

WW2 NAZI AND FASCIST MALTA PROPAGANDA POSTCARDS

by
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In the Second World War (WW2) the Axis powers strove to conquer or subdue Malta by siege, starvation and intense bombardment, but then they also used Malta as a propaganda tool for internal consumption. Their publicity services promoted the publication of a number of morale-boosting postcards; both Germany and Italy being run as dictatorships, what the authorities allowed to be published had to conform to an agenda strictly at the service of a centralized authority. Publishers had greater freedom as to what to put on the market in the democratic Allied powers though, during wartime, censorship became quite as rigid in the Allied democracies as it was in the Nazi-Fascist totalitarian states. As postal services between belligerent countries are usually suspended for the duration of hostilities, these postcards were only meant to circulate inside the respective war zones or neutral states and could not reach enemy territory.

The number of postcards featuring Malta published in Italy and Germany during WW2 never reached high levels, and I will here try to illustrate and review those I am aware of. Many are quite scarce, others extremely rare.

Fascist Italy

These postcards fall under two main groupings: military propaganda and political promotion.

WW2 thankfully did not result in an invasion of the island by Nazi-Fascist armed forces, though this was always on the cards and serious preparations for a massive airborne conquest went into it, only to be repeatedly stalled at the last moment, mostly through Adolf Hitler's changes of heart. Apart from an assault on Grand Harbour by Italian E-boats and human torpedoes on July 26, 1941, the war action consisted mainly in air attacks on Malta by the *Regia Aeronautica*; the postcards record some of these episodes. Considering the impressive amount of Italian, German and conjoint raids, the number of postcards triggered by the blitz is not remarkable.

It would only be historically fair to here set straight a common misconception, born of ignorance and fostered by war propaganda – the cowardice and ineptitude of Italian wartime pilots. The truth was exactly the opposite: that British airmen feared and respected Italian pilots far more than they did German ones. All serious military scholars who have tackled the issue dispassionately agree that Italian pilots

generally showed astounding valour against all odds.

George Beurling, the legendary Canadian ace based on Malta, destined to become one of the greatest flying myths of the WW2, did not mince his words about the Eyeties (Italians) and the Jerries (Germans) who the Allied pilots had to fight. “The Eyeties are comparatively easy to shoot down. Oh, they’re brave enough. In fact, I think the Eyeties have more courage than the Germans. They will stick it even if things are going against them, whereas the Jerries will run”.¹

On another occasion, Beurling worded his thoughts differently: “The Jerrie are probably better overall pilots than the Italians, but they certainly let the Eyeties do their fighting for them when the going got tough”.²

It was the Italians’ inferior equipment and weaponry that crippled their air force, not the valour of its pilots. “The Italians were let down badly in the matter of their equipment. Only about half of their bombs went off, and those that did went ‘pop’ instead of ‘bang’. Badly made, undersized bombs blunted their attacks and poor guns their defensive powers. Their armament was very bad altogether. I’d blame the armaments, not the individuals”.³ Beurling summarized the difference in these words: “the Italians and Germans were viewed as different species entirely by the Malta-based pilots. George thought the Italians brave and obviously skilled pilots, but not good marksmen. The Germans, on the other hand, tended to fight only if they had a superior tactical position; if the odds were against them, they soon made themselves scarce”.⁴

Wing Commander George Burges, resplendent in his *Faith, Hope and Charity* renown, expressed exactly the same judgement as Beurling: “The average Italian pilot had more courage in the face of opposition than many of his Luftwaffe counterparts. I found that the Germans were far more willing to break formation and leg it back home. Most German fighter pilots had far less stomach for individual combat, man to man, than the pilots of the *Macchis* and CR 42”. Burges boasted of “many exciting personal combats with Italian fighter pilots, as did most of the pilots of the Fighter Flight”. The Germans, Burges added, “preferred to stay in large packs at a great height, with occasional sorties to attack defenceless men, women and children on the inland roads of Malta, or to pick up a wounded straggler in a damaged Hurricane or Spitfire”.⁵

And another source confirms this in full: “The RAF pilots had a higher regard for the Italian pilots who would ‘stay and mix it’ even if the odds were against

¹ Dan Maccaffary, *Air Aces*, Toronto, 1990, p. 127.

² George Beurling, Leslie Roberts, *Malta Spitfire*, London, 1943, p. 140.

³ Wing Commander George Burges, quoted in Poolman, see *infra*.

⁴ James Holland, *Fortress Malta*, Orion, 2003, p. 350.

⁵ Kenneth Poolman, *Faith, Hope and Charity*, London, 1954, pp. 96 -98.

them, unlike the gallant Luftwaffe who had a tendency to turn tail and run if they did not have all the cards stacked in their favour”.⁶

And, as to the effectiveness of Italian air force bombing over Malta, the Commander in Chief Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, had this to record: “It is not too much to say of those early months that the Italian high-level bombing was the best I have ever seen, far better than the German ... I shall always remember it with respect”.⁷

Fig. 1

Portrait of Carmelo Borg Pisani, the Maltese from Senglea born in 1914 who went to Rome to study painting; when WW2 broke out he remained in Italy, renouncing his British passport and assuming Italian citizenship. He consented to be landed in Malta by submarine on May 18, 1942, to spy for the Italian High Command. The British almost instantly captured him, tried him for treason and hanged him on November 28, 1942. Celebrated as a hero by the Axis powers and reviled as a traitor by the Allies.

This postcard was published in 1943 by the *Fascio di Malta*, an organization of Italian fascists in Italy with a Malta connection, and was printed by the leading house of Rizzoli & Co of Milan. The imprint states that Borg Pisani was executed by firing squad, but this only confirms the poor level of information reaching the Italian intelligence services from Malta. This card enjoyed a large print run.



Fig. 2

The ‘*Sette Giugno*’ monument erected at the Addolorata cemetery, to keep alive the memory of the victims shot during the popular anti-British uprisings (not revolution) of 1919. The Maltese artist Ganni Vella designed this memorial, and the Russian émigré sculptor Boris Edwards executed it. The *Comitato d’Azione Maltese*, an organization of pro-Italian Maltese in Italy who promoted, even during the war, the Italian destiny of Malta, took the initiative of publishing this postcard. It was printed in Milan by the Tipografia C. Luini.



⁶ www.forums.ubi.com/eve/forums

⁷ David Wragg, *Malta, the Last Great Siege*, Leo Cooper, 2003, p. 45.

Fig. 3

A photographic view of Grand Harbour from the Upper Baracca, printed in olive green. It was distributed by the insurance company *Societa' Reale Mutua di Assicurazioni* of Turin, and, like all war propaganda, has a large *VINCERE* printed across its back.

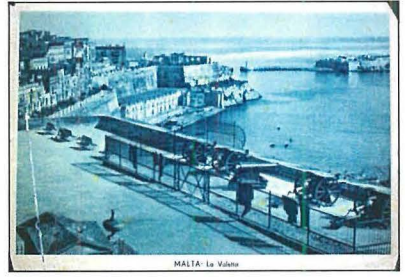


Fig. 4

Coloured postcard with a relief map of Malta and Gozo issued specifically for the Italian armed forces, printed by *Novissima, Roma*. It has a large diagonal *VINCERE* in grey on the back. The place names of the islands are given in a curious mixture of Maltese, Italian and English. While the graphic designer drew the coastal outlines quite accurately, the internal reliefs are mostly fanciful.

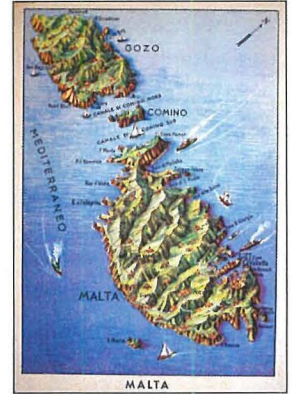


Fig. 5

Another coloured postcard in the same series intended specifically for the Italian armed forces. It shows the Mediterranean and the surrounding countries, with two sizeable insets outlining the Maltese islands, and Valletta together with the harbour areas. Large diagonal *VINCERE* on the back.



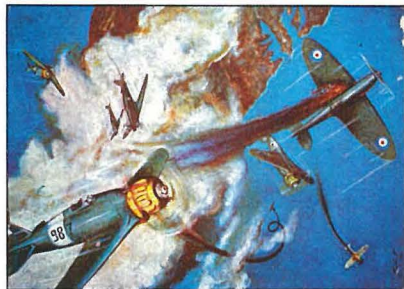
Fig. 6

A sepia postcard showing two Italian planes dropping bombs over Valletta and the harbour areas. This deckle-edged postcard formed part of a larger series officially issued by the *Regia Aeronautica*. The airplane is a *Cant Z 1007*, the *Alcione*, a medium bomber often used in air raids over Malta. The inscription on the back, in translation, reads: "Our bombers, despite the anti-aircraft reaction, release their bombs with certainty and precision over the harbor of Malta (Valletta)".



Fig. 7

A coloured postcard showing an air battle over Malta between Italian and British airplanes. The inscription on the back specifies that this episode occurred on July 25, 1941, at a height of 7500 metres. The plane in the foreground, with the prominent yellow nose, is a *Macchi C.200 'Saetta'*, while the British fighters were *Hawker Hurricanes*. *VINCERE* printed on the back, which also specifies that the image is based on a painting by C. Magnaghi and P. Brolis.



A Maltese version of this air battle recounts: “Two ‘*recce*’ (reconnaissance) planes and a large number of fighters came over in the early hours of this morning and one of the most spectacular of all the air combats witnessed in Malta’s skies ensued. A shot-down *Macchi 200* crashed in Kingsway and ended in a cloud of thick dust. The pilot bailed out but was killed. One other Italian pilot is picked up alive”.⁸

An Italian source proves more lavish with details: “On the morning of July 25, 1941, a *Cant Z* photographic reconnaissance plane of the 30th Formation was sent to Valletta to photograph the English convoy ‘Substance’ which had berthed the day before. Some 40 *Macchi C.200* of the 54th Formation in Comiso and of the 10th Group in Gerbini were dispatched to escort the reconnaissance plane. When over Malta, about 30 *Hurricanes* attacked the formation: the three-engined plane fell in flames and two *Macchi* were shot down: that of Sub-lieutenant Liberti who died, and that of Lieutenant Di Giorgi. The pilots of the *Saettas* claimed four *Hurricanes*: two by Sergeant Major Magnaghi, one by Captain Gostini, and one by Sergeant Omiccioli, of the 98th Squadron”.⁹

Italian sources state that the reconnaissance plane was sent to gather intelligence on the outcome of the British convoy. Considering that the E-Boat and human torpedo attack on Grand Harbour was planned for the following day, it is difficult not to speculate on the real reason for the reconnaissance.

The exceptional interest of this particularly rare postcard lies in the fact that the artwork was the joint effort of one of the pilots who took a leading part in that battle: Carlo Magnaghi, an ace aviator with eleven kills to his name, (died in action, May 13, 1944), and another airman, Piero Brolis (1920 – 1978), who later became a reputable painter and sculptor.

⁸ Michael Galea, *Malta, Diary of a War*, Malta, 1992, p. 66.

⁹ Wikipedia, *Macchi M.C.200*.

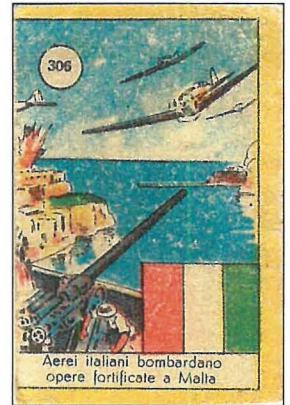
Fig. 8

A real photographic postcard showing Our Lady and the child Jesus blessing Italian planes, warships and submarines, with a flat land profile in the distant background. The military airplanes are dropping paratroopers for an invasion. Handwritten on the back is “Malta”; the card was probably produced in anticipation of the planned invasion of Malta by paratroopers and sea-borne commandos. It has a monogram, FB in a lozenge, both on the front and on the back. Clearly the heavens did not bless a war of aggression.



Fig. 9

A coloured card, showing Italian fighter planes swooping over Grand Harbour to attack a Maltese anti-aircraft position situated in the vicinity of the Upper Baracca. Rather crude artwork in bright colours. The card has an Italian flag in the lower part and the number 306 in a white circle. The inscription says “Italian planes bomb fortified positions in Malta”.



Nazi Germany

Fig. 10

A coloured postcard, based on a painting or watercolour, showing an attack by the Luftwaffe's *Stuka* dive-bombers, over Grand Harbour, with an Allied warship on fire in French Creek and black smoke billowing from a fuel storage depot. This card sends a transparent propaganda message: Germany is the dominant power. The card was published by Verlag Grieshaber & Säuberlich in Stuttgart.



Fig.11

A small black and white card, showing the same image as the Italian Fig. 6, but with one of the bomber planes airbrushed out of the picture. It forms part of a German set “The Second World War in Pictures”, Series 17, no 1.



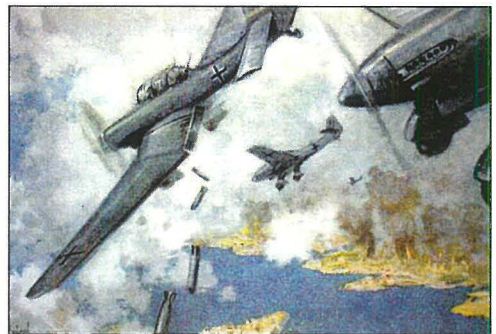
Fig. 12

A real photographic postcard of a close-up of a German dive-bomber in flight: the *Junkers Ju-87*, popularly known as the *Stuka*. It carries the imprint “Malta 20 Juli 1942” in reverse printing in the lower left-hand corner. Although the intensity of the Axis blitz had reached its highest peak in July 1942, no air raids are recorded for July 20.¹⁰



Fig. 13

A German war propaganda postcard in colour derived from a signed painting (signature illegible). It shows a massed attack by Stuka dive bombers on a Malta harbor, with sticks of bombs falling and fires ablaze on land.



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¹⁰ Galea, *op. cit.*, p. 149 – 151.