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Fausta Cialente's "Middle East" Through Anticolonialism and Antifascism in Egypt

Abstract

The role of the allophone press in Egypt was particularly important for the circulation and elaboration of radical ideas and struggles from the end of the 19th century until the Second World War. During the 1940s, the Italian writer Fausta Cialente (1898–1994) published the independent magazine "Fronte Unito" (1943–46), which was intended to be an instrument of information and education for the development of the new Italian state after the fascist regime, and to critically think about class and gender divisions, labour and colonial exploitation and the life of the Italian colony in Egypt. All these elements are also present in Cialente's literature, nourished by her life in Egypt between 1921 and 1947. This paper interrogates the links between the anti-fascist and pro-democracy political struggle and the anti-colonial views expressed in Cialente's writings and militancy in a country where, according to the editors, the imperialist mentality reigned among all communities and influenced their power and subaltern relations.

Keywords

Fausta Cialente, Fronte Unito, antifascism, colonialism, anticolonialism

Introduction

This paper aims to reconstruct the development of the antifascist and anti-colonialist thought in some of the Italian antifascist novelist and journalist Fausta Cialente's writings and to detect a critical view of the racialised division of the Egyptian society of her time. In turn, her literature and journalism shed light on the role and—albeit limited—impact of the antifascist movement that grew

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within the Italian colony in the Egyptian cosmopolitan colonial context. Here I briefly share the concept of cosmopolitanism in Middle Eastern societies in its popular, vernacular dimension: the social history of the many "subalterns" from different national origins who inhabited the Arab cities between the 19th and 20th centuries, which problematizes the frequent elitist and Eurocentric approach (Hanley 2008; Halim 2013; Paonessa 2021; Santilli 2013; Starr 2009).

Another important element that can be detected in Cialente's thought concerns her specifically female interpretation. A gender dimension and the heteronormativity then at work are represented in most of her novels, or can be acknowledged by reading them, even when she does not provide a direct analysis of these aspects. This is shown by the rebellion against social norms in which her novels' characters are engaged, and this will be confirmed in her political militancy and journalism. In this paper, I will analyse the main aspects of her thought with the purpose of shedding light on the class and ethnic divisions structuring the multiple colonial relations, which in turn reflected the power relations between imperialist forces. These are all aspects with which Fausta Cialente was well acquainted since she lived in Egypt from 1921 to 1947 with her husband Enrico Terni—the son of a Jewish family who had settled in Alexandria long before—and their daughter Lionella.

The Terni family house had been "one of the few that was frequented by intellectuals of all nationalities and social backgrounds" (Cialente 1991: XII), a meeting place for outcasts and dissidents. Enrico Terni was the secretary of a cultural club in Alexandria called *L'Atelier*, and Fausta Cialente actively participated in spreading the news about what was happening in Europe. They also welcomed refugees from the fascist regime (Ramsey-Portolano 2012: 244–45).[1] Moreover, in the environment of the Alexandrian upper middle class, she became acquainted with the miserable conditions of the Egyptian population and the hierarchical differences between Europeans, Levantines and Egyptians at the expense of the natives and the poor. Her life in the Egyptian society then shaped her ideas about what the "Middle East" was and represented, as we will see with her unpublished writing by the same title.

The interest in Cialente's life and thought also corresponds to a gender perspective of Italian journalism in Egypt, as most of the voices (journalists, editors, owners) were male, often mirroring the social reproduction of gender division. With the antifascist resistance, however, several female figures became protagonists of the political fight, in Italy and in Egypt as well. Women were also a significant presence in Cialente's novels, whose raw material is

largely based on her Egyptian experience and her critical view of the way the Levantine and European bourgeoisie treated the indigenous people (Bracchi 2009).

Indeed, the aim of such investigation is to question the long-term impact and repercussions of different forms of social exclusion and subalternisation which continue to affect specific ethnic, gender and social groups, just as much as those populations and states subordinated to Western countries.

At the same time, the present analysis must consider the historical moment in which Cialente lived in Egypt. She knew the monarchy and the British protectorate—only formally ended in 1936, after the former declaration by Great Britain in 1922—and witnessed the long process to obtain full national independence (Campanini 2005). During the 1930s an anti-British sentiment spread mainly through the press and fascist propaganda, as Mussolini's fascist dictatorship progressively influenced Italians abroad, up to and even after its downfall. In the meantime, Cairo had already strengthened its central position within broader Arab journalism, after the development and spread of private publishers and the first independent magazines, and the establishment of Western news agencies since the 19th century, in liaison with political and diplomatic powers (Ferrando 2021: 6, 22).

Thus, it is worth remembering that "radical" or leftist ideas (socialist, anarchist, communist) had already begun to spread in Egypt in the 19th century, and notably through the circulation of immigrant workers and the press in cities like Alexandria, Cairo and Port Said (Marchi 2021; Paonessa 2021). Indeed, in several Arab and Middle Eastern countries, the press was "a participant in and subject to political circumstances, at times benefiting from the opportunities offered by free public debate while in other situations being subject to repressive legal regimes", and still plays a fundamental role in the understanding of social and political history and its representation of each specific context (Gorman and Monciaud 2018: 1–2).

Italians in Egypt Under the Fascist Regime

Before investigating Fausta Cialente's ideas on fascism and imperialism, one needs to briefly recall the colonial context in which she matured her idea of Middle East and her criticism of colonial society and the broader capitalist-imperialist system. This was the context of the "invention of the Middle East," i.e. the creation of new state entities that would lead to Arab nationalisms (Faught 2023).

Later, the colonial policy of the Italian fascist regime attempted to legitimise itself in terms of a "civilising mission" and proximity to Muslim and Arab peoples in the lands to conquer, where, in the regime's narrative, the "Italian emigrants" were gradually to become patriotic "Italians abroad." In the 1930s, the National Fascist Party (PNF) began its campaign against British and French hegemony in the Mediterranean, trying to change the national imagery also through the media, such as the press and radio stations. Egypt became such a strategic place for confrontation and conflict between rival imperialist powers in the Mediterranean, that news agencies turned into instruments of colonial domination.[2] It is worth mentioning the first international Arabic-language radio station, *Radio Bari*, which since 1934 had been encouraging exchanges between Italians and Arabs as a means of spreading fascist propaganda (Ferrando 2020; Marzano 2015; Stanton 2013; Viscomi 2016: 58).

Mussolini was well aware of the propaganda potential of the Italian press in Egypt, which he purposely subsidised in order to build consensus for and oppose criticism of the national government. In his opinion, opposition came from the Masonic lodges who "controlled" the press in Alexandria, so he came up with the idea of publishing a fascist newspaper, *La Quarta Italia* (The Fourth Italy), launched in Alexandria. Here, local fascists asked for permission to publish it in March, but, due to the lack of funds only one issue came out, of which all traces seem to have been lost (Petricioli 2007: 298, 318).[3]

National propaganda firstly stressed the "social and technical achievements of Fascist Italy" and later focused on communism and anti-communism (Tedeschini Lalli 1976: 743). However, the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the end of the Capitulations system in Egypt in 1937, the promulgation of the racial fascist laws in 1938 and entry into war against the British weakened the spirit of the Italian community in Egypt, which had to simultaneously deal with British pressure, Egyptian nationalism, the fascistisation of Italian institutions (such as schools, cultural and political associations, the press etc.) and the ongoing propaganda. The development of the antifascist response was indeed complicated.

Furthermore, when Italy opened hostilities against the British in Egypt, General Wavell, commander-in-chief of the Middle East Command, ordered the ambassador in Cairo to proceed with the internment of males of military age and members of the Fascist Party between the ages of 17 and 55, the suspension of trade with Italy, the confiscation of the properties of the Italians living in Egypt, and the closure of Italian schools and banks. About 8,000 men were interned in prison camps run by the Egyptian and British authorities in the desert (Pet-

ricioli 2007; Rubini 2015: 33–34; Viscomi 2016). Despite this situation, during the 1940s many Italians joined the international antifascist and anti-colonialist resistance, which was organised in various locations in Egypt and North Africa, and which made large use of the press and radio (Valabrega 1996).

In such a context, Fausta Cialente's life changed. She moved from Alexandria to Cairo and took part in the long antifascist fight, which she documented in her unpublished war journal, *Diario di guerra*, written between 1941–47. "I had left Alexandria, that October, called by the G.H.R. (the Grand Headquarters) in Cairo, and no one had heard about it except my husband, my daughter and my friend who had reported me to the British authorities as a good element to use in the anti-fascist propaganda" because, as she claimed, she had always been antifascist, even though up till this moment she was only involved in literature and not in politics.[4]

This would emerge more clearly in her novels than in her militant journalism which would later confirm a critical view of the relationship between the Middle East and Europe, but above all it incessantly underlined the antithesis between fascist politics and freedom for all peoples. In fact, her main purpose did indeed become to fight the former from Egypt to achieve the latter.

Fausta Cialente and the Antifascist Movement in Egypt

Since "Fascism made the Empire into one of its strengths" (Calchi Novati 2011: 252), Fausta Cialente and other Italians in Egypt started to wonder how to counter the fascist imperialistic narrative and campaign. She was asked to collaborate with the Allied propaganda: from October 1940 to mid-February 1943 she was engaged by British Radio Cairo to host the daily programme *Siamo italiani, parliamo agli italiani* ("We are Italian, we speak to the Italian people"), with the help of Anna Caprera (pseudonym of Laura Levi, born to a Jewish family in Alexandria). The broadcast was notably addressed to the Italian prisoners of war in the Anglo-Egyptian camps.[5]

In its war against Fascist Italy, the British had no choice at that moment but to collaborate with the leftist antifascist members of the colony even if, as Cialente reported, they pursued antithetical goals. She accepted under certain conditions to only speak to the Italians and "not just to speak in Italian" for a British broadcast, because she wanted to reach the Italian audience and not simply be a mere instrument of the British anti-Italian propaganda. Apart from the news and bulletins from the fronts, and a column offering political commentary, her speeches were also transcribed and published in the magazine

Il Corriere d'Italia printed in Cairo since 1941. The Foreign Transmissions Division also appointed Cialente to make a series of clandestine programmes, secretly transmitted from Jerusalem and from the Marmarica desert to be addressed to the Italian troops in North Africa, with the aim of encouraging them to defect and sabotage the fascist military operations. Radio broadcasts had to show the power of the British Empire and weaken the spirit of the Italians, galvanised by the fascist colonial enterprise in Africa (Lombardo 2012: 43). But, at times, Italian clandestine radios such as Radio Cairo, had to artificially stage some criticism towards Great Britain in order to deflect suspicions of receiving British support, and this went on until the end of the WWII, when the broadcast became entirely British (Rubini 2014b: 150). Her last official intervention was transmitted on 13 February 1943, after which Cialente was suspended and the programme changed its name in *Voci della Vittoria alleata* (Voices from the Allied Victory) (Carbé 2021: 99; Palieri 2018).

The British authorities had asked for a wider antifascist movement, but such a front was actually quite difficult to form in Egypt due to the coexistence of different groups, such as the Pacifist League, established around 1934 and led by the Swiss Marxist Paul Jacquot-Descombes; *Giustizia e Libertà* led by Paolo Vittorelli and whose bulletin was widely read in the camps; *Libera Italia* which also edited a weekly publication and other communists and liberals (Cacciatore 2019; Monciaud 2015; Rondinelli 2017; Valabrega 1996). Eventually, an attempt was made to unite a group and create an independent magazine, and this project was finally achieved by Cialente with her "Fronte Unito," which was launched on 21 October 1943 and distributed in Egypt, Libya, Eritrea and Palestine. 2,000 copies were still sold after Mussolini's fall and Italy's surrender to the Allies, and it was welcomed by the British and Egyptians authorities, but criticised by other Italian antifascists from *Libera Italia* (from which Cialente was temporarily expelled) and *Giustizia e Libertà*. Italian communists like Renato Mieli, Cialente's friend and director of *Corriere di Tripoli*, and the Italian-Egyptian Dina Forti, were asked to help as correspondents for the magazine (Carbé 2021: 91–106; Rubini 2015: 37–38).

In any case, the will to unite to fight the fascist regime never diminished, and all the antifascist movements and their many women activists joined the Democratic Movement for National Liberation after its foundation in May 1947 (Valabrega 1996: 302). However, between 1943 and 1948, most Italian antifascists were expelled from Egypt notably because of their association with communism, and also in some cases with political Zionism. By 1949, the

structure of the antifascist movement no longer existed (Viscomi 2016: 60).

When Fausta Cialente finally published the independent magazine *Fronte Unito*, she was aware of the hostility of the British towards her leftist ideas and propaganda. In fact, she notes that they tried to impose collaborators from *Libera Italia* or *Giustizia e Libertà* who were willing to compromise and complicity with them (Rubini 2015: 36). She had already questioned such relationship, as she later wrote in her war journal (in 1947) when the British proposed that she worked for Radio Cairo: "to whom could they have turned—the British—if not to the elements of a 'left' that had been anti-fascist all along? And indeed, during the six years of struggle, in the citadel of British conservatism that was Cairo in wartime (and still is, after all), at the embassy, in the headquarters and in all the offices, beyond the sometimes perfect courtesy and, often, an intelligent and friendly understanding, we felt the suspicion on the part of the great majority of those officials of the Empire […]. We were disrupters, a bad breed of disrupters that they had to use—and that's that [...]. Their respect, or at least their preference, almost always went for the fascists of the colony locked up in the political concentration camps and those in the prisoner-of-war camps—as today it goes to the neo-fascists they continue to support at home and abroad. We must therefore confess that their company was equally unwelcome to us, with many exceptions" (Rubini 2014b: 148).

Moreover, ambiguous positions about fascist colonial politics have been recorded among popular, socialist and communist groups and parties, since the antifascist front was not unanimous nor was it ready to face Mussolini's imperialism. This might even explain the marginality of the question of anti-colonialism and its theoretical weakness within the antifascist heterogeneous front, and not only during the fascist era (Santarelli 1991: 74–75). But this, as it is evident in her literature and journal writing, might also be a distinctive feature in Cialente's position, even within such antifascist front, since the colonial experience in Egypt was at the core of her political projects and anti-imperialist perspective.

Fronte Unito. Fausta Cialente's Antifascist Periodical

From the autumn of 1942 onwards, with the gradual defeat of the Nazi-fascist troops, the guidelines of the British propaganda changed and Fausta Cialente started working on her periodical *Fronte Unito. Quindicinale Italiano Indipendente di Lotta - Informazione - Cultura*, printed by the Société Orientale de Publicité in Cairo. Her group wanted to add another voice to the then only available

reading material in the camps: *Luce nel deserto* (Light in the desert), edited by the Apostolic Delegation. So, together with Laura Levi, they launched their new enterprise from an apartment in Zamalek, in Cairo (Marchi 2018).

The independent periodical *Fronte Unito* pursued the aim of educating and empowering the Italian colony with national democratic and universalist values. In the first issue, it described the community behind it as "a bloc composed by Italians, in Italy, beyond any barrier of class, political faith, religion, to fight against the fascist tyranny" and achieve peace and liberty.[6] It claimed to be an instrument of unification for all the antifascist groups and parties, without being an organ of any, in North Africa and the Middle East.

Its main goal was to inform Italians in a documented way and transmit the example of "political maturity and enlightened patriotism"[7] of the Italians fighting in the homeland to those compatriots abroad who had yet to understand the urgent need to join the liberation movement. The message was also meant for all free peoples who should join against all forms of fascism.

Nonetheless, the antifascist front still remained "divided, almost unorganised"[8] and incapable of influencing the masses by its specific "ideas, quality and past",[9] despite the collaboration with associations such as *Libera Italia* which counted up to 3,000 members in Cairo, Alessandria and Port Said and assisted thousands of prisoners of war, as the first issue published in 1943 tells us. When Palmiro Togliatti, leader of the Italian Communist Party, made a quick stop in Cairo in March 1944, on his way back from the USSR (where he lived for 17 years), he wanted to know everything about the difficulties between the antifascists of all tendencies, "with all the quarrels, divisions, provocations, spying and difficulties, in short, with which we had to contend on a daily basis, both with 'those outside,' the foreigners, and with 'those inside,' the Italian colony of Egypt, largely still stubbornly fascist".[10] He also left a handwritten message for the prisoners of war and the Italians in Egypt about "the Italian path to communism," which caused a great astonishment when it appeared on the front page of the following issue of *Fronte Unito*.[11]

Fronte Unito had a duty to inform its readers about the fight against nazism and fascism, but also about daily life in Italy and in the colony, about workers' problems, migrations, women's life and work, and so forth. Italian readers were asked to help in spreading the antifascist mission, by forming reading clubs and holding debates with the aim of educating young people to become democratic citizens in the near future. Many issues of the periodical speak about the Italian youth of Egypt who had been raised under fascist propaganda

and depoliticised,[12] as well as other millions of Italians abroad who had yet to develop a strong antifascist and liberation movement able to "redeem" the nation.[13] Fascism, it is said, has systematically cheated Italians about its prestige, intentionally confused with the prestige of their nation. It has built a facade of nationalism and the Italian colony in Egypt had paid for this mistake with internment camps and economic and moral misery, despite it having been "at the forefront [*avanguardia*] of every work of civilization and progress in this country".[14] The last statement confirms the pervasive cultural legacy of an elitist image of the Italians in Egypt and of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism that would persist for a long time, both in the historiography of the Italian colony and colonialism (Carminati 2021; Santilli 2013; Starr 2009: 32–50) and in the community itself.

Between Anti-Imperialism and the Southern Question

The pedagogical and political intent of the *Fronte Unito* editors dovetailed with the revolutionary potential of the subaltern classes, aiming to transform their own country if not the whole world order. In Issue n. 3 of 1943, in an article entitled *Libertà o imperialismo?* (Freedom or Imperialism?), the editorial staff explained that "the aggressive fascist expansionism was born out of the greed of the tycoons of industry and finance, and only benefited them; this allowed [the people] to see that the bloody chain of imperialism did not only weigh on the conquered peoples but on the 'conqueror' too". The article goes on to discuss the shame of having been the executioner of free peoples, which should have extinguished the last imperialist ambitions: "the Italians have finally understood that these actions do not bring well-being to the people [...]. We are sure that the new Italy will respect the independence and equality of all the people, of any colour, religion or geographical origin, and that it will contribute to the realisation of a democratic and anti-imperialist policy. Italians more than others, thanks to their recent formation as a State, will have a future only if they collaborate with other European populations on a democratic base and by excluding every kind of national oppression and violent conquest".[15] The editors then mentioned the Italians' "anti-imperialist consciousness" due to the "general character" matured by workers in Italy and abroad over long years of hardship. If today such words may appear naive—even caricatural—, or romantic hopes for a better future, the interest of *Fronte Unito* for the working conditions of the poor emerges from several articles where poverty and unemployment are analysed and the idea of equality and social justice is

also outlined. In Issue n. 11 of 1944, Italian workers are even called to join the indigenous labourers in colonies like Eritrea.

It is worth recalling here that the colonial conquest of Libya, which was so strongly backed by Giovanni Giolitti's governments at the beginning of the 20th century, aimed at procuring Italy a central role in the Mediterranean and at strengthening Italian nationalism. Subsequently, attempts were made to offer expropriated land in Africa to the poor and peasant masses, thus masking Italy's imperialistic ambitions and the very ideology of a settler colonialism driven by the rhetoric of the Italian overpopulation (Ertola 2022). Moreover, the "southern question" pitted the industrial (rich) North against the rural (poor) South for a long period of time in Italy, generating tensions that were only, and apparently, reduced by the imperialist discourse. In the end, both Southern Italy and Africa were affected by colonialist policies (Cresti 2008; Gramsci 1966).

This kind of fracture, rooted in territorial and class division, was at the centre of Cialente's reflections, which she further elaborated after she left the country. *Fronte Unito* was therefore committed to cooperating with Italian workers and prisoners in the Egyptian camps to try and reinforce Italian identity and the sense of belonging to a finally renewed and free country, without ever forgetting its social rifts. To achieve such liberation and political consciousness it was necessary to recognise the deception of fascism and its "betrayal." This concept emerges in several issues of 1944–45, when the editors spoke about those Italians who adhered to fascism in Egypt, making the Italian colony "a devoted administrator of fascism, which they considered to be a regime of progress and order, and which gave them a false impression of strength and power as useful elements to assert their prestige in a country, such as Egypt, where the imperialist mentality reigned supreme in all foreign communities".[16] Admiration for fascism still continues, claims *Fronte Unito*, and it was formerly due to the ignorance on the part of those who had never seen Italy or who had only spent their holidays there in luxury hotels, while the masses of workers felt betrayed and understood how they had been deceived. Many others, especially young people, would have fallen into the opposite extreme of deniers of all nationalities, and would thus be called anti-Italians or stateless. The call was then to unite and work together to create a new democratic government and democratic institutions even in the colony.[17]

A distinctive feature thus emerges within the Italian colony itself, made up of different social classes and ideological tendencies. This leads us to think of a further divide between Italians/Europeans and the indigenous population, which

is not examined in the magazine, but of which Cialente was already aware. She will prove her political consciousness about this in her later reflections: "But for us foreigners, the privilege of freedom was effective; and the more serious the oppression in Italy became—of which we were always well informed—, and the more aggressive the fascist propaganda in the colony was, the more we were driven to political action that we felt it was our duty to lead […] Matteotti's assassination, Gramsci's death, the war in Ethiopia with the ridiculous proclamation of the empire, the war in Spain, were, with many other facts and arguments, the burning material around which, year after year, we worked, so that not only the Italian communities in Cairo, Port Said and Alexandria, but foreigners and Egyptians themselves would be informed of what Fascist Italy actually was. In fact, in 1938, the 'League for Peace and Freedom' had arisen in which anti-fascists from foreign communities in Egypt, [such as] Greeks, French, Swiss, met and informed the Egyptians about everything that was happening in the world, like in Spain and China, for instance" (Cialente 1981: 85).

This practice of meeting and exchanging information could be identified as a form of cosmopolitanism, which nonetheless remains inherently linked to colonialism in its multiple dimensions and social relations (Starr 2009). Yet, such was a cosmopolitan exchange between Europeans and Egyptians still informed by unevenness, as was also found in other organisations such as the Free Popular University (Università Popolare Libera, UPL), which was set up in Alexandria and for a short period in Cairo, from 1901 until the 1940s (Gorman 2005). The UPL hosted open conferences on art, politics, democratic and radical ideas as opposed to imperialism: all that "fascism never did," according to the editors.[18]

Towards the Creation of a New Nation

Fronte Unito was also committed to reporting on the current situation of the Italians in and of Egypt. In the last issues, a study was published on the state of the Italian colony after the years of war and the "sad legacy" of fascism: the ignorance about the real situation at home. The Italian colony in Egypt, it is said, has paid harshly for this mistake, with thousands interned in concentration camps, and with the seizure of all assets by the Egyptian government, despite the fact that the organisation *Libera Italia* had managed to obtain several disinterments and that many people had found work.[19]

But the problem for those who remained in Egypt is raised in several articles about the options available to young Italians there: should they stay or

"return" to Italy? Such a question suggests that they considered Italy as their motherland, even for those Italians born in Egypt. The editors insist on the need for re-education, so as to avoid the renewal of fascist forms of racism and imperialism.[20] The need to learn Arabic to find a job is also mentioned.[21]

In an article about the creation of a newspaper called *The Youth's Voice*, proposals are made for implementing the Italian Cultural Centre's activities and involving members in Alexandria, "to reconstitute the core of the Italian culture" and collaborate "in the spiritual awakening of the colony, employing and spreading the cultural heritage of Italy."[22] Hence, the Italian colony was still the main interest for the editors of *Fronte Unito.*

In the spring of 1944, the positive balance found in *Fronte Unito* encouraged its increased circulation; readership could now also count Italian prisoners in the camps in Kenya, India and South Africa, and by December 1944 circulation had reached some 15.000 copies, despite the effects of the press censorship imposed by the British and the Egyptians. Finally, at the beginning of 1945 the British censorship became increasingly rigid and intolerant of the editorial staff's inclinations towards Soviet policy—notwithstanding the fact that *Fronte Unito* also arrived "in Kuibiscev" through the Soviet Embassy press office, and elsewhere[23]—until its distribution was suddenly banned from the military camps (Rubini 2015: 40–41).

So, at the end of 1945, the editors decided to completely renew the magazine. They focused more on local news (notably from Cairo and Alexandria), on the situation in the camps and the post-war reconstruction of the Italian colony in Egypt. On 11 January 1946 the last editorial of Issue 98 announced that *Fronte Unito* would turn into *Il Mattino della domenica*, considered as the "organ of the Italian communities of Egypt and the Middle East" with the aim of giving birth to a new Italian renaissance which would have been granted by the "democratic regime" which had just taken over. *Il Mattino* wished "to win for Italians at home and abroad the sacrosanct right to peace, bread and work, a right which is not only ours but of all the peoples of the universe", but publication ceased in December of the same year (Petricioli 2007: 449–50).

Finally, among the issues related to the creation of the new Italian Republic, the role of women also emerges in several articles of *Fronte Unito.* Although the magazine does not deal with a specifically female or gender-related issues, news about women are present, such as the election of a woman as deputy-mayor of Turin being linked as it was to the increase of women in administrative roles, especially in Northern Italy where they had been taking part

in the liberation struggles, resistance and insurrection.[24] Moreover, contents on the vote for women and women's role in the antifascist struggle are hailed as Italy's great democratic achievements, but space is also given to lifestyle contents such as fashion, beauty, theatre, or household economy, in the column *Today's woman* present in several issues of 1945.[25] The reception of this kind of issues by the female audience of the magazine remains to be further investigated, however, the intersection between gender, class, and race can be outlined in Cialente's production.

Fausta Cialente's Literature Between Colonialism and Anti-colonialism

During her time in Egypt, Fausta Cialente came in contact with so many people from many different cultures. This could have acted as a sort of toolbox that enabled her to thoroughly understand and interpret the social reality and its colonial structure, as the contents of her Egypt-based novels demonstrate. "They call themselves Greeks, Swiss, French, Armenians... In fact, when they speak of Egypt and the Egyptians, they no longer represent a nation, but only a class.... A class that, at its heart, is always for the British occupier, never for the independence of the Egyptians, for their true progress! How dare they speak of progress in a country on which the humiliation of Mixed Courts is imposed? Of capitulations? For more than a hundred years, you have heard it repeated that cosmopolitanism has been Egypt's fortune and wealth. Believe me, quite the opposite is true. Foreigners have made a lot of money here, this is especially true. And then! Who has their so much heralded progress served? [It has only served] Their interests, the interests of the *pashas*... of the 'responsible ones!' Certainly not the *fellah*" (Cialente 1961: 142).

Nevertheless, she also states that in those years Egypt was for a woman "an extraordinary country in terms of freedoms. Seen from outside, the Italian situation gave the sense of slow suffocation". During her trips to Italy, she said, "I was almost afraid to speak. In Egypt, on the other hand, as elsewhere, you could read works that were forbidden in Italy, like the French Gide, Martin du Gard..." (Gialloreto 2015: 264–65).

In a novel such as *Ballata Levantina* one can read the drive for rebellion in a city populated by so many rebels of different origins, where the protagonist, the Venetian Daniela, learnt the effects of imperialism and fascism on the local and poor people from the Levant and of course from the Italian colony. Xeno-

phobia and anti-Semitism are also mentioned, and the "indigenous" Muslims or Copts are mainly background figures in her writings, in contrast with the arrogance and racism of the European and Levantine components who got rich at the expense of their hosts. The image of a "non-existent, never seen, almost ridiculous Egypt" (Gialloreto 2015: 273) was portrayed by authors like Lawrence Durrell in his *Alexandria Quartet.* Rather curiously, Cialente was asked to translate the novel *Clea* from his tetralogy, even though she was not a great fan of Durrell's work which expressed feelings so distant from her own (Cossu 2012: 191; Fognani 2019; Gialloreto 2015: 274–75; Jaran 2014).

Yet, in novels such as *Pamela o la bella estate* and *Cortile a Cleopatra*, Cialente spoke about the "poor" Levantine milieu, where "Europeans, Levantine or not, didn't have, or even refused, contacts with the indigenous population, apart, of course, from servants, suppliers, workers" (Cialente 1991: XI). She claims to use the term indigenous in a merely descriptive sense, while Levantines and Europeans used it "with contempt, as if they were speaking of an inferior or slave race, an odious attitude that outraged me from the beginning....". Greek and Turkish artisans or small Jewish traders bustled around Cleopatra, a suburb of Alexandria populated by several subaltern ethnic groups. The uprooted person who rebels against social impositions emerges once again in *Cortile a Cleopatra*, embodied by the protagonist Marco (Cialente 1966; Ramsey-Portolano 2012: 240).[26]

Cialente's position against colonialism is strictly intertwined with her critique of the bourgeois class, as she stated that the "fundamental" theme of almost all her work focuses on the "portrait of an unconscious or guilty bourgeoisie" notably in a colonial context (Cialente 1991: IX). She claimed to be "among the few, the very few indeed, who considered Levantinism to be an old fibroma encrusted all over the Middle East and destined to disappear [...] a phenomenon which, it was claimed, had brought nothing good to the country and its inhabitants, while Europeans and Levantines enjoyed conditions, partly created by them, whereby their daily life was incredibly 'pleasant' and easy. They boasted about it as if it were all their own merit and right, without looking around, thus without even bothering to see that the 'masses' enjoyed absolutely none of those privileges. Instead, I saw how atrocious the misery of such a meek and peaceful people was, how infamous the hand of the larval colonialism that still pressed upon it, and how shameful the complicity or acquiescence of the very rich ruling class" (Cialente 1991: XII–XIII). Such a divide is also represented in her novel *Pamela o la bella estate* where the protagonist Pamela tries to join the bourgeois side,

by renting out her family's apartment near the beach to a French family, for whom she was only a servant. She did not appreciate her previous life but her time spent in between two realities attests to the asymmetry of the relationship between them. Such an asymmetry also represents the power relation between the colonisers and the colonised, the bourgeois and the poor, but where Pamela belongs to a Western conquering nation that claimed, just as Fascist Italy, to be superior to every African country (Virga 2016: 84–86).

Between February and July 1947, before her return to Italy, Cialente started writing a biographical narrative text dedicated to the various steps of the anti-fascist propaganda in Egypt. Eight typewritten pages contain the prologue and first chapter of an unfinished novel called *Middle East* (Rubini 2014a: 79–80; Rubini 2014b). This short essay contains a bitter critique of the anti-fascist Italians in Egypt and British politics in the Middle East: "The Middle East is the war and is us. We who take a stand in an extraordinary and unpredictable way, alongside those who should be our enemies and must logically be our allies instead; with whom there will be many misunderstandings and the struggle will not be easy. But our real enemy is fascism, and as much as 10 June [1940] and the 'warrior' speech from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia [when Mussolini declared war on Britain and France] seemed to us as the beginning of the end, we wished for its shipwreck and we have had this hope deep in our hearts ever since. We know from now the price we will have to pay: death and disaster. But freedom cannot be obtained back cheaply, we know this too, for so many years. While it is new to them, they did not expect it—but we have no choice, we in the Middle East, it is the only alternative fate offers us" (Rubini 2014a: 146).

This was quite evident for the antifascists abroad, she claimed, as they were not exiles or emigrants, but people who, just like her husband's family, had been Italian residents in Egypt for several generations. But even cohabitation failed to overcome the prejudice against and the cultural and social distancing from Arabs, which are problems that still need to be solved in our time. "The Middle East is the war and is us" is a statement that offers us much food for thought, as much as Cialente's ante-litteram intersectional approach in such a peculiar context of multiple identities and struggles.

Conclusion

Fausta Cialente was a witness to a historical era of transition, for Italy and Egypt, an observer of social, ethnic and gender differences and a conscious

critic of colonialism. In her literature and in much literary criticism of her works, one finds insights into her specific positioning and ideas, matured precisely because of her own experience in the Nile country. Through her magazine *Fronte Unito* she tried to encourage and develop such consciousness and change. But, as this paper has argued, her magazine was primarily addressed to the Italians of and in Egypt, who themselves were ridden with conflict and inequality, and whose bourgeoisie also embodied racialised divisions.

Again, how did her life in Egypt, alongside so many different social and national groups, influence her position over time? During those long years of incessant struggle against discrimination and the "parasitic Levantine class," she realised that she could no longer live there, as one "must be sovereignly rich, otherwise you feel like plague victims"[27]. She did however find the Egyptian life interesting, and claimed that, if she had been Egyptian, she would have "fully participated in solving the serious problems that need to be solved. In a way there is more freshness and youthfulness than in Europe[28]", as she wrote to her friend Sibilla Aleramo from Cairo on 10 December 1948 (Gialloreto 2015: 276).

One could see discrepancies or contradictions between her political ideals and activity and her living conditions within a bourgeois environment, nonetheless it is important to highlight the fact that Cialente tried to give voice to a critical consciousness of the colonial and power relations, which was not so commonplace even among the antifascist front. And she did so without overlooking the fact that she was a woman and spoke about and for women too. During her life in Egypt, female and feminist issues were already being debated: what Cialente knew about such debates, the press and movements in that country remains to be further investigated. In those years, Egyptian women were just like their European counterparts engaged in the fight for their emancipation (Papa 2020: 6). More broadly speaking, newspapers and periodicals shared and increased a globalised vision of the contemporary world, witnessing the fervent cultural and political activity of an internationalist network operating in and beyond the Mediterranean borders (Khuri-Makdisi 2010). In spite of possible contradictions, which further research can confirm or deny, we can read throughout Cialente's work a constant aspiration to a critical understanding of capitalistic social fractures, be they of class, ethnic or gender origins, which she denounced through literary and journalistic languages.

Finally, despite the intolerance she sometimes expressed about that country—also depicted as "dry and dull" and where one felt isolated[29]—Egypt became the space in which she moved between the Italian colony and Africa,

between her identity and difference, between the centre and the margins, between freedom and constraint. Writing is the means by which she reacted to, or rebelled, against an environment that *had* to be understood and interpreted. She would translate the mistrust and the different cultural and behavioural codes in her novels, where she sides with the weak and oppressed, the victims of abuse and racism (Gialloreto 2015: 262–63; Minghelli 1994: 228; Salsano 2005: 185–86). Moreover, she was an interpreter of her time and cultural moment, declaring that she became a novelist to respond to the social reality she lived in, even if, for many writers, the need to write and express this reality could be limited by economic constraints, which often "imposed" the way to write also independently from a writer's creativity and will. This is why, she argued, as an intellectual she identified her interests with those of the working class, interests that should change for both writers and workers.[30]

Let me conclude by quoting Fausta Cialente again. On her trip to Kuwait, in January 1956, her plane flew over the desert after a stop in Damascus. She was outraged to see the damage wrought by colonisation, damage which is still there for all to see since the autumn 2023: "the miserable refugee camps from Palestine, those of the first war with Israel […] what could the Western world and the Arab world expect, I wondered, from such a turpentine-ridden mass, from the young people and children growing up in those conditions, without home or country [...] Their anger would soon turn into hatred and an irresistible desire for revenge. I had often spoken of this to my husband, who had always been anti-Zionist. 'Create another nationalism?' I had heard him say long before those events. 'Aren't there enough of them already? Haven't they brought us enough misfortune? If they would at least have found a truly democratic and modern, i.e. tolerant state!'" (Cialente 1976: 244–45). Historian Calchi Novati (2011: 262) stated that "The line of sovereignty that cut the Mediterranean in half disappeared with decolonisation, but a power gap survives between North and South". More accurately, this line should have disappeared with the decolonisation processes, but the gap—far from simply surviving—still structures the asymmetric relations between the West and the Middle Eastern countries as the current status quo demonstrates.

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Notes

1 - Ruggiero N., *Fausta Cialente*, "Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani", 2017

https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fausta-cialente_(Dizionario-Biografico) (last accessed 27 October 2024).

2 - This can also be related to Egyptian national journalism, notably in the period of the Independence, when the first independent news agency in the Arab world was founded in Cairo in 1955. The agency claimed its autonomy (from the West) in being able to choose its information sources (Ferrando 2020: 19–20).

3 - "Quarta Italia" was also mentioned in a letter that communist Amadeo Bordiga sent to the Comintern on 29 January 1923 (found in the appendix with other letters that Antonio Gramsci used to receive for information) (Gramsci 2011: 190).

4 - *Millenovecentoquaranta* is the title of the first chapter of the unfinished tale *Middle East*, dated July 1947, annex to the nine notebooks of her war journal, written between 1941 and 1947 and donated by her daughter Lionella Terni Muir to the University of Pavia in 1998. This 1,710-page archive also includes letters, magazine articles and other annexes that Cialente inserted within the pages of the notebooks (Carbé 2021: 67; Rubini 2014a: 62; Rubini 2014b: 145). The friend she mentioned was the antifascist Paolo Vittorelli, *alias* Raffaello Battino, journalist for Radio Cairo and founder of the political organisation *Giustizia e Libertà* in Egypt.

5 - "Seen as a fifth column community, around 5000 Italian men of working age (a majority of the wage-earning members of the community) were arrested and sent to internment camps in Egypt's Eastern Desert," as reported by Viscomi (2016: 59).

6 - *Presentazione*, "Fronte Unito", n. 1, 1943.

7 - Ibid.

8 - M. Montagnana, *I compiti dell'ora. Un appello dell'Alleanza Garibaldi*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 11, 9 March 1944.

9 - Ibid.

10 - F. Cialente, *Togliatti. Incontro in Egitto nel 1944. 'Ma si – disse – sono Ercoli'*, in "L'Unità", 30 August 1964.

11 - *Sulla via del ritorno in Italia. Togliatti invia il suo saluto al "Fronte Unito" e ai prigionieri*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 12, 23 March 1944. Here Togliatti also noticed the misery of the country, especially that of the women and children in the streets, as well as "that silent, black slave" who had served their meal so ceremoniously at Fausta Cialente and Laura Levi's apartment in Cairo, as he remembered years later when he met them again in Rome. In Cialente's words, the man was not a slave and was really in charge of running the house.

12 - P. Andreotti, *Un po' di bilancio*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 3, 18 November 1943.

13 - P. Togliatti in "Fronte Unito", n. 12, 23 March 1944.

14 - F. U., *Gli italiani in Egitto*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 16, 18 May 1944.

15 - Fronte Unito, *Libertà o imperialismo?*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 3, 18 November 1943.

16 - C.D. M., *Gli italiani in Egitto*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 27, 1 September 1944.

17 - Ibid.

18 - E. T., *L'Università Popolare Libera*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 24, 11 August 1944.

19 - F. U., *Ricordate gli Italiani d'Egitto*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 16, 18 May 1944.

20 - Fronte Unito, *Libertà o imperialismo?*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 12, 23 March 1944.

21 - I.B., *Dopo cinque lunghi anni di guerra. La colonia italiana come sta*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 96, 28 December 1945.

22 - La creazione del giornale murale "La voce dei giovani", in "Fronte Unito", n. 79, 31 August 1945.

23 - F. Cialente in "L'Unità", 30 August 1964, op.cit.

24 - C. Straneo Caracciolo, *Il vice sindaco di Torino è una donna*, in "Fronte Unito", n. 79, 31 August 1945.

25 - See "Fronte Unito", n. 50, 9 February 1945 and n. 69, 22 June 1945.

26 - An excerpt from *Cortile a Cleopatra* was also published in "Giornale d'Oriente", on 1 January 1931, where Fausta Terni Cialente was introduced as a "valuable collaborator." She also wrote about the Egyptian landscape in some articles in 1936 and 1937 (El Behi 2023).

27 - Fondazione Gramsci di Roma, "Fondo Aleramo - Sezione cronologica 1940-1949", Lettera n. 252, Fausta Cialente Terni a Sibilla, Il Cairo, 10 December 1948.

28 - Ibid.

29 - Fondazione Gramsci di Roma, "Fondo Aleramo - Sezione cronologica 1930 - 1939", Lettera n. 134, Fausta Cialente Terni a Sibilla, Bulkeley, 23 November 1934.

30 - *Fausta Terni Cialente racconta come è diventata una scrittrice*, in "L'Unità", 19 April 1952.

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