

# Paper Soldiers on the March: Colonial Toys for Imperial Play

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- 1 Maria Pia Musso, *Il gioco e il fascismo. Il ruolo dell'ideologia fascista nelle esperienze del ludico durante il Ventennio* [Play and Fascism: The Role of Fascist Ideology in the Experiences of Play during Fascist Rule] (Rome: Aracne, 2005); and Martina Ercolano, "I giocattoli dei figli della borghesia fascista. Uno spaccato sulla Napoli di inizio Novecento," [Fascist Bourgeoisie Children's: A Split in Naples in the Early Twentieth Century] *Rivista italiana di Educazione Familiare* [Toys of Children of the Fascist Middle Class: An Insight into Early 20th Century Naples in Italian Family Education Magazine] vol. 1 (2017): 201–19. All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.
- 2 Dennis Doordan, "Political Things: Design in Fascist Italy," in *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion, 1885-1945: Selections from the Wolfsonian*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995); and Vittorio Linfante and Paola Bertola, *Il giocattolo italiano nella prima metà del Novecento* [The Italian Toy in the First Half of the Twentieth Century] (Milan: Editore 24 ORE cultura, 2013).
- 3 Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising Under Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).
- 4 Brian L. McLaren, "The Tripoli Trade Fair and the Representation of Italy's African Colonies," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002): 171–97.
- 5 Gianluca Gabrielli, *Il curriculum "razziale." La costruzione dell'alterità di "razza" e coloniale nella scuola italiana (1860–1950)* [The "Racial" Curriculum. The

Toys were among the most engaging forms of propaganda produced during Italy's fascist period. Scholars like Maria Musso and Martina Ercolano have ably investigated the politicization of toy design under fascism.<sup>1</sup> Their studies build on foundational work from Dennis Doordan and on recent catalogs curated by Vittorio Linfante and Paola Bertola that examine the fascistization of board games. Such games include "The Conquest of Abyssinia," which I explore further in this article.<sup>2</sup> Taken in sum, these studies show how toys and games passively familiarized Italian children with the Fascist Party's expectations for proper adult behavior.

Benito Mussolini's fascist regime leveraged a vast range of propaganda to promote the regime's imperial ambitions. A raving press heralded the regime's imperial ambitions in Italian East Africa. Advertising, literature, and film characterized Africa as a "place in the sun" for working-class Italians seeking better lives, as noted by scholars like Karen Pinkus, Barbara Spackman, and Ruth Ben-Ghiat.<sup>3</sup> Museums, such as the Museo Pigorini in Rome, and traveling exhibitions, like the Mostra dell'Africa Orientale Italiana [Exhibit of Italian East Africa], created architectural spaces that framed colonialism as tourism, as observed by Brian McLaren.<sup>4</sup> How were Italian children supposed to imagine fascism's East African empire? The regime provided explicit instruction in how to think like a colonist: Schools promoted what Gianluca Gabrielli has called, "a racial curriculum."<sup>5</sup> More broadly, Tracy Koon, Eden McLean, Minio Paluello, and Victoria De Grazia, have shown how imperialism shaped fascist childhood education through courses ranging from biology to history to geography.<sup>6</sup> In this article, I show how colonial toys fit within this broader body of imperial propaganda.

In this article, I argue that fascism's colonial toys and games were designed to prompt imperial play that actively marketed the East African occupation to Italian children through mimicry of the fascist occupation in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia.

Figure 1

Balilla toy gun (1930s). Wood and metal.  
Source: Libro e Moschetto: Mostra viruale permanente di oggetti, libri, ed immagini del ventennio fascista, Armi: Articolo 346 [Book and Gun: Permanent virtual exhibit of objects, books, and images from the Fascist period, Weapons: Object 346]. Photo by the author.



In the games, paper Askari and Dubat soldiers marched across kitchen floors under the command of Italian youngsters. I examine a playbook for *The Conquest of Abyssinia* boardgame to show how it provides an instructive guide to military conquest. Produced by a porridge company, this game brought empire into the domestic sphere. Other toys also miniaturized violence, placing it on the kitchen table with miniature colonial dishware for children. The Fucile Balilla (see Figure 1), meant for kids from six to twelve years of age, was a nearly perfect replica of the Moschetto 1891 model used by fascist soldiers. I then explain how financial tie-ins, demonstrating where these toys come from, reveal the economic structures that underpinned children's colonial propaganda via fascist government projects. Imperial play taught fascist lessons, associating militance, sobriety, and sacrifice with the pleasures of winning the game.

Colonial toys provided children, especially little boys, with interactive lessons in the dictatorship's expectations of military duty. Imperial play primed young Italians to see themselves as the future foot soldiers of fascist Italy in the East African empire.

### Futurist Approaches to Toy: Metal, Movement, and Modern Warfare

To understand how Italian toy designs became politicized under fascism, we must contextualize this period within the industry's broader developmental arc. In Italy, toys were not a primary trade, as they were in Germany, France, and England, but a secondary one. Carpenters, potters, and tailors used leftover pieces from their larger commissions to create small amusements. Italy boasted nationally specific toy designs, including the *presepi* [nativity scenes] of Naples and the puppets of the Commedia d'Arte and Carlo Collodi's beloved Pinocchio. From 1850 to World War I, Italian toy production converted from artisanal to industrial.<sup>7</sup>

Aggressive Italian toy designs have their origins in a 1915 manifesto: "The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe."<sup>8</sup> Together, Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero called for the *opera d'arte totale*, a total work of art, that would place people in environments that were avant-garde in every way. It was the first step to a futurist reworking of the world. In addition to traditional arts, like painting and sculpture, everything from fashion to music would be redesigned to improve their dynamism. The program for national regeneration included children's toys.

The manifesto called for building toys (by means of "plastic complexes") that would accustom the child to the following:

Construction of "Race" and Colonial Otherness in Italian School] (Macerata, Italy: EUM, 2016).

- 6 Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Tracy Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Eden K. McLean, *Mussolini's Children: Race and Elementary Education in Fascist Italy* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press); and Minio Paluella, *Education in Fascist Italy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 7 In the 1900s, the discovery of germs brought new hygienic norms into the domestic sphere. Homes more commonly included "nurseries" (i.e., rooms dedicated specifically to children's care), which then led to a norm of playtime.
- 8 These explosive ideas had surprisingly gentle origins. Depero and Balla based many of their ideas about what made for a good toy on a 1906 visit to the school of painter and ceramicist Francesco Randone. Randone founded the Scuola di Arte Educatrice in 1890 to "teach what wasn't taught in public schools." His program proved popular and successful, and in 1894 the Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione [Ministry of Public Instruction] in 1894 provided an official school seat in Via Campania 10. First-hand contact with nature and the arts, he believed, could improve the lives of boys living in the Roman periphery. What Balla and Depero took from these visits included the importance of first-hand experience and the power of the arts, but also something decidedly darker.

- 9 The Italian original reads, “Per mezzo di complessi plastici noi costruiremo dei giocattoli che abitueranno il bambino: 1) a ridere apertissimamente (per effetto di trucchi esageratamente buffi); 2) all’elasticità massima (senza ricorrere a lanci di proiettili, frustate, punture improvvisate, ecc.); 3) allo slancio immaginativo (mediante giocattoli fantastici da vedere con lenti; cassettoni da aprirsi di notte, da cui scoppieranno meraviglie pirotecniche; congegni in trasformazione, ecc.); 4) a tendere infinitamente e ad agilizzare la sensibilità (nel dominio sconfinato dei rumori, odori, colori, più intensi, più acuti, più eccitanti); 5) al coraggio fisico, alla lotta e alla GUERRA (mediante giocattoli enormi che agiranno all’aperto, pericolosi, aggressivi). Il giocattolo futurista sarà utilissimo anche all’adulto, poiché lo manterrà giovane, agile, festante, disinvolto, pronto a tutto, instancabile, istintivo e intuitivo.” Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero, “Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo” [Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe], Leaflet (Milan: Direzione del Movimento Futurista, 1915).
- 10 Depero also collaborated for larger commissions. For a puppet show at the Teatro dei Piccoli in Rome in April 1918, he designed a cast of futurist marionettes, animated by the Giorni dell’Acqua company, whose movements were set to otherworldly music from Alfredo Casella, Gerald Hugh Tyrwhitt, Gian Francesco Malipiero, and Béla Bartók.
- 11 Filippo Marinetti, the father of Futurism, wrote a poem dedicated to war toys. Performed in December 1940 at the Teatro Mazoni in Milan, “il poema dei giocattoli guerreschi” [The poem of the war toys] was dedicated to the children of combatants. See Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Il poema dei giocattoli guerreschi: detto da Marinetti nella mattinata di Patriottismo Fascista Guerriero organizzata al Teatro Manzoni di Milano dal Sindacato,” vol. 5, n. 12, [http://futurismo.accademiadellacrusca.org/immagine.asp?idscheda=196&file\\_seq=1](http://futurismo.accademiadellacrusca.org/immagine.asp?idscheda=196&file_seq=1) (Milan, Rome: Autori e Scrittori, Mensile del Sindacato Nazionale, December 1940).

1. Laughing very openly (as a result of excessively funny tricks);
2. Maximum flexibility but without resorting to throwing bullets, lashes, sudden stings, etc.;
3. The imaginative impulse (through fantastic toys to be seen with lenses; boxes to be opened at night, from which pyrotechnic marvels would burst; devices in transformation);
4. To infinitely tend and provoke sensitivity (in the boundless domain of noises, smells, colors, more intense, more acute, more exciting); and
5. Physical courage, struggle, and WAR (through huge toys that will act outdoors, dangerous, aggressive). The futurist toy will also be very useful to adults because it will keep them young, agile, cheerful, casual, ready for anything, tireless, instinctive, and intuitive.<sup>9</sup>

Futurist toys made a show of rejecting the traditional rules of toy production, design, and use. The ideal futurist toy was a miniature modern machine—fast, light, and loud—that glorified superhuman strength, mechanical speed, and imperial violence.

For example, consider the rocking horse, which was more fire-breathing dragon than trusty steed (see Figure 2). Rocking astride the fiery-orange metal body might have felt like riding a rocket: fast, cold, unsteady, thrilling. This toy—the very opposite of a teddy bear—did not aim to lull a child to sleep with cuddles and softness, but to provide a jolt of adrenaline.

In reality, even the most dynamic futurist toys were produced in old-fashioned ways. Rather than an industrial factory with assembly-line production, Depero founded an artisanal toy shop in his hometown of Rovereto, a “casa d’arte,” to craft his futurist toys. Charming wooden rhinoceroses were carved by hand.<sup>10</sup> Although futurist artists first pioneered the idea that Italian toys ought to “accustom the child to... physical courage, struggle, and WAR,” the Italian toy industry under fascism adapted these ideas to the new political moment.<sup>11</sup> They made use of regime projects in their product designs, miniaturizing the world of fascist adults to create attractive commercial items. As a result, private companies often designed more effective propaganda for fascism than the regime.

### *Italian Toy Production Under Fascism*

Under fascism, leaders relied on autarky (i.e., economic independence or self-sufficiency) to boost domestic industry as financial preparation for war. Protectionist economics shielded Italy’s paper and metal industries from foreign competitors. Patriotic consumption meant purchasing locally made cardboard, aluminum, tin, and

Figure 2

Rocking horse (1910s). Designed by Fortunato Depero. Painted wood and metal. Source: Museo del Cavallo Giocattolo, Grandate, Italy. Credit: Studio Pirovano.



linoleum, as well as embracing modern products produced by new technologies, such as Nicholas Appert's process of food canning. New factories producing autarkic paper and metal products sprung up across Italy's industrial north. Two rival toy companies, Industria Nazionale Giocattoli Automatici Padova (INGAP) (1919–1972) and Cardini in Omegna (1922–1928), provide a case study for how the industry worked. Both INGAP and Cardini were part of the Italian metal industry in the early 1920s before shifting their focus to toys. In fact, Cardini continued to can tomato sauce for Buitoni-Perugina, even as his toy planes took off. His name appeared on their red and yellow cans throughout the decade.<sup>12</sup>

INGAP and Cardini pioneered a distinctly Italian style in toy design. Rejecting the trudging realism of traditional Northern European toys, they made new Italian toys that were fanciful, sparking the imagination with bright colors and lightweight

12 Vincenzo Capuano, ed. *Museo del giocattolo di Napoli* (Naples: Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa, 2011).

Figure 3

Manifattura Confalonieri (1936).

Source: Museo del Giocattolo e del Bambino – Fondazione Franzini, who owns the object and photograph rights. [www.museuodelgiocattolo.it](http://www.museuodelgiocattolo.it)



- 13 Today, INGAP toys and others like them can be found in museums that sit on the foundations of former factories, in the exurbs of northern and central Italy (e.g., the Museo Veneto Giocattolo in Padua, the Museo del Giocattolo in Perugia, and the Museogiocando in Arcevia outside of Ancona). Bologna, the former site of the Agostino Marchesini toy company, boasts two toy museums, both focused on metal in motion: the Museo del Giocattolo in Movimento and the Museo del Cavallo Giocattolo.
- 14 Attilio Mussino continued his illustration career in the post-war period, illustrating, for example, some of the most famous book editions of Pinocchio in the 1950s.
- 15 Missionary Giuseppe Sapeto, based in Abyssinia, gained the ear of King Emanuele and suggested that Italian presence in the area would promote trade. At the same time, Raffaele Rubattino proposed establishing a steamship line through the newly opened Suez Canal and the Red Sea to India. The king, the monk, and the magnate formed a plan: Rubattino would purchase the Bay of Assab (in the future Eritrea) in his own name and with his own funds but would use the port to further Italy's national interests. To carry out the plan, Sapeto returned to the Red Sea on behalf of the company, completed the purchase, and bought more land to the south. By March 1870, an Italian shipping company had thus become claimant to territory at the northern end of the region, with its beaches and outlying islands. Two years later, Italy formally took possession of the nascent colony from its commercial owners.

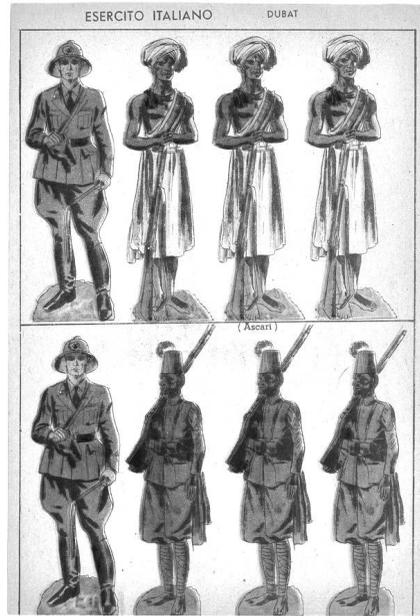
designs. In 1922 INGAP merged with a larger business run by Anselmo and Tullio Zinetti and the Casale family. INGAP employment ballooned over the next few decades, growing from 20 to 600 employees between 1920 and 1938.<sup>13</sup> By the end of this period, the factory was 18,000 square meters in size and produced more than 400 different types of toys. Cardini's hiring kept pace, measured in prestige rather than in numbers, with major designers like Attilio Mussino joining the ranks. Mussino's illustrations transformed packaging into part of the toy. Toy airplanes, trains, and trams arrived in colorful cardboard boxes resembling garages, tunnels, and airplane hangars.<sup>14</sup> Cardini was also the first Italian toy company to advertise directly to young consumers, with a weekly spot in *Corriere dei Piccoli*, the most widely read children's publication during the period.

#### *Paper Soldiers on the March*

Benito Mussolini's colonial troops invaded Ethiopia in October 1935, but Italian interference in East African affairs began much earlier, with commercial expansion led by both church and state in the late nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Askari, native east African soldiers, were among the first local troops deployed in East Africa. The first Eritrean battalions were raised in 1888 from Muslim and Christian volunteers, replacing an earlier Basci-Buruk corps of irregulars. The Eritrean Askaris initially served only in infantry battalions, although Eritrean cavalry squadrons (*penne di falco*) and mountain artillery batteries subsequently were raised. By 1922, units of camel cavalry (*meharisti*) had been added. These Eritrean camel units also were deployed in Libya after 1932. During the 1930s, the fascist regime also added armored car units to the Askari corps. Of the 256,000 Italian troops serving in Italian East Africa by 1940, roughly 182,000 were recruited from Eritrea, Somalia, and the recently occupied (1935–36) Ethiopia. Turning to the world of toys, the 1936 Manifattura Confalonieri created a scene in which papier-mâché figures allowed children to reenact and play out the violence of rifles and Gatling guns, pointed at a man who seems to be an Eritrean civilian (see Figure 3).

Figure 4

Paper soldiers of the *Esercito Italiano* [Italian military] (mid-1930s). Printed by Gallo, Italy. Source: Wolfsonian Museum, XC2014.12.12.38.4, Miami, FL. Published with the permission of The Wolfsonian—Florida International University (Miami, Florida).



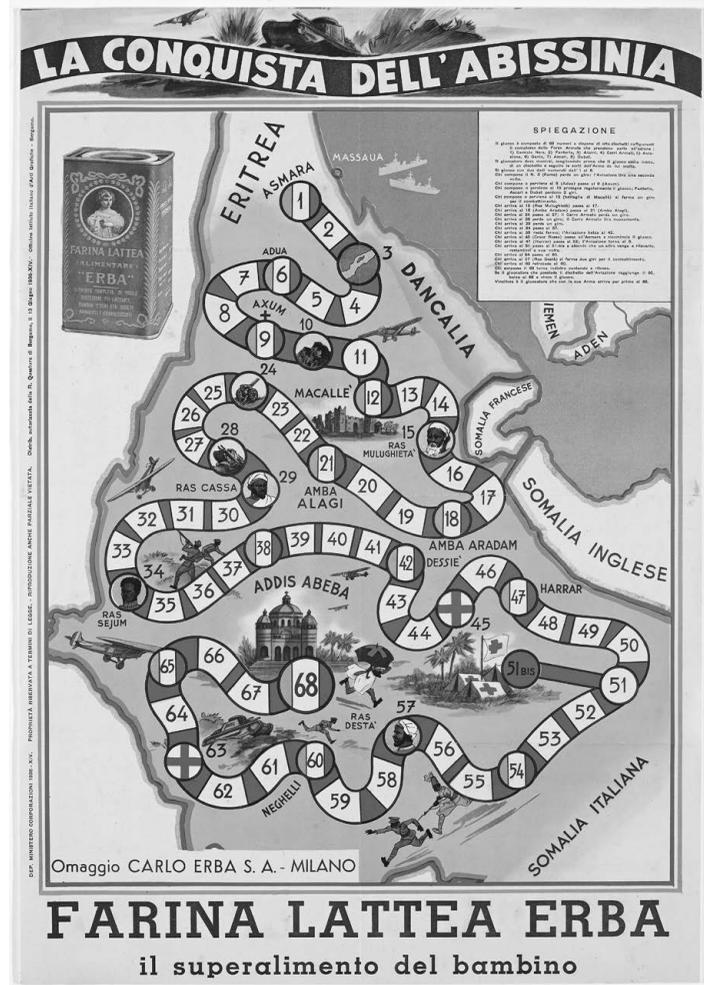
In addition, paper soldiers came in colored, cut-out sheets, like Edizioni Gallo's *Esercito Italiano—Truppe Coloniali—Fanti* [Italian Military—Colonial Troops—Infantry] (see Figure 4). This printout included eight four-inch-tall figures for playing war: two Italian soldiers, three Dubat, and three Askari. The ratio of one Italian officer to three East African soldiers was typical, suggesting to children that Italians commanded and East Africans served.<sup>16</sup> Another example, Edizioni Ribar's *Polizia Coloniale* [Colonial Police] paper soldier set, illustrates how children might have played with the toys.<sup>17</sup> Many paper soldiers appeared to stand on a patch of earth, a platform marked by a dotted line. Here, children folded the paper. This posture enabled the paper soldier to stand at attention, upright on the floor, as the child strategized the courtyard battles and recreated famous Italian wartime tableaux of colonial victories.

Although Italian children may not have been familiar with the military history of the Eritrean corps, playing with paper soldiers taught Italian boys to recognize their uniforms. Gallo editions' paper soldiers showed that the Eritrean regiments in Italian service wore high red fezzes with colored tufts and waist sashes that varied according to each unit. The 17th Eritrean Battalion had black and white tufts and vertically striped sashes, while the 64th Eritrean Battalion wore both items, in scarlet and in purple. White uniforms were worn for parades. Khaki was reserved for service duties. The Somali Askari were similarly dressed, although with knee-length shorts. Dubat was the designation given to armed irregular bands used by the Italian Royal Corps of Colonial Troops (*Regio Corpo di Truppe Coloniali*) in Italian Somaliland from 1924 to 1941. From their establishment, Dubats wore the white

16 Gallo, *Paper Soldiers of the Italian Military: Askari*, printed mid-1930s, Italy (Wolfsonian Museum, ITAL XC2014.12.12.38.3, Miami).

17 Ribar, *Paper Soldiers of Colonial Police*, printed mid-1930s, Italy (Wolfsonian Museum, ITAL XC2014.12.12.38.5, Miami).

Figure 5  
 Board game, *La conquista dell'Abissinia* [The Conquest of Abyssinia] (1936). Printed by Farina Lattea Erba Cereal Company, Bergamo, Italy. Source: Wolfsonian Museum, ETH XB1992.1787, Miami, FL. Published with the permission of The Wolfsonian—Florida International University (Miami, Florida).



*futa*, a traditional Somali sarong-like garment. They also wrapped smaller *futa*, or turbans (*dub*), around their heads, which were assiduously maintained. The term *dubat* (literally, white turban) derives from this use. In the Gallo editions, Somali non-commissioned officers were distinguished by green, red, or black lanyards and tassels, according to rank.

The high degree of specificity in these designs for paper soldiers meant that boys, as teen recruits, would not have to be instructed in the critical minutiae of the East African military hierarchy. After years of imperial play, they could have spotted a uniform in the brush and decoded that soldier's martial rank and national origin, essentially identifying friends and foes at a glance.

#### *Playing Empire with Colonial Board Games*

The Conquest of Abyssinia, Farina Lattea Erba's imperial board game, invited children to walk in the footsteps of fascist foot soldiers and the Italian industrial titans who came before them (see Figure 5). Illustrations of steam ships, palm trees, and Italian

military progress were printed in bright color lithograph on heavy cardboard stock by *Officina Istituto Italiano d'Arte Grafica Bergamo*. This tabletop amusement for children represented a significant advertising investment on the part of *Carlo Erba S.A.*, the Milanese food company. Measuring two feet by one foot, it would have dominated the table as children played the game at breakfast (presumably consisting of the cream of wheat hawked by the company). *Carlo Erba S.A.* provided this toy *in omaggio*, the gift that came with a number of porridge box purchases.

In this colonial version of the Game of the Goose, children reenacted the key events of the First Italo-Abyssinian War along a track of 68 squares.<sup>18</sup> Traditional goose games would pit two or more players against each other in a race. Moves are determined by the throw of the dice. Players would move back and forth through 63 squares while dodging obstacles or accessing their aid: the bridge, the hotel, the well, the maze, the prison, and death. Each hazard would have a number and each a different penalty. The first player to reach the end of the track won. In the fascist game, children rolled two die to move their disk both chronologically—from 1870 to 1936—and geographically—from Massawa, Eritrea to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The disks represented the armed forces that took part in the action. Thus, children could choose their disk to ally themselves with the Italian forces (Black Shirts, Infantry, Alpinists, Civil Engineering), the African troops fighting for the Italians (Ascari, Dubat), or martial technology (tanks, aviation).<sup>19</sup> Children already would have been familiar with the uniforms of many of these Italian military divisions, thanks to the complementary toy genres like the paper soldiers. When they selected an identifying chip, they decided who they wanted to be in this imaginary imperial world.

The track began in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, and the first Italian entry to East Africa. In 1885, Italian forces occupied Massawa, reaching an accord with Abyssinia that stipulated free transport of Abyssinian goods to Massawa. In 1887 about 500 men in the Italian forces were defeated at Dogali—the famous 500 for whom the Roma Termini's Piazza Cinquecento are named. Another disastrous battle for the Italians, the Battle of Adwa, took place in 1896. The game had Adwa as the goose game's Bridge (typically square six): It was a square that allowed for a quick move ahead. Players could roll a six and land on Adua, then go straight to square nine and arrive in Axum. Perhaps this quick move from Eritrea to Ethiopia constituted a chance to erase Italy's recent military defeat with a reference to the glory of the ancient Romans in Axum, suggesting that imperialism was inevitable. If players landed on square

18 The Game of the Goose was developed in Italy in the late 1500s and was subsequently distributed across Europe. Famously, a version of the Goose Game was given by Francesco De Medici I of Florence to King Phillip II of Spain sometime between 1574 and 1587. Stewart Woods, *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012).

19 Italian originals were labeled as follows: *Camicie Nere*, *Fanteria*, *Alpini*, *Genio*, *Carri Armati*, and *Aviazione*.

ten, the mountainous terrain outside of Axum, those whose disk represented three military divisions—Infantry, Askari, and Dubat—would lose two turns apiece. Military technology, if it was not representing a player, flew free across the territory. Five planes, two steamships, and two tanks careened across the board, and they could be supplemented by players whose disk represented a plane or tank. One plane flew near Axum, buzzing space 11. On square 12, the Battle of Macallè was marked by a castle fortress. In this “Hotel,” players lost a turn: The logic was that they had to wait for the battle to take place. Thus, at square 15, Ethiopian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ras Mulughietà Yeggazu waited for the battle, and his defeat brought players ahead two spaces, to square 17. Ras Mulughietà, along with his son, Tadessa Mulughietà, were killed during the retreat of his defeated army from Amba Aradam (square 18 in the game).

The Battle of Amba Aradam was one of the first sites of Geneva Convention violations by the Italians.<sup>20</sup> For four consecutive days, Italian Marshal Pietro Badoglio unleashed the full power of the Italian Air Force on Ras Mulugeta’s Ethiopian armed corps, raining 40 tons of mustard gas on the fleeing soldiers. Landing on square 18 allowed players to jump ahead three spaces to square 21, Amba Alagi. The Battle of Amba Alagi was the first in a series of battles between the Italian General, Baratieri, and Ethiopia’s Emperor Menelik during the First Italo-Ethiopian War. Although the Italian forces were defeated, Amba Alagi did have a silver lining for General Baratieri. Prime Minister Crispi’s flabbergasted cabinet agreed to advance twenty million lire, provided that Baratieri could ensure that the disaster would be stopped.

The board game figured the next ten squares as skirmishes. Lacking people, places, or clear dates, the narrative of the Western Ethiopian engagements evoked confusion, violence, and disorder. In the game, who was fighting whom in specific terms, or where the fights were fought was no longer clear. Artillery itself becomes the actor. Square 24 led directly to square 27, marked by a cannon. Here, the tank lost a turn. But on square 28, the tank would get a second chance because arms were allowed to roll twice. On square 29, players met commander Ras Kassa, and here they would lose a turn, with this imperial version of the well hazard. At square 34, players could skip three spaces to 37, landing on Ethiopian royal Ras Sejum, a fascist sympathizer until 1941. Ultimately, flying above the East African territory was the way to win: If the Aviation player landed on square 65, they would fly to square 68 and win the game. According to the rules, the winner of *The Conquest of Abyssinia* was the player who, “with his weapon, is the first to arrive at sixty-eight.”

20 On the Italian use of poison gas in Ethiopia, see Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale* [Italians in East Africa] (Milan: Mondadori, 1992).

The board does not distinguish the borders between Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, perhaps because European powers were in the process of realigning them even as children played the game in Italy. Moreover, *The Conquest of Abyssinia* collapsed the many, simultaneous battles into a false representative few that favored Italian victories. No matter what, the game ended with an Italian child's landing on square 68, allowing the child to claim Addis Ababa for Rome. Because only Italians played, Italians always won.

#### *Imperial Cereal from Farina Lattea*

The company Farina Lattea Erba brought colonialism to breakfast. To connect children's porridge consumption with Italian military might, the product's advertising banner suggested that superfoods fuel future *übermenschen*: "Erba Cream of Wheat: the child's superfood: a complete food for easy digestion by nursing infants, children of all ages, sick and convalescent adults." Slurping spoonfuls of Erba-brand porridge would prepare Italian boys for war by strengthening their bodies for soldierhood. Like the INGAP and Cardini companies, Farina Lattea Erba owed its success in part to the Italian canning industry. Tin packaging meant that cream of wheat could travel without spoiling, to be consumed in the colonies as one of the comforts of home.

Italian children could even eat their morning cream of what out of a 1935 line of colonial dishware from ceramics maker Ginora, called "Figli di Lupa" (see Figure 6). These tiny cups and plates showed camels, palm trees, and huts alongside the cannons, tanks, and guns used to take them. Key to the construction of children's racism, this reduction in scale conveys an empire that you can hold in the palm of your hand. Advertising and illustration reduced the actual violence to miniaturized play. As Achille Mbembe observed about everyday life in Cameroon under French rule: "What marked violence in the colony was, as it were, its miniaturization; it occurred in what might be called the details. It could erupt at any time."<sup>21</sup> Ginori also created "Fisher-Price"-type weapons for the scenes: Their shapes were rounded, and all human evidence of violence was removed. This artillery was, for lack of a better term, cute. It was therefore dangerously approachable. Children might barely have noticed that the tank was cracking a palm tree and that the cannon was still smoking.

If the Italians who ate their breakfast from the "Figli di Lupa" dishes grew up and moved to Ethiopia, then this product brand would continue to provide them with comforting memories of Italian childhood, steeped in watercolor imagery of pastel

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21 Achille Mbembe, cited in Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995).



Figure 6

Tableware set for Figli di lupo [Sons of the Wolf] ceramics line. Made by Ceramica Ginori, 1935, Milan, Italy. (Museum of Modern Art, "Century of the Child" show, New York, United States.) Private Collection Schito, Genova, Italy.

muskets and petite pith helmets. Ginori built factories throughout the colonies.<sup>22</sup> Private industries focused on eating, like Ginori ceramic dishes and Farina Lattea porridge, stood at the center of fascist government policy in the East African colonies. By 1939, more than 2,000 factories, chiefly operating with Eritrean laborers newly arrived from the surrounding countryside, produced everything from food and drug products (e.g., pasta, cooking oil, dried meat, and tobacco), to clothing (buttons and hides), to construction materials. Industry led to an urban population boom of Italians and East Africans alike: The Italian population in Asmara increased from 4,600 to 75,000 in 5 years. And with the involvement of East Africans in the industries, trade and fruit plantations expanded across the Horn of Africa. Some of these plantations were owned by Eritrean, Ethiopian, and Somali citizens. In other words, agricultural concerns and the food industry left their mark on the East African colonies in a fundamental way. In many cases, food companies were the de facto colonial government.

#### *Collect the Colony to Win Your Toy Gun*

Metal toys and games were costly luxuries during the fascist period. Using cheap paper, private food companies created toys—in reality, a new kind of interactive advertising—to encourage young Italians to become loyal consumers of their brands. To their food packaging, which at the point was a recent innovation, companies added *buoni* [coupons] that could be mailed back to the

22 Confederazione Generale Fascista dell'Industria Italiana. *Lo Sviluppo dell'Industria Italiana*. Associazione fra le società italiane per azioni [General Fascist Confederation of Italian Industry. *Development of Italian Industry*. Association of Italian Joint-Stock Companies] (Rome: Litografia del genio civile, 1938).



Figure 7  
 Propaganda pamphlet, “La campagna Italiana in Africa Orientale” [The Italian Campaign in East Africa] for Fascist Colonial Institute historical pamphlet series (1939). Printed by Liebig Meat Extract Company, Rome, Italy. Source: Wolfsonian Museum, ITAL B1992. 1817, Miami, FL. Published with the permission of The Wolfsonian—Florida International University (Miami, Florida).



company in exchange for illustrated *figurine* [picture cards] and the thematic albums to collect them (see Figure 7). In doing so, these companies created a new form of toy that promoted a new kind of play: the *concorso*, a commercial collecting contest. Once completed, albums could be sent away to win “fabulous” prizes, like Balilla baby dolls and guns. The *concorsi* turned children into salespeople, rewarding them for ensuring the consumer loyalty of their parents. In addition, the *concorsi* prompted children to request food products that children typically did not care about. Such was the power of the *concorsi* that fascist-period youngsters asked for yeast and beef broth, rather than cookies and chocolates.<sup>23</sup>

Toys, for children and adults alike, created material, financial, and culinary connections between the metropole and empire. Imperialism was one of the most effective motivators for the *concorsi* and *figurine*. For example, *concorsi* booklets printed *figurine* of Rodolfo Graziani next to Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. From March to December 1938, the Concorso Filatelico “Impero” [the “Imperial” Stamp Contest] printed colonial officials and cartoon animals next to one another, in near-identical *caselle* [squares]. The advertisement for the *concorso* played on the collection of empire, showing a map of Abyssinia. *Concorsi* encouraged children

23 As children grew into teens and then adults, the *concorsi* game came to be played by Italians of all ages. With grown-up prizes like cars (e.g., a Fiat 500 for 75 Flaminio Milanese houseware albums), refrigerators, or dining room sets (both for 50 albums), in addition to dolls and guns, these collecting games became a family affair. The increasing age range of *concorsi* players shows that this form of advertising was effective in creating new consumer habits that stuck for life: Kids who played turned into adults who played.

Figure 8

Child's workbook (1930s). Source: Museo della Figurina, Modena, Italy. Quaderno di bambino con figurine e ritagli di giornale dedicati al Fascismo, 1940. Italia. Courtesy Comune di Modena, Collezione Museo della Figurina—Fondazione Modena Arti Visive.



to interact with colonial generals and cartoon ducks as if both were approachable household heroes and to think of imperial space as something to be collected, square by square.<sup>24</sup>

Children did not always play the *concorsi* albums and cards in the way that the adult designers of these games predicted. Perhaps in response to this high cost, children sometimes would be content with collecting the *figurine* to paste into homemade albums to keep as a souvenir, rather than sending them away for a different, more economically valuable toy. Instead of mobilizing the troops for battle, children immobilized them for contemplation, pasting them into workbooks as collector's items. Some children even made their own collections, such as the Bolognese school girls' workbook shown in Figure 8. The workbook depicts a surprisingly wide spectrum of esteem for different fascist figures. Benito Mussolini seemed to have received the highest esteem, as evinced

24 In addition to the *Topolino* and *Paperino* cartoons, magazines for children (e.g., *Il Giornale delle Meraviglie* [Journal of Wonders] and *Albi a Colore* [Colored Comic Books]) participated in this *concorso*, as did the adult magazine *Le Grandi Firme*, "Albi a Colori" etc. Each album contained 30 caselle to be filled with *figurine*, and the first album was free. *Concorso Filatelico Impero* instructions (Museo della Figurina, Modena, Italy).

by the child's decision to place him alone, on his own page, with a doodled frame. An imperial aviator received less respect. On a page titled "Noi sogniamo l'Italia romana" [We dream of Roman Italy], the child used a red pen to beautify Tito Minniti with a touch of lipstick. More importantly, she engaged in a freer form of curatorial play than commercial albums would have allowed her to do. She mixed *figurine* from different brands to create her own thematic set instead. The illustrated card, "Un ferrito abissino" [A wounded Abyssinian], shows a somber man in a head bandage placed next to the probable cause of the injury, "Resistenza agli assalti nemici: Gli arditi al fronte Mekan" [Resistance to enemy assaults: the Fascists at the Mekan front]. She inked her title, "La Guerra" [The War] in blue cursive. In sum, children pushed the boundaries of play in ways that the album makers might not have predicted, producing both more ardent adherence to fascist cults of personality, as well as more subversive forms of resistance to that veneration.

Collecting picture cards and pasting them into albums constituted a studious form of play that engaged children in Mediterranean military history and the East African empire. For example, Liebig yeast produced an "Impero Italiano" series, depicting the Harari coffee harvesting and the Addis Ababa marketplace. The company also created a more explicitly martial set of cards, "Gli Alpini." The front of the cards showed an image of famous Italo-Ethiopian battles. The back recounted the battle's history. Sapis Meat Broth produced individual cards, such as "#2: La Battaglia di Adua" and "#5: La Battaglia di Passo Mekan." When placed together into albums, they created fascist-approved narratives of empire, similar to narrative in the game, *The Conquest of Abyssinia*. In "La Grande Italia: Figure Storiche," the cards elided two thousand years of political development, depicting ancient Roman emperors and fascist colonial generals as two halves of a historical coin, with no Renaissance in between. On the album cover, a Roman Centurion helmet faces a colonial pith helmet, including its inevitable goggles; the spears of antiquity blend seamlessly into shovels of modernity. The "Littoral Adriatic" [Littoral Adriatic] album pinpoints the center of the world on Trieste, Italy, and assembles Nazi German and Fascist Italy government figures together. The slot marked "Italian" stands next to the one marked "German." When children pasted the Axis powers together, their play demonstrated the bond in a physical way that the children could understand.<sup>25</sup> A set of "Anti-Sanction"-themed cards reflected the Liebig images of Italian East Africa. Once assembled, a complete album entitled the owner to a "beautiful toy war tank," complete with a machine gun that spit fire sparks.<sup>26</sup>

25 *Concorso* album, "Raccolta di 50 Figurine del Litorale Adriatico." Text reads, "La battaglia per l'europa sta per raggiungere il suo punto culminante. La Germania e l'Italia Repubblicana con i loro alleati affronteranno decisi e fiduciosi nella vittoria l'urto concentrico dall'oriente e dall'occidente. Con la vittoria le armi germaniche salveranno l'Europa e ne tuteleranno la civiltà per i migliori destini di tutta la comunità europea." c. 1939-1941. Ufficio Propaganda, Stampa, e Cultura presso il Supremo Commissario nella zona di operazioni del litorale adriatico. Price: 5 lire (Museo della Figurina, Modena, Italy)

26 *Figurina* text reads, "Un bellissimo carro armato, giocattolo automatic, con mitragliatrice che lancia scintille." The tank was the first prize of four available. Other prizes included a box of cookies or assorted candies made by the company, or "un interessante libro di avventure." Note that the backs of each *figurina* showed the tank. It is not clear whether it is a toy or the real thing. Framing text reads, "raccolta – figurine 'contro sanzioni' – con regalo – Ditta A. Mandredi. Fabbrica Caramelle e Biscotti. Reggio E." The central images show the words, "18 Novembre" as a rainbow over a tank. The tank moves up and left over a hill, busting through the word "Sanzioni" It crushes the letters N, Z, I, and O as part of its upward progress. (Museo della Figurina, Modena, Italy).

*“The Scramble for Africa” Today*

Italy’s empire in East Africa came to an end in January 1942, with the Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement acknowledging Ethiopian sovereignty. But the legacies of fascist imperialism continue to shape daily life and political relations between Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Italy today. Repatriation of fascist war booty to Ethiopia, such as the Stele of Axum, did not take place until 2008. Ironically, the stele sat in front of the center for the Food and Agriculture Organization in the Testaccio neighborhood of Rome, where global humanitarians met to discuss Ethiopia’s food shortages and hunger crisis during the early 1980s. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki has leveraged Italian legacies of Futurist architecture to showcase Asmara as a potential tourist destination, gaining a nod from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) agency in July 2017, despite the fact that the regime’s human rights record is among the world’s worst.<sup>27</sup> Today, far-right League party populists, like Matteo Salvini, leverage nativist sentiment against sub-Saharan African migrants to Italy to gain votes, even as he accuses France of “stealing” Africa’s wealth.<sup>28</sup> Awareness of colonial pasts on contemporary forms of migration and diaspora in multi-ethnic Europe informs these current debates.

In 1948 INGAP made fascist-inspired designs, like the “Giroplano” [tin airplane], which had a Balilla pilot dressed in a black fez hat and necktie, with his right arm raised in a Roman salute.<sup>29</sup> European imperialism in Africa still haunts the board game industry, even today. In 2019 GMT Games announced that *The Scramble for Africa* game had been scrapped due to “both topic and treatment” of its colonialist historical setting.<sup>30</sup> Terrain created for the game offered the possibility of mimicking colonial ignorance: Players could choose between playing across a geographically accurate map of Africa, or “drawing completely random terrain representing the mystery of 19th Century Africa.” Coffee plantations, which figured prominently in the Italo-Ethiopian Invasion and subsequent territorial seizures, provide a lesson in context. Absent Africans are a typical trope of contemporary colonial board games. In *The Scramble for Africa*, the “Plantation” chips show places (e.g., fields) and products (e.g., coffee) but no people. In his oft-quoted essay, “Postcolonial Catan,” Bruno Faidutti recalls his first moment of reflection on the trope: “One of the first remarks made by a fellow player when going through the rules was the ironic ‘where are the natives?’”<sup>31</sup> To win the game, players venture into the interior of the continent, “discovering land, people, and riches.” The ultimate goal of these activities is “to expand your colonial power.”

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- 27 Eritrea Human Rights Overview. Human Rights Watch, 2017. Compulsory military conscription often leads to indefinite service. Eritrean government’s near complete control of media coverage is evoked by the global ranking of second to last in terms of freedom of the press, behind only North Korea. Global Press Freedom Index. Reporters Without Borders, 2018.
- 28 Miles Johnson, “Matteo Salvini accuses France of ‘stealing’ Africa’s wealth,” *Financial Times*, January 22, 2019.
- 29 Vittorio Linfante and Paola Bertola, (2013), 70.
- 30 Jon Bolding, “A Cancelled Board Game Reveals How Colonialism Inspires and Haunts Games” *Vice*, April 12, 2019.
- 31 Bruno Faidutti, “Postcolonial Catan,” in *Analog Game Studies* vol. 2, ed. Evan Torner et al. (Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University ETC Press, 2017), 35–36. Faidutti notes that this absence is more obvious for Francophone players because the French language has only one word, Colon. In contrast, German, the original language of the game, provides both Siedler and Kolonist as translations, similar to the English options of settler and colonist. Naming the game, “Les Colons de Catan,” in French, drives the colonizing point home more readily than the English version, “Settlers of Catan.”

As scholars like Mia Fuller have noted, scholars of Italian colonialism have generally investigated archives, rather than objects.<sup>32</sup> To focus on the latter, this article has turned toward the history of design, showing how colonial toys prompted imperial play under Italian Fascism. Because imperial war-making and hygiene dealt in the devastating terms of sustaining life and causing death, child's play was utterly critical to learning how to get it right. Children had to learn that a paper soldier can be crumpled, but a person can be killed. *Concorsi*—with their collectable picture cards, albums, and prizes—demonstrate the indelible links between food companies, Italian children, and Italy's East African empire. Collections of the colonies implied ownership from afar, so that collecting became an act of patriotic consumerism, to be rewarded with a violent prize. By tracing colonial toys from design to distribution, this article has traced the origins of the adorable and the deadly. We have followed the dolls and guns across their arc from northern Italian factories to the hands of children, who play with their fingers crooked around tiny triggers, practicing their aim.

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32 Mia Fuller, "Italy's Colonial Futures: Colonial Inertia and Postcolonial Capital in Asmara," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 4.