

The Italian public's enthusiasm for dictator Benito Mussolini and the Fascist Party peaked in the mid-1930s with the military occupation of Ethiopia. Troops for the *milizia volontaria* invaded the sovereign nation in October 1935 to establish Italian East Africa, an area that comprises modern-day Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. The occupation was hugely expensive, both due to its direct cost and in losses from trade sanctions by the League of Nations, to which both Italy and Ethiopia belonged. To balance the budget, all Italians were called to participate in the regime's colonial ventures. Men enlisted in the armed services. Women donated their gold wedding rings on the Giornata della Fede (Day of Faith, also literally translated as the Day of the Wedding Rings). Children vicariously participated in the Fascist regime's imperial project as they threw a pair of dice across the boards of games like *La conquista dell'Abissinia* (*The Conquest of Abyssinia*), *Alla conquista economica dell'impero* (*Economic Conquest of Empire*), and *Tombola storica geografica di Etiopia* (*Historical Geographic Bingo of Ethiopia*).

Italian conquest games of the Fascist era operate in the category of racing board games, wherein two or more players select chips to represent themselves and then throw a pair of dice to proceed across a board mined with obstacles (lose a turn) and larded with rewards (skip ahead two spaces). In *La conquista dell'Abissinia*, Italian children could choose to represent themselves on the board by selecting between chips depicting Italian military units and machines. Players could be the aviation forces. They could also be an airplane. These chips mattered because they signified how much power different players possessed in the context of Italian empire, and what they possessed in the colonial world. Train, ship, and plane chips allowed people to become machines. Military technology appeared to sanitize warfare, by distancing shooters from their human targets. Rules dictated that these chips moved through the game with fewer casualties. Conquest games rewarded the fastest movement through Abyssinia. Specifically, they blasted through decades of military history and thousands of kilometers of the Italian march across the Horn of Africa. The first square typically depicts the purchase of the Bay of Assab in Eritrea in 1870. The final square concludes with the conquest of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia in 1935.

Conquest games took liberties with military history, domesticating atrocities. In *La conquista dell'Abissinia*, the Italian Fascist Red Cross bombings in Ethiopia constituted the last major play to determine who could win the game. In the traditional Game of the Goose, square 51 is known as The Prison. Visually, this section of the board game calls attention to itself by involving the only half-move (*-bis*) of the game. As in the earlier game, landing on square 51 suggests that the player is wounded. Wounded players are placed in a special holding area, a Red Cross camp at square 51.5, where they must wait, losing all turns, until another Italian player arrives.

Landing on Dessiè, square 38, means that all players must stay in place except for Aviation, who flies ahead to square 42. In December 1935, the Italian forces

dropped forty incendiary bombs on a Seventh-Day Adventist mission compound, including one on its adjoining hospital. The Red Cross on the hospital's roof became a landing target. According to the Fascist narrative, the bombings were retaliation for Ethiopian brutalization of captured Italian soldiers. An Ethiopian man, perhaps Haile Selassie, hoists a black umbrella marked with the red cross. This image sits next to square 57, Ras Desta, which stalls the player for two rolls of the dice. Ras Desta proposed placing empty Red Cross tents at a distance from the real Red Cross center where the doctors actually worked. When Italians recognized this practice, they bombed without distinction.

At this point in the game, and only at this point, the outcome hangs in the balance. If you land on square 45, you must return to Asmara to restart the colonial enterprise. In the old Game of the Goose, square 45 is the Death hazard; here it is marked by a Red Cross camp. Similarly, the Red Cross in square 63 sends players back three spaces, to the Neghelli highlands near the Wadara forest, where Ras Desta's troops rallied. In other words, landing on or near the Red Cross always stalls forward progress in the Italian colonial game.

The game traces military history, but it does not move at a regular pace. Dice rolls introduce huge variance. Hazard squares send people whizzing forward or back or halt their progress altogether. In other words, *The Conquest of Abyssinia* functions as memory does. It highlights significant generals and their battles even as it steadily progresses through the day-to-day. Playing *The Conquest of Abyssinia* regularized chaotic military action and normalized war.

Game makers commissioned by food companies had financial stakes in the commercial success of these games. At the same time that Italian children played games of imperial conquest in Italy, private food companies established their retail presence in the Horn of Africa. Farina Lattea Erba, a cereal company, and Compagna Italiana Liebig, a yeast maker, produced and distributed games like *La conquista dell'Abissina* and *Alla conquista economica dell'impero* in exchange for box tops. Bingo games, like *Tombola storica geografica di Etiopia*, emphasized the act of collection through play. To win, children needed to assemble the right mix of Italian train stations, indigenous *tucul* huts, and electric stations to light the way. These imperial games taught future colonists not only how to conquer the Horn of Africa but also how to maintain power through the development and control of local infrastructure. In Fascist Italy, playtime meant learning how to move through colonial spaces, how to manage colonial goods, and how to interact with colonial people.

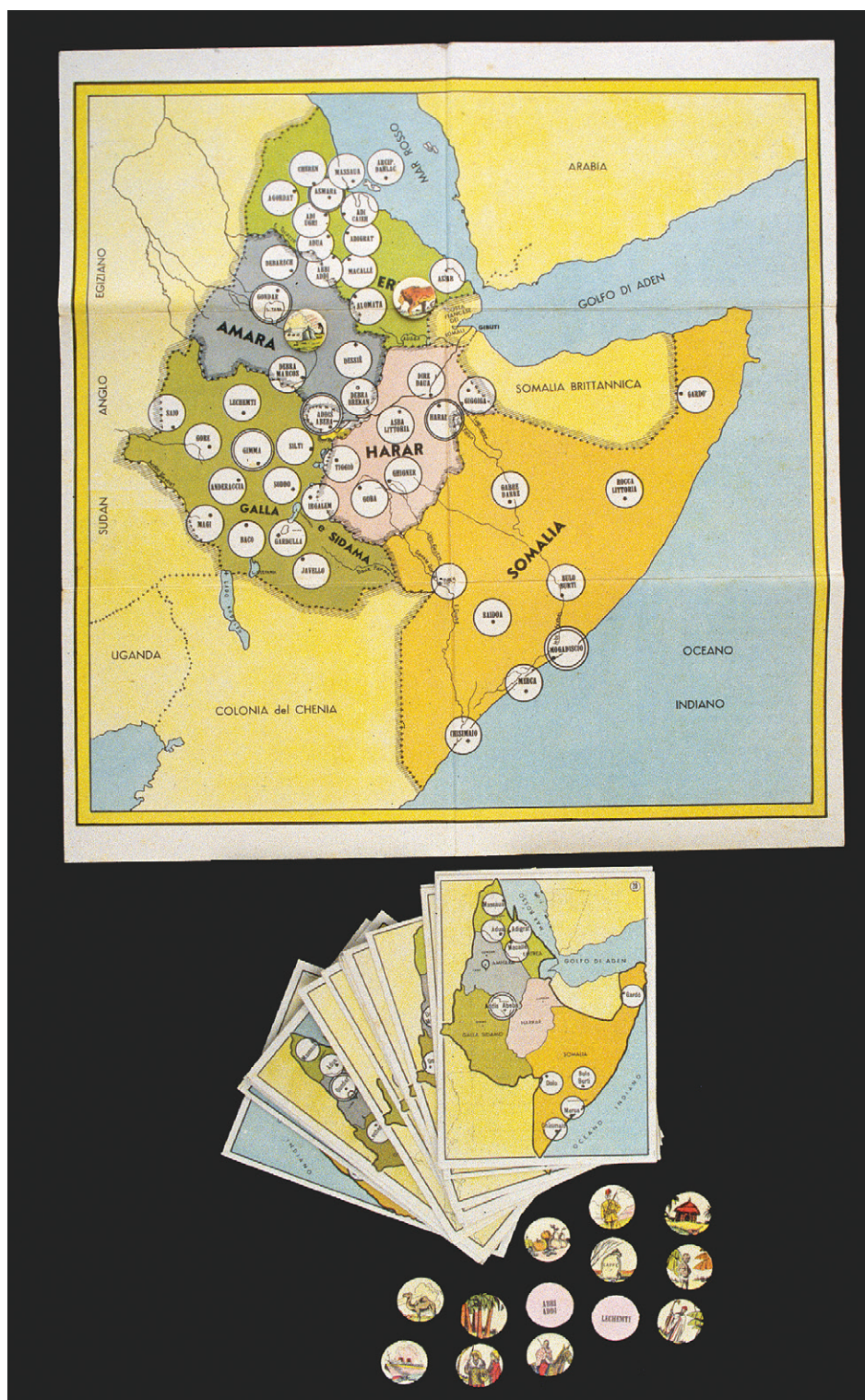


Figure 6.5: Game board detail of *La conquista dell'Abissinia* showing the Red Cross camp.

Figure 6.6: Game box for *Tombola storica geografica di Etiopia* (Historical Geographic Bingo of Ethiopia), created in 1937 by Nonno Ebe and published by Carroccio in Milan.



Figure 6.7: Maps and collectible playing pieces for *Tombola storica geografica di Etiopia*.



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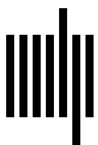
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