historical roots of the institution. It depicts the number 100 and a line connecting two airplanes – one old, the other state-of-the-art – cutting through the zeroes. This design simultaneously represents a sense of continuity across the Air Force’s history and a tribute to its intellectual origins, with the zeroes looking like shock waves produced by the airplanes’ speed ‘in perfect Futurist style’ (Aeronautica Militare, 2023b). The logo’s symbolism is made explicit by its accompanying motto: ‘Flying to the Future’.

As a critical scholar of war, I still agree with the Air Force’s mission to foreground its often-neglected history, both nationally and internationally. The Italian Air Force, and the thinkers that informed its philosophy, are important actors in the history of aerial warfare, and their relevance is dangerously underestimated by War Studies and International Relations (IR) scholars. However, I am deeply skeptical of how the Air Force has chosen to portray its own history. Its institutional and intellectual roots are not marks of pride to be unapologetically celebrated, but traces of the symbiosis between the development of aerial modes of violence and the political ideologies of imperialism and Fascism in Italy and beyond. Douhet’s principles of aerial war, for instance, were also informed by civilisational dreams of colonial conquest and racial supremacy, and arguably often justified the bombardment of civilian populations. Italo Balbo, first Minister of the Air Force (and the only Marshal of the Air in Italy’s history), was also one of the key political figures in Mussolini’s dictatorship. Yet, Douhet’s role in the establishment of the Air Force is still celebrated today – his work is taught globally in military academies and the Air Force’s high school is named after him – and Balbo’s historical significance is circumscribed to his ‘ventures’ leading pilots around the world, albeit without noticing their role as a tool of transnational propaganda (see Kallis, 2016).

The Air Force’s centenary celebrations also seem to be forgetful of the radical role of imperialism in the history of the institution. Most notably, the fact that the first offensive use of airplanes took place during the Italian invasion of Libya testifies to the racist politics of imperial violence more than it elevates the Italian Air Force as a symbol of modernity. Ironically, while the Air Force wants to make its history known and celebrate it, its narration does not provide a serious opportunity to revisit and complicate it. It is instead fraught with omissions that foreclose the interrogation of precisely those events and connections that would need further critical exploration.

These historical erasures are important for the study of world politics, perhaps even more than they should be for the Italian Air Force aficionados. The marginality of aerial warfare within the disciplinary history and theory of IR, in this sense, is not without implications. In fact, the story of Italian pilots and intellectuals trying to master ‘command of the air’ (Douhet, 2009) is also a story about the relation between imperial violence and particular ways of relating to the

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atmosphere through new technologies. These connections could not be more salient considering the great deal of attention IR scholarship has paid to drone warfare in the last few years (e.g., Daggett, 2015; Grayson and Mawdsley, 2019; Holmqvist, 2014; Wilcox, 2017). Following the intellectual ethos of scholars like Priya Satia (2014) or Caren Kaplan (2018), it is not hard to imagine how situating the emergence of drone warfare within the histories of empire can uncover political trajectories that go beyond contemporary concerns for asymmetry, precision, or technological autonomy. Given the importance of Italy's Air Force to the global history of war in the air, there is a real need to explore the colonial roots of world politics beyond the usual focus on the Anglosphere if we want to tease out the politics of contemporary aerial violence.

Imperialism and its legacies offer an underexplored picture of what we might call an aerial history of the international. If, on the one hand, the history of aerial warfare has fundamentally been one of imperial violence, on the other it is central to the constitution of the modern international system. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia (1935-6), as I argue in my recent work (Brandimarte, 2023), is an unparalleled example of this. Largely ignored by IR scholars, and marginally mentioned within the Italian Air Force's celebration, the Abyssinian War acted as a conceptual and political crucible for the solidification of a racialised global order (Getachew, 2019: 63-70; Shilliam, 2013). The invasion, which was meant to secure Italy's imperial status, was justified by the Fascist dictatorship on the basis of Ethiopia's lower status of civilisation – mainly due to the continued practice of slavery in the country. Notwithstanding Ethiopia's membership of the League of Nations, its subaltern status did not grant it any right to protection. As a testing ground for a newly formed international order, the war exposed how the principles of sovereignty and modernity on which it rested were still profoundly shaped by colonial worldviews.

At the same time, the Abyssinian War is also a crucial moment in the history of aerial war. The conflict is still remembered for the cruel and indiscriminate use of gas bombings against Ethiopian soldiers and civilians by the Italian Air Force, which re-instated Italy's primacy in the adoption and development of new forms of aerial violence. Remarkably, the war offers not only a reminder of the role of strategic innovation and imperial war in the history of world politics, but also an insight into the importance of aerial relations to the creation of a global racial imaginary (cf. Barder, 2021). Indeed, the Abyssinian War channeled the fears and anxieties about war "from above" that haunted post-war Europe, and pictured the atmosphere as a conceptual and material battleground through which understandings of modernity, race, and civilisation took shape. On the one hand, the possibility of acquiring control of the air through the new technology of the airplane was both a strategic tool of modernity and an opening onto a new aesthetic regime which made Italian men civilised and racially superior.

The founder of the Futurist movement Filippo Marinetti, who volunteered for the war at the age of 60, firmly believed that the future of war was one where humans could 'become airborne' – a future that was already made present by the admirable skill of Italian aviators (Marinetti, cited in Brandimarte, 2023: 8-9) and that still resonates with the Air Force's identity today. These feelings were echoed in the pilots' sense of invincibility and racist contempt which came with the ability to master and weaponise the air. Mussolini's son, who was also a well-known aviator, was thrilled and intoxicated at the prospect of hunting down Ethiopians from the sky. 'The Abyssinian is an animal, and as such it is good at hiding' – he noticed – '[b]ut even in that case, it has little reason to joust: the lion tamer still exists' (Mussolini, 1937: 78). On the other, the racialisation of Ethiopians as an uncivilised people was also tied to their inability to fully experience and withstand aerial war. The vulnerability of Ethiopian soldiers to gas bombings, and their impotence against the lethality of the air itself – 'our conscience was clear: you cannot kill the fog' (Ras Kassa, cited in Rochat, 2007[1996]: 63) – was taken as evidence of their racial inferiority. This atmospheric imaginary of race travelled transnationally, and was often presented even within more "critical" forms of satire and political art.

Building on the Futurist celebration of war in the air, the development of air-minded strategic thought, and the European experiences of airplanes and gas in the First World War, the Fascist invasion of Abyssinia foregrounded the political function of air to the construction of a racialised understanding of civilisation and international order. Today, in its dream to 'fly to the future', the Italian Air Force seems strongly committed to operating 'in continuity with its values and traditions from the past' (Aeronautica Militare, 2023a). While its celebratory narratives stay unconscious of the imperial roots of the institution, the racial histories of aerial violence still linger within contemporary world politics, from drone strikes in the Global South to the use of tear gas against refugees trying to cross Europe's borders. The story of the Italian Air Force conveniently serves as a lesson for a discipline that has

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only just celebrated its centenary, too. In raising awareness of the politics of aerial war today, IR scholars also need to think carefully about its histories and genealogy. The recognition that the entanglement of race, empire, and aerial violence is not exceptional to the struggles of our time, but is instead historically coded into the theories and materialities of international order, should push us to further question the role of IR as a discipline and an institution that often “flies to the future”, yet forgets its own past (see Kirshna, 2001).

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