

Did Art by Western Front Soldier Predict the Russian Revolution? The Secret History of the ‘Guerra Alla Guerra’ Peace Postcards

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ABSTRACT

The allegorical artwork ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ (War against War) was created by the Italian-Australian artist Ernesto Genoni (1885-1975). It features a young woman wrapped in red and rising out of a battlefield. Her wrap billows over the war-scape to form a massive red flag. The work was published in 1916 as a postcard by the Milan-based Pro Umanità organisation headed by Rosa Genoni. During 1916, Ernesto Genoni enlisted as a volunteer in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and he served on the Western Front as a stretcher bearer. By the end of 1916 he had been plucked off the battlefield and conscripted into the Italian Army where he refused to take the oath of allegiance. He subsequently served time in several military prisons for insubordination and as a medical orderly in the Italian military hospital in Verona. The ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ postcards were sold in Italy and Australia to fund the war-relief work of Pro Umanità of feeding POWs and supporting widows and orphans in Europe in the wake of the catastrophe of the First World War. ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ was prescient in that it appears to illustrate the spirit of revolution growing out of the devastation of war. The following year the Russian Revolution overthrew the Czarist regime (in 1917). By the close of WWI in 1918 the talk of revolution and its threat to the ‘established order’ was rife throughout Europe. The original artwork has not been located. The postcard was reproduced for the 2018 centenary of the Armistice of 11 November 1918.

Keywords: Ernesto Genoni, Rosa Genoni, Somme, Western Front, stretcher bearer, Australia, Italy, World War 1, the Great War, war art, war artist, pacifist art.

INTRODUCTION

When Ernesto Genoni (1885-1975) enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) for the Great War he stated his occupation as “labourer” (AIF, 1916a). In fact, he was an Italian artist, trained for five years at the renowned Brera Academy of Fine Art in Milan (Paull, 2014). At the time when the war broke out, Ernesto was in Western Australia (WA) visiting his siblings who had migrated to Australia, and who were, by then, well established ‘on the land’ in the southern wheat-belt of WA, with their own houses, farms and families.

Ernesto was the youngest of eighteen children. The eldest, Rosa Genoni (1867-1954), remained in Milan, as did the youngest, Ernesto, who trained at Brera. The other surviving siblings migrated to Australia in search of a better life and, in the case of the boys, to avoid the military draft. In the closing decades of the eighteenth century and into the early decades of the nineteenth century, Italy had embarked on a series of ill-conceived colonial wars in North

Africa. Each of the Genoni boys was liable for conscription into the Italian army when he turned eighteen years. The pacifist family thwarted this by progressively despatching their teenager boys to Australia, where they quickly learned the language, adopted their new country, and ‘made good’.

With this pacifist background, and in the case of Ernesto with his firmly entrenched pacifist views, it remains a mystery why he volunteered for the AIF. And enlistment was explicitly against the wishes of his sister Rosa, the de facto matriarch of the family. Ernesto stated that: “Every young man was then enlisting so I thought to enlist too ... I went to Bunbury [WA] to enlist with the purpose of serving in the medical corps” (E. Genoni, c.1955, p.12). Strictly speaking, Ernesto was quite ineligible to join the AIF, he was, after all, a foreigner, an Italian, a visitor to the country (he had not migrated and he was not naturalised). But these were not times for pettifogging bureaucracy, Britain was at war, and therefore Australia was at war. Unlike almost all of the belligerent countries engaged in

Did Art by Western Front Soldier Predict the Russian Revolution? The Secret History of the ‘Guerra Alla Guerra’ Peace Postcards

the conflict, whether Entente or Axis powers, Australia’s forces were all volunteers. The government of the day was keen on instating conscription in the young country (Australian federation was in 1901). But in two separate nation-wide referenda, the people rejected the proposition. So the force that Australia sent to the killing fields of Europe was an all-volunteer force. To meet the recruitment targets a blind-eye was many times turned on volunteers who were otherwise ineligible, by dint of age or nationality (for example).

There were official war artists sent by Australia to record the war (e.g. Dyson, 1918). Ernesto was quite likely unaware of this. Perhaps he thought that declaring his profession as ‘artist’ would have drawn attention to himself and been a cause for rejection, rather than the commonplace occupation of ‘labourer’. In any event, it is clear that the AIF had no inkling that they were sending an Italian-trained artist to the Western Front.

When he visited Australia (and places in Italy), Ernesto travelled with his art materials. The subjects of approximately one hundred Ernesto Genoni paintings are known (to the present author), and they include portraits (e.g. Paull, 2017, 2018a), landscapes (e.g. Paull, 2014), cityscapes, still-lives, and spiritual-style artworks (e.g. Paull, 2016).

So, when Ernesto embarked on 17 April 1916 from Fremantle, WA (AIF, 1916b) clad in an Australian khaki uniform, it seems likely that he carried with him his paints and brushes. However, as a very unofficial Australian war artist it appears that he produced only one finished war artwork. That work is ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ (War on War) (Figure 1). The present author was introduced to a postcard of Ernesto’s ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ in Milan preserved in a family collection in Italy. This paper reveals some of the story of that artwork, ‘Guerra alla Guerra’.

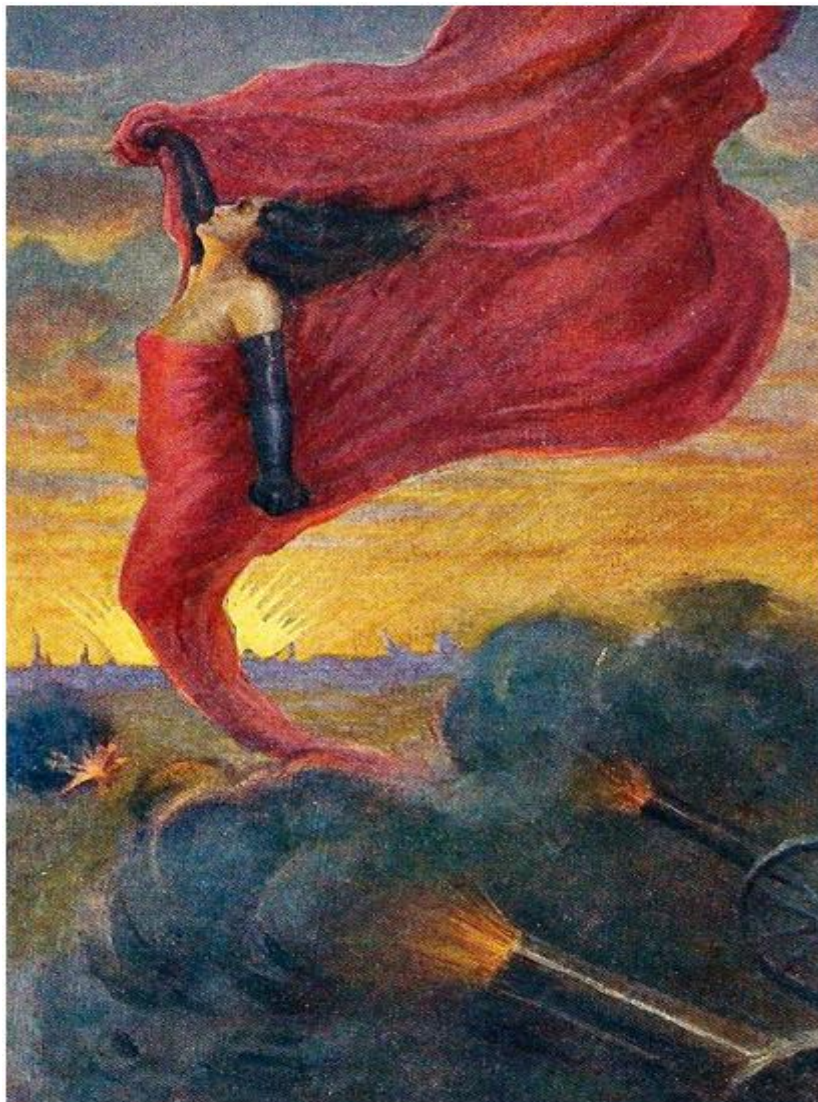


Figure1. “Guerra alla Guerra’ by Ernesto Genoni, 1916

METHODS

For the present paper the author had access to original art and documents held by various Genoni family members in Australia and Italy, to family and others who remembered Ernesto, to several unpublished memoirs written by Ernesto Genoni, to the war records of the State Archives in Milan, Italy, to the AIF records and other government records held in Australia, and the National Library of Australia's Trove, the records of Australia's newspapers. The vintage postcard was reproduced in 2018 and distributed to commemorate the centenary of the Armistice (11 November 2018) (DPAC, 2018) with an objective of eliciting feedback from the extended Genoni family members and others.

RESULTS

Physical attributes of the vintage postcard: The vintage postcard measures 88mm x 137 mm. It is printed in colour on matte card of approximately 280gsm. On the reverse, in the left hand gutter is printed "Visto R. Prefettura - Milan" (this may be a war-time release from the Prefecture of Milan), there is a vertical line splitting the postcard into a message area on the left and an address area on the right, there are four horizontal lines printed for an address in the right-hand panel, there is a rectangle in upper right corner enclosing the statement "Stampata in Italia". Two printed versions of the vintage postcard were sighted, one with a white border around the 'Guerra alla Guerra' image and one version borderless (separate printings).

Title and artist of the vintage postcard: On the reverse the postcard reads "'GUERRA ALLA GUERRA' di E. Genoni".

Rudolf Steiner: Some sighted versions of the vintage postcard bore a postcard-size paste-on sheet with the caption reading: "La guerra fratricida cesserà solo col dare a tutti una vita dignitosa e relativamente agiata, in una organizzazione statale tripartita in cui i trust capitalistici non sfrutteranno le masse e non potranno influenzare la politica degli Stati" Vedi: PUNTI ESSENZIALE DELLA QUESTIONE SOCIALE (Bocca - II ediz.)".

The present author translates this as: "The fratricidal war will cease only by giving everyone a dignified and relatively wealthy life, in a tripartite state organization in which the capitalist trusts will not exploit the masses and will not be able to influence the politics of the States". See: ESSENTIAL POINTS OF THE

SOCIAL QUESTION (Bocca - II edn.)". This is a quote from Rudolf Steiner (his name does not appear on the paste-on). Steiner's book is 'Basic Issues of the Social Question' (Steiner, 1919).

Date of the vintage postcard: The postcard is undated. Based on a published letter by a sister in Melbourne, Australia, of Ernesto and Rosa, a working hypothesis is that the vintage postcard first appeared in late 1916.

Gina L'Hardy Genoni, living in Melbourne at the time, states in a letter to the editor published on 18 November 1916 that she received 1,000 postcards from Rosa in Milan to sell as fundraisers for prisoners of war (POWs) and those widowed and orphaned by the war.

Gina's heart-felt letter throws light on the spirit of the times, reveals her own fund-raising efforts for war-relief, introduces Rosa and Pro Umanità, and declares that she is at a loss to know how to sell 1,000 postcards from Milan:

"PRISONERS OF WAR - 'Tirano,' Mont Albert-Rd., E. Kew. My sister, Rosa Genoni, is a great worker on the committee of the Pro-Human Society of Milan, Italy. This society has undertaken to feed our Italian prisoners of war. They bake thousands of loaves of bread, and send them to Switzerland, which being a neutral power, has the right to feed the poor, unfortunate prisoners, who might otherwise starve to death. They have appealed in every village or town of Italy, and every small donation has a very treasured value. I, personally, have done some work amongst my friends, and so far I have sent all I possibly could to help, because this society also looks after the poor orphans and widows. They try very hard to bring help and a smile to every desolate home they know. I have been working at flags - I call them the 'port-bonheur' flags - I make eight of them, all the Allies'. They are made of the best silk ribbons. They are well made, and look rather pretty. I thought they would make a novelty, and a patriotic Xmas present. I sell them 30/- set, or 4/- each, and 5/- the Italian flag. It does sound dear, but, really, the work is long, and ribbons are of the best. As I have made up so many, Miss O'Conner suggested I should write and tell you of them; your help would really be a blessing to us. Every lady who spends 6/- which buys a bag of bread for one week to a prisoner receives from the society a letter of thanks, signed first by the prisoner himself. They have also sent me 1000 post cards to sell at four for 1/- and really I am

Did Art by Western Front Soldier Predict the Russian Revolution? The Secret History of the ‘Guerra Alla Guerra’ Peace Postcards

at my wits’ end to find a way out of them. A little card I send is to show how to collect shillings. The name of the donor is to be written at the back, and then the society acknowledges it. It is very dreadful to ask people for help in a country such as this one, where everyone gives and works not only for their own, but for the other nations as well. Really, I have not courage enough to make appeals through the public paper. Yours very sincerely, (Signora) Gina L’Hardy Genoni, ‘Phone 1818, Hawthorn” (L’Hardy Genoni, 1916, p.23).

Geographic provenance of the vintage postcard: It remains undetermined where Guerra alla Guerra was painted. At the outbreak of war (28 July 1914), Ernesto was in Western Australia. He enlisted on 25 February 1916 and trained at “Blackboy camp near Perth” (E. Genoni, c.1955, p.12). There was further training in Egypt, then with his battalion reinforcements Ernesto embarked from Alexandria, travelled to Marseille, then to a camp at Étaples, and onwards to the Western Front.



Figure 2. Ernesto Genoni, AIF 16th Battalion, with SB (stretcher bearer) armband (Sharp, 1916).

When he reached the front, Ernesto volunteered as a stretcher bearer and served at the bloody battles of the Somme, Ypres, and Pozières (E.

Genoni, c.1955) (Figure 2). He was discharged at the Western Front, on 18 October 1916, due to being conscripted into the Italian Army. He

Did Art by Western Front Soldier Predict the Russian Revolution? The Secret History of the ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ Peace Postcards

reported to the Italian Embassy in London on 19 October, and from there he travelled to Paris, Modane, Milan, and finally Verona. He was sent to military prison for refusing to take the Italian Army oath of allegiance (E. Genoni, c.1955).

There was no option for contentious objection in Italy at that time and the Italian Army was notoriously harsh with insubordination, General Luigi Cadorna was a brutal disciplinarian and he reintroduced the ancient Roman practice of decimation, and execution for subordination (Gooch, 2014; Thompson, 2010). Ernesto’s representation to the Military Tribunal included a reference from his Regimental Medical Officer which stated that “private Genoni, E. has for some time been a stretcher bearer in my infantry battalion and has done much meritorious work. His conduct has been excellent and he is reliable and brave. I am very sorry to lose him” (Steele, 1916). Captain Steele may have thereby saved his brave and reliable stretcher bearer from the firing squad.

Rosa Genoni had attended the Women’s Peace Congress in the Hague in 1915 as the sole Italian representative (Paull, 2018b). She had been actively thinking of ways to promote peace and offset the destructive forces of war since at least then. Rosa and Ernesto were in more or less regular mail contact as the circumstances permitted, so it may be that personal correspondence might yet surface and narrow down just where ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ was painted.

The original of ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ appears not to have survived (in any event it was not located). It is one of only two images by Ernesto Genoni depicting war and conflict. The other artwork is an oil painting, in portrait format, of approximately 25 cm x 40 cm, undated, which was recovered from Verese, Italy, by an Australian member of the Genoni family, and was subsequently brought to Australia, and is currently in a private collection in Australia. This other work features a single ethereal female figure rising above a deathly landscape (marked with crucifixes) and menaced by an uncompleted dark figure. This other war-themed artwork appears to be incomplete and was perhaps a preliminary work to ‘Guerra alla Guerra’. Just where Guerra was painted remains unclear.

As a commemoration of the centenary of the Armistice of WW1 (11-11-1918 to 11-11-2018),

Ernesto Genoni’s ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ postcard was reproduced bearing the Armistice Centenary logo (DPAC, 2018) and distributed, mostly in Australia but also to Italy, Switzerland, United Kingdom, USA and Russia. Although this elicited many favourable and appreciative comments, no new data emerged from this process. No relatives in Australia reported seeing such postcards amongst family papers and it was affirmed that Ernesto did not discuss his war service (like so many other veterans of WW1).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The artwork ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ is within a long-time tradition of women depicted as dominating a battlefield. In Guerra, the woman is the sole human figure depicted. This contrasts with Eugene Delacroix’s ‘Liberty Leading the People’ (1830) where the bare chested woman is bearing the French tricolour flag and is inciting the combatants forward (Gombrich, 1950). It contrasts also with Hermann Stille’s ‘Joan of Arc in Battle’ (1843) where the woman is depicted on horseback clad in armour bearing a split pennant with Christian motifs and leading belligerents into battle (Hermitage, 2018b). In Hans von Achen’s ‘Allegory of Peace, Art and Abundance’ (1602) the central figure is a nude woman bearing an olive sprig and with symbols of war, drums and weaponry, present but laid down (Hermitage, 2018a). The central figure of the National War Memorial in Adelaide (1931) is ‘the Spirit of Compassion’ portrayed by George Rayner Hoff as a bare chested woman, winged, bearing a sheathed sword in her right hand and supporting a dead soldier in her left arm (Inglis & Brazier, 2008).

By way of difference, in ‘Guerra alla Guerra’ the woman appears to arise out of the battlefield and transcend it. Her ethereality and femininity contrast with the war-landscape of canons, canon-fire, explosions, dark smoke and the horizon of ruined buildings. Unlike Liberty with her French flag and Joan of Arc with her Christian banner, Genoni’s woman transforms herself into a red flag of revolution, with her body forming the flag-pole accentuated by her long black opera gloves (Redwood, 2016) and with her scarlet wrap billowing behind her as a massive red flag of revolution. Her long black hair co-mingled with the drapery of the red ‘flag’ and accentuated by the blackness of her

gloves adds a touch of anarchistic symbolism, the black and the red, to the image.

The war was a time of great social dislocation. Spirits were so often upbeat at the outset of the war with the popular view that the war would be over by Christmas. As the war dragged on, and those aspirational Christmas victories failed to materialise, the harsh realities of modern industrial warfare began to sink in. Daily postings of missing and killed in action (MIA and KIA) notices began peppering the newspapers. Parents and wives, grandparents and children, dreaded receiving death notices of their loved ones. Spirits variously turned to disquiet, gloom, despair and anger. Two referenda held in Australia to approve conscription were defeated. The blockade of Germany ensured that the the military as well as the public suffered deprivations, some starved. With the war over, George Bernard Shaw declared "We are the happiest and proudest of empires ... but ... To win this war, we starved the children of Germany, and of many other lands as well" (Richter, 1919, pp.3-4)

What had begun with the distant news of the assassination of the heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg throne (Preljević & Spahić, 2015), led on to news of a cascading confluence of interlocking treaties, militaristic braggadocio and over-reach, and territorial avarice, and ultimately to ten million soldiers dead, seven million civilians dead (Mougel, 2011). There were multiples of those figures of broken soldiers, blinded, deafened, physically mutilated, psychologically traumatised, lame, amputees who would not live to fulfil the aspirations of their youth, nor live 'to make old bones'.

In Germany and other Axis countries food was in short supply during the war and after. "German scientists" calculated that "if an ordinary human being is to keep his health and strength then, his daily food must contain 2,280 calories ... in the latter part of 1917, and thereafter, the rations of the urban population contained only 1,000 calories ... this is barely sufficient for a child of two or three years old" (Bell, 1937, p.671). Many succumbed to disease, some died of starvation and many more were "subjected to prolonged hunger, but not to starvation" (Bell, 1937, p.672).

The Russian Revolution of 1917 overthrew the czarist regime, pulled Russia out of the war, and

changed the destiny of Russia forever. It presented as an option for a new future.

Lord Robert Cecil warned that "The whole fabric of our civilization is in danger. Unless we can really get the conditions of Europe back to normal ... it is impossible to exaggerate the danger that may be before us" (in Richter, 1919, p.59). General Smuts observed that "The Continent ... lies in ruins ... with its people broken, starving, despairing ... seeing only red through the blinding mist of tears and fears ... Europe is weltering in confusion and unsettlement" (in Richter, 1919, p.57).

Rosa Genoni wrote to a pacifist colleague during the war that "as soon as it will be possible (because now all meetings are forbidden) I will go from city to city to make pacifist propaganda ... I no longer believe in the honesty of our King, nor in the Queen's humanity ... I want to join the socialist party ... the only ones having humanity, courage and honesty ... All these tragic things will pass and the people will understand how they were fooled and they will revolt" (R. Genoni, 1916).

In this milieu of pain, suffering, loss, and hunger, throughout Europe, and beyond, the social order. was under scrutiny. How could a few bullets in Serbia ricochet around the world so that, in the course of 225 weeks, millions would die? There was the living example of the Russian Revolution. It was a 'solution' worthy of consideration, and many did just that.

In the Georges Simenon novel 'Maigret and the Minister' there is a character, Jules Piquemal.. Maigret's Inspector Lapointe reported: "Immediately after the war, Piquemal joined the Communist Party. The card was renewed for three years ... He has also belonged to the International League of Theosophy, based in Switzerland. You've heard of it? ... Piquemal had tried all manner of philosophical and social theories" (Simenon, 1978, p.474). In this snippet Simenon succinctly characterises what was the experience of many, not necessarily in the details, but of a personal quest for seeking new solutions.

Ernesto Genoni joined the Anthroposophical Society based in Switzerland in 1920. He married Lydia Hillbrand in February 1924. She was a young idealistic Austrian woman and a devoted communist. By the end of the year, what Ernesto called "the sad marriage" was over (E. Genoni, c.1955, p.19). Ernesto travelled to

Did Art by Western Front Soldier Predict the Russian Revolution? The Secret History of the 'Guerra Alla Guerra' Peace Postcards

Dornach, Switzerland, to work with Rudolf Steiner, he then migrated to Australia where he devoted the rest of his life to advancing the social and spiritual ideas of Steiner. Lydia moved to London and she remained a committed life-long communist.

'Guerra alla Guerra' did service as a peace postcard, as a fund-raiser for bread for POWs, widows and orphans, and it appears to have foreseen the spirit of revolution growing out of the chaos of the battlefield. As history records, the communist revolutions proceeded only so far, and often faltered in their implementation. Nevertheless, other less epochal but more enduring social revolutions grew out of the war, as, for example, the women of the 1915 Hague Congress (Barrier Miner, 1915; Paull, 2018b) progressively achieved their suffragette objectives in the years following the war.

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Did Art by Western Front Soldier Predict the Russian Revolution? The Secret History of the ‘Guerra Alla Guerra’ Peace Postcards

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