

## TONITZA AND THE GREAT WAR: SOLDIER, PRISONER, REPORTER AND ARTIST

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**Rezumat:** Primul Război Mondial a mobilizat peste 66 de milioane de oameni din toată Europa și din coloniile marilor puteri. Bărbați de toate vârstele și categoriile sociale au devenit soldați, uneori împotriva voinței și contrar convingerilor lor pacifiste. Fenomen rar până atunci – artiști și scriitori s-au găsit pe câmpul de luptă și în lagărele de prizonieri, fiind martori sau victime ale celor mai teribile atrocități ale războiului de tip nou: un război industrializat și global.

Ca mulți alți soldați, Nicolae Tonitza (1886-1940) a fost înrolat și forțat să îndure ravagiile războiului. Ca soldat și apoi ca prizonier pentru mai mult de 18 luni, odată revenit în România, nu a încetat să evoce ororile suferite și condițiile de viață lamentabile pe care a trebuit să le îndure, alături de mulți alții. Dar nu s-a oprit aici. S-a străduit să denunțe „războiul de după război”. Într-adevăr, consecințele sociale generate de Primul Război Mondial s-au perpetuat ani întregi, afectând multe segmente de populație, mai ales pe cei mai săraci. Această dorință de a aduce la lumină războiul și consecințele sale devastatoare a devenit o adevărată direcție de creație, plasând omul în centrul preocupărilor și dând artistului posibilitatea de a fi stăpânul propriilor sale gânduri.

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*The People's participation in the State Affairs is the decisive cause of the ruthless, hyperbolic character of the revolutionary wars, unlike the lace-like wars waged by the European cabinets in the midst of the popular indifference. (Aron, 1987)*

The ideas that emerged during the Century of Light, followed by those of the 1789 French Revolution, led, among other things, to the people becoming an increasingly active part in the constituent policies of the State – an exponential phenomenon which, during the 19th century, took place in several countries of the world, especially on the European continent.

This way of becoming a complete citizen, together with the growth of economic and educational levels, pertaining to an increased number of people, generated the emerging of a national consciousness, a sentiment of belonging to a nation, to a State, to a common spirituality.

From here on, a war would no longer be about monarchs and territorial conquests, but about the pride of one nation in front of another.

The compulsory military service, introduced in the 19th century, would amplify this phenomenon. From now on, war would concern any man of age with both the physical and mental capacity to fight.

The Great War was a war of the masses. More than 66 million people were mobilized in Europe. The whole society was involved, regardless of social classes. Workers, peasants, intellectuals, artists, writers, and – of course – the military men took part in the conflict, all equal in arms. All were sent off to the front, and all

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would be soldiers. Each of them would experience violence, misery, cold, hunger, thirst, and mass decimation, all horrors of the war on daily basis.

It was during this war that artists, writers, painters, sculptors, and musicians were massively mobilized. They would cover a story, paint, and draw what they saw and lived, leaving authentic testimonies for posterity, while using new forms of art expression.

With rare exceptions, before the compulsory military service was established, artists contemporary with the war they represented did not participate in the war.

The first globalized conflict profoundly changed the view artists had about war. For the longest time, artists celebrated courage, patriotism and sacrifice through illustrious heroes, like those of the Iliad. This source of inspiration is also due to the fact that war-centered works of art were often commissioned to highlight a person or a government. Traditional depictions (individual portraits of generals, fight scenes between two armies, battlefields, heroes in action) no longer agreed with the new depersonalized form of fight. Personal bravery is no longer in line with the current context; the extent of military measures and damage generated apocalyptic scenes. During the war, the artists began, little by little, favoring the denunciation of violence and barbarism instead of a particular form of exaltation. They portray the fear of death in their works and some of them even exhibit a type of fascination with this moral and total war.

Among the mobilized artists, we mention Otto Dix, Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger, who would, each in their own style, represent the suffering endured during the war.

The same scenario was shaping up in Romania. A lot of men were mobilized in 1916, when joining in the war. Among them, some were artists, like Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Camil Ressu, Ștefan Dimitrescu, Oscar Han, Dimitrie Paciurea, Ion Jalea, and Cornel Medrea, to name only a few.

Like other men, Nicolae Tonitza was also mobilized in the Romanian army, mid-August.

Pushed by the countries of the Triple Entente and confident, due to the recent Russian victories against the Austro-Hungarian army, on August 15th 1916 (the Julian calendar), Romania declared war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The response from Germany, Turkey and Bulgaria would follow shortly. Between August 16th and 18th, they all waged war against Romania.

Tonitza joined his military unit and would participate in the battle which still represents one of the most important defeats for the Romanian army during this war, the Tutrakan battle. There were only a few weeks since he had left Jassy. In just a few days, he had the occasion to experience all the horrors of war and the life of misery it entails.

The fights lasted two weeks and Romanians went from one mistake to another, from one defeat to another, all ending in capitulation. The enemy managed to isolate the whole garrison of the city, so that it was impossible for the Romanian army to stock up or to strengthen the forces in the area. On August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1916, the Romanian resistance fell apart. Despite the heroism of naval forces and of the infantry, the biggest part of the Romanian army was either decimated or captured.

For the Romanians, the losses were enormous; more than 6,000 people were killed, injured, or have disappeared, and 28,000 were made prisoners. In order

to get an idea about the horror of this battle, here's a quote from writer George Topîrceanu: *The machine-guns of the enemies plow the Danube, from shore to shore. Under their intermittent rounds, rows of bubbles appear on the body of water, bursting into the air, as if the bullets came from the depth, from the bottom. One by one, around each swimmer, there is a hail of projectiles drawing vertiginous circles, tighter and tighter, until the head of the man caught in the middle suddenly disappears, like a balloon popping up...* (Topîrceanu, 2014)

Tonitza's military unit was obliterated, and the survivors, among which he was fortunate enough to be, were all made prisoners. There are no written records from him, to describe this fight and the journey to the camp. His articles, *The Markings of a Fighter*, stop reporting on the arrival to the Danube shore. On the other hand, when he returned from the war, he illustrated the book of G. Millian-Maximin (*In the hands of the enemy, The Markings of a Prisoner, real life illustrations by painter Nicolae Tonitza*, published by the Brănișteanu Publishing House in 1920 in Bucharest) with his drawings, made while in captivity.

Milian-Maximin also took part in the Battle of Tutrakan and was, himself, taken prisoner by the Bulgarians. The road to the prisoners' camp was not the same as Tonitza's, as he was taken to Silven, while Tonitza went to Kirdjali. However, we can assume that their experiences are similar. No doubt the journey happened in the same conditions, was extremely difficult, and went through the same steps and trials. Besides, if Milian-Maximin and Tonitza were able to tune their stories and the respective drawings, it means they certainly lived through almost similar experiences.

We find the first drawing on page 7. The label says it represents a priest blessing the soldiers before their departure for the battlefield. In the few previous pages, Milian-Maximin talks about the people's despair and unhappiness just before the battle. All feel it's a "real" war which will last, which will make them suffer, which will be difficult. It evokes the sorrow of the soldiers who have left behind their loved ones, their families, their wives and children. Most probably Tonitza felt the same despair. He had, indeed, left home his two first children, who were very young (two-years-old Catrina and one-year-old Petre) and his wife, Ecaterina, pregnant with their third child, Irina, who was to be born while her father was in captivity. The priest had both the role of strengthening the faith and hope that they would go back to their families, and of absolving the sins of those facing a very probable death.

On page 55 we find a drawing that became famous: *The Convoy of Prisoners* (Figure 1). Indeed, Tonitza remade this drawing and, in 1919, he made an oil painting, nowadays kept in the National Art Museum of Romania. In this drawing, we see soldiers - as observed from the back, the point of view of the artist - their heads down, obviously in great pain and sorrow. We can feel the sorrow of the defeat, and the fear of an uncertain future in this drawing. The narration: *We start: an endless convoy in overwhelming heat* and what is written in the pages preceding it, shows the extremely hard conditions in which the walk to the camp happened: *Each of us was suffering from thirst. We can endure hunger but for a drop of water we would run kilometers.*

In the following pages, Milian-Maximin makes an even wider description of the deplorable conditions that prisoners had to endure. He evokes hunger and tiredness of course, but he especially evokes the thirst, which seems to be the hardest to bear



Figure 1



Figure 2

by these people. Despite the wounds and the daily humiliation by the new “masters”, people were forced to go on, in suffocating heat by day, and glacial cold by night. The author recounts that, after twelve days of infinite ordeal, they finally arrived at the Silven camp, which was a real relief for those not having the force to go on, and finally allowed to “rest” a little bit. Unfortunately for Tonitza, the ordeal of the road was not yet finished. Silven was only half-way to his final destination: the Kirdjali camp. To this point, he had already been walking for more than 200 kilometers, with 180 kilometers still to go, in increasingly harsh conditions. The fatigue was becoming, without a doubt, more problematic than the cold and the rain of the incoming autumn.

Milian-Maximin wasn't with Tonitza in the Kirdjali camp. However, common elements can be found between what they lived and similar experiences can be quoted. For example, being constantly invaded and “eaten” by “small beasts” that are abundantly found in the prisoners' barracks, like lice, fleas, bed bugs and others. This is described on page 116, by Millian-Maximin and illustrated on page 117, by Tonitza. We see in the drawing some figures sitting on the floor, head down, visibly very focused on something that requires lots of attention. The narration of this drawing is *About 2 o'clock in the afternoon, when the sun is stronger, hundreds of prisoners go out to hunt*. Millian-Maximin talks about this with some humor: *Yes, the hunting of pests became, not only a concern, but also an amusement, a passion*.

Another episode seems to be common to both protagonists: the funeral of those deceased in captivity. On page 137, we can find a drawing that represents the funerary convoy of a dead prisoner. In the foreground, there is a man walking, carrying a cross as big as him, followed by two others carrying a makeshift coffin. Last in the funeral procession is a Bulgarian sentinel, armed with a bayonet and surveilling the prisoners. It's a common episode for both the painter and the writer, except for one detail. Millian-Maximin says that they were Serbian prisoners. Tonitza, who will retake the drawing between 1918 and 1920 (oil on cardboard - now kept at the Romanian National Art Museum) names it: *The funeral of a Romanian Prisoner in Bulgaria* (Figure 2).

The description of the drawing in the book reads: *The convoy goes to the small black forest, where the ones who escaped their captivity rest. Looks like the prisoners see death as one of the easiest roads to freedom, as hope of escaping is much in vain.*

Maybe Tonitza also had such morbid thoughts, but chose to find other “escape” doors. Indeed, with all his misfortune, he had the luck of being supervised by someone who was himself an artist in civilian life, with whom he communicated in French and who allowed him to draw and even helped with the necessary supplies, albeit shabby. On the other hand, Tonitza makes himself a hairdresser/barber in the camp, and even a portraitist, creating “photos” for identity documents for the Turkish locals. This is recounted by the artist’s wife: *In order to get some «change» while in the camp, he was a barber and «photographer» in drawing, for passports of the Turkish locals. All humiliations, all moral and physical sufferings make him condemn both the army and the war. While in captivity he gets two diseases which will made him suffer a lot and weaken his health: malaria and rheumatism. He was not allowed to work. However, a Bulgarian officer, with whom he talked in French, bought him, in the absence of colors, inks and pencils, with which he made some sketches. I still have a couple of them. Saint Georges Museum has another two, representing a convoy of prisoners and the house in which the camp was installed. These sketches were used to illustrate Mr. Millian-Maximin’s volume of memoirs. (Jianu, 1945)*

About one year into his detention, the international conventions orchestrated by the Red Cross were implemented. They allowed prisoners to work and even practice their profession from civilian life. In return, what they produced was directed to the Red Cross. This way, Tonitza and other artists could get outside the camp, outdoors, under surveillance - of course -, to get inspired and paint the surrounding landscapes. Unfortunately, the commander of the camp found out about these getaways and, in anger, he would destroy about 1000 drawings made until that moment, of which Tonitza intended to make a testimonial album, translated into the main European languages, to tell the horrors of war and plead for peace between countries. (Comarnescu, 1962)

Still, he was able to save some sketches that described life in the camp. They are rare and precious testimonies of the suffering endured by the prisoners.

Nevertheless, he emerges as a stronger, more mature person, more motivated to denounce the injustices suffered by the defenseless people, pleading for peace and harmony in this world.

The 1917 Russian Revolution and the withdrawal of the Russian forces left Romania alone on the Eastern front, faced with the Central Powers’ troops. In this context, despite recent victories of the Romanian army, Romania is forced to sign a Peace Treaty with Germany, Bulgaria and the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. It will be signed on February 20th (Julian calendar) at Bufta. As a result, Romania signs a convention for the Romanian prisoners held in camps in those countries, to be released.

Tonitza, together with other hundreds of other prisoners from the Kirdjali camp, arrives in Bucharest on April 1918. Having been appointed chief editor of the *Iașul* newspaper, he immediately resumes his activity as a journalist. In this immediate immersion in an intense intellectual activity, we see all the strength, the energetic character, and the admirable determination that he has, starting to work immediately following months of endless suffering.

Tonitza resumed an intense journalistic activity, but was also very active on the artistic side of things, pushed by the need and the profound wish to testify about the atrocities of the war he had experienced alongside others.

To this end he will use rare drawings made in the Kirdjali camp, drawings that were saved from the destructive madness of the commander. He would display them either directly, as they were, or redo them in watercolor, while others would end up as oil paintings.

Some of these representations are in the book of G. Milian-Maximin and in the newly made paintings. We can distinguish three stages of his ordeal. First is the battle of Tutrakan, a watercolor which represents Romanian soldiers fighting in the trenches (Figure 3) - we see the one on the left preparing to throw a grenade. Second is the road to the camp, a drawing presented in the book of Milian-Maximin, later transformed into an oil painting. The picture is named *On the way to Tutrakan* (Figure 4). Here we see people who clearly are seriously injured in the battle. An expression of intense pain on their faces speaks for, and shows the viewers, all the suffering endured by these soldiers. Another oil painting makes us think about the exhausting road to the camp: it is named *The Calvary* (Figure 5). The title is evocative and the image shows, through the scale used - people on the ground and very small horse riders in a hilly landscape that occupies the entire canvas - the endless and infinitely long way to the camp.

Finally, many works in ink and pencil represent the everyday life of prisoners (Figure 6 and Figure 7). We often see them sitting or lying in the barracks and outdoors. The exhaustion caused by the captivity is perfectly represented. We read on their faces the despair felt during these months of suffering, frustration, humiliation, and deprivation of basic needs: water or food. The drawings are made with just few lines, but still, the expression of their ordeal and the atrocities suffered can be read very clearly.

Through these various works, Tonitza expressed himself in a way similar to a true war reporter, wanting to keep a historical testimony of the evoked facts and disseminate them among his contemporaries, so they can see the realities of this world war, which has profoundly affected him.

Upon his return from the prison camp, he will take an active part in forming a group of artists, former combatants like himself, expressing the same will to confess and inform through their creation. These artists, among whom were Corneliu Medrea, Oscar Han, Camil Ressu, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Brancusi, Pallady, Șirato, etc., met at the house of Tonitza's beloved friend Ștefan Dimitrescu. They founded the "Romanian Art" Association, within which they would be able to support each other financially, and organize two large exhibitions in 1918 and 1919, in Jassy and Bucharest. They would also influence each other in aesthetics and artistic philosophy and create a new current with a strong taste for realism. As they shared the same horrors from the front, they wanted to express their distress towards what they lived through, as much as their feeling of being disarmed in the face of the adverse consequences of the war. Even though the Great War was over and the armistice finally signed in 1918, its ravages would linger for many years.

The social consequences of the Great War were also very well represented by Tonitza. His human attachment being amplified by his experience as a soldier



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7





Figure 8



Figure 9

and prisoner, he deliberately chose to paint the grief the population was left with after conflict.

One of the major consequences of the war, throughout Europe, was the demise of more than 16 million people sacrificed in fights, and as a result millions of women and children who became widows or orphans. Tonitza will represent this phenomenon in his watercolor works from 1919 - *Orphans* - (Figure 8) and in the oil painting from 1920 - *Women at the cemetery (Post-mortem - Study II)* (Figure 9).

He also evokes, in another oil painting dating from 1919 and named *The Mother of the Soldier* (Figure 10), the pain of a mother who has lost her son in this senseless war. We see her crashed on a grave, clutching the cross in her arms, as if it were her child. The emotion emanated is intense; we, too, feel the infinite pain of this mother who will never be able to see her son again, her son dead on the front.

*Poor women, scarves on their heads, with sunken, somber faces, treated in strong contour lines, children, elderly people, drifters, crowded, waiting for a piece of bread, shivering in the cold. Almost all of them with their heads lowered, sad ghosts of those defeated in life. In foreplan, a visionary, with his gaze implying another type of bread, that of justice, of a better world. It's a suggestive image of urban misery. It is not a revolted world, but a sad, resigned one who can wait.* (Jianu, 1945)

With his painting *Queue for bread* (Figure 11), Tonitza describes the poverty and the misery following years of war. We can see an impressive number of skinny people, dressed in tatters and frozen. There are people of all ages, from small children to old people, who lined up for some time, for a piece of bread. Obviously, we read sadness and sorrow on their faces, but also a kind of resignation. An impressive dignity felt by the humble ones who accept their destiny with honor.

This way he describes a serious social issue in the years following the war. The economy of the country is down, the finances unorganized, the agriculture in a lamentable condition. The annual grain production entirely destroyed, the urban population would soon be missing its main source of food, the bread. Tonitza chose to paint a disconcerting situation and to position himself as the noble spokesman of





Figure 10



Figure 11

a humanitarian cause. Thus, he highlights and focuses on a serious subject: the great victim of poverty is the population. But, more than this social concern, he also opens a new way of representing the humanity in painting, placing the men, women, old men and children on the same level, together going through common difficulty; one can find one's self in the painting, one can imagine what these people feel.

In a way, we enter their souls and see, for a moment, what terrible sorrow they feel. This way, the painting becomes a story and the human being is the main character. Tonitza shifts the representation of Mankind to the center stage. A stage which is neither idealistic nor bucolic, but realistic, showing the everyday life of thousands of people, a life full of deprivation, of sorrow and humiliation.

*The composition of Tonitza, Queue for Bread, opens a new horizon for our art: In our art - as Tonitza himself says - we switch, almost suddenly, from the peasant condition seen in rustic sweetness to some kind of serious and symbolic urbanism, to the tumultuous life of fairs where the human will not mean only a decorative and funny accessory. (Flacăra, October 27, 1922) (Zambaccian, 1955)*

Perhaps this is Tonitza's genuine "humanism": not only denouncing injustice and taking the side of the poor, but also making way for another type of humanity - another fan of emotions -, feelings of deep pain and sadness, not rural scenes which are made to show an idealized world in which nobody lives genuinely.

In the manner of Zola or Daumier, who strongly influenced him while staying in Paris, Tonitza wants to portray the reality of the society he is part of, but also the "truth" of the people, the depth and complexity of their feelings. He chooses to show us the sorrow and the sadness, making us question the condition of "the other." The *Convoy of Prisoners*, the *Queue for Bread*, *Women at the Cemetery*, the *Soldier's Mother*, are not meant to be decorative but to express a thought and to make the public reflect, reach the humanism in their heart or feel the sadness of their fellows.

This way, the role of the artist takes another form. He no longer serves only to aesthetically satisfy, but he takes a philosophical approach and makes us question the world around us.

The ravages of war and of the after war period made their mark on many Romanian and European artists. Desiring to shout out in front of the whole world

their despair and the horrors they have lived, they somehow want to emancipate and to break free from conventional artistic expectations.

The post-war artist is not obsolete. Becoming his own master, he is gaining scale and consistency, thus becoming a crucial voice of the cultural construction.

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