

War Letters (Italy)

By [Carlo Stacciari](#)

Summary

Despite the high rates of illiteracy in Italy on the eve of the war, the conflict brought about an unusual and massive recourse to writing, and not only by soldiers at the front. The correspondence served mainly to maintain contact between the country, war zone and prisoner of war camps and allowed soldiers, even those with scant writing skills, to recount, from a distance, the suffering and horrors of the war. The soldiers' letters, as well as representing one of the largest and most widespread experiences for writers of the lower classes of the contemporary age, have allowed scholars to undertake work of great heuristic interest for the history of the First World War.

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Introduction: The Discovery of Writing During the War

The First World War brought about a need and a production of writing in Italy difficult to find in other conflicts of the modern age. This was because of the number of people called upon to contend with writing in relation to the mobilized soldiers, and on account of the amount of letters and postcards exchanged between the front and the home front during the forty-one months of war. In this period, the [letters were exchanged](#) with a very high frequency, and despite the difficult material conditions imposed by the war, writing letters was perhaps the soldiers' main task during their leisure time.¹ The ranks of professional writers, hired by the major daily newspapers to recount the phases of the conflict daily from the front, were flanked by a veritable army of millions of men, of every social and cultural level, armed with pens and pencils to put their war experiences on paper. If one excludes an unknown number of diaries and memoirs written during or at the end of the conflict, there was, in fact, a total of almost 4 billion items of correspondence handled during the war: 1,535,933,600 letters sent from the home front to the front; 2,213,015,490 letters addressed by the soldiers to the

population; and 244,987,000 letters exchanged within the war zone. The total average daily movement of correspondence was about 3 million. The peak of incoming letters from the front was recorded in June 1917, with a daily average of 2.78 million; the greatest number of letters exchanged between soldiers at the front was in the weeks following the [defeat of Caporetto](#), with an average daily circulation of 550,000; while the highest daily average of letters sent to the front came in June 1918 with 1,770,000 letters.²

Apparently these were modest numbers when compared with those of other European countries: in [France](#), it is estimated that, during the conflict, the units of correspondence amounted to about 10 billion, and as high as 30 billion in [Germany](#), while in [Great Britain](#) it is estimated that at least 20 million letters were sent from the [Western Front](#) to the home front each week.³ [Italy's](#) numbers were not so meagre; in fact, they were surprisingly high when compared with the number of soldiers mobilized and especially with the literacy rates registered in Italy on the eve of the war. On average, certainly with some significant differences between young people and the elderly population, and between the more literate northern areas and the southern ones, nearly 40 percent of the population could neither read nor write. In France, in the same period, more than 95 percent of conscripts were literate. Applying this data, perhaps a little superficially, to the mobilized military, without going into issues related to the processes of literacy and schooling, it can be said that almost 2 million soldiers left for the war without knowing how to write a letter home, well aware that, in any case, no one else in the house would have been able to read it. Several studies, supported by the statistical data, have shown the ways in which many soldiers learned to write during the war. In some cases, they learned with the help of fellow comrades in arms, in others with that of the military [chaplains](#) present in the armed forces, and not just because they were driven, in obvious circumstances of constant danger, by the desire to not interrupt contact with relatives or acquaintances back home, but also because many saw, in the daily exercise of writing, a possible refuge from the anguish, suffering and precariousness of war, an opportunity of making sense of this experience.⁴ Some, even among those who were least competent and had little experience in writing, were able to record real diaries about their experience of war, succeeding in an attempt to leave a record of an event which immediately seemed, to all the protagonists, boundless, radically new, therefore memorable.⁵

The management of this mass of paper was entrusted to the Military Post, a structure set up specifically for the war. Correspondence arriving and departing for the front, from the beginning of the conflict, was, in fact, taken from civilian offices and sent to military ones. In accordance with regulations issued in March 1915 by a special commission established by the Ministry of Post, which was charged with reviewing the entire preceding legislation and transmitting provisions for [censorship](#) to the offices, to which the mail would be submitted

during the conflict. The main point of collection and sorting of mail was in Bologna, considered a strategic city because it was not far from the front, while there were four subsidiary offices in different parts of the country in the cities of Bari, Naples, Taranto and Treviso. This venue, due to its proximity to the war zone, was dismantled and reunited with that of Bologna in November 1917. These main offices, along with other minor centres scattered throughout the country, initially organized to manage the correspondence of 500,000 soldiers, had, immediately, to triple their efforts, and subsequently, serve more than 5 million mobilized soldiers. This caused many problems with the timely delivery of mail, especially at the beginning of the war, and then during periods of high traffic, when there were more than 4 million letters a day.

These numbers were also reached as a result of the military authorities' measures, that were intended to facilitate and promote the exchange of letters between the front and the rear, for example the free distribution of so-called duty-free postcards, that is, free from payment for the stamp. The High Command issued many of these postcards to the soldiers. During some periods of the war, every soldier was allowed to write and send postcards – up to seven per week – free of charge, in effect one a day. Some of these postcards, because of their structure, apparently had the aim of making it easier for less literate soldiers to fill them in, guiding them in writing the address of the recipient and the text through preprinted, simplified, very restrictive forms. In fact, they were intended to minimize the space for writing, and therefore the amount of information that the soldiers could give to the country. This system also facilitated the work of the officials in charge of censorship and improved the circulation of mail. Also, as has been demonstrated, the censors were entrusted with more wide-ranging tasks than had been planned on the eve of the war, and asked not only to prevent confidential information or, more generally, information of a military nature from reaching the country and therefore running the risk of being intercepted by the enemy, but also to inform authorities about the soldiers' morale and opinions on the war, which the letters would have more or less clearly leaked. This service, also present in other European countries, resulted, in Italy, in a progressive tightening of control and consequently of sanctions, without, nevertheless, the government ever being able to control all the mail, especially after the defeat at Caporetto when the army and the country were called upon to regroup in order to continue the war. The possibility of their mail being intercepted led many soldiers to adopt an attitude of self-censorship, which, added to the inadequacies of written communication, inhibited freedom of expression in many cases.⁶ Nevertheless, several studies have amply demonstrated that these obstacles did not prevent millions of soldiers from giving, through their letters – apparently merely trivial and repetitive, generally incorrect and uncertain – relevant answers to questions about the war.

I Write These Few Words...

The call to arms, and the consequent departure from home, caused a radical change in soldiers' habits. In this sense, writing and reading, always marginal activities for the popular classes, became a real daily necessity. Writing and receiving mail became, for many combatants, a primary need, almost an obsession, because it permitted them to maintain contact with the family environment, with their work and their birthplace, as can be seen from the anxious demands for information in the letters from the front. Illiterate soldiers understood how important it was to learn a few rudimentary rules for communicating, in writing, at least their state of health. They were forced to ask for help from fellow soldiers, superiors or military chaplains, before becoming, not without difficulty, independent. They were aware that through writing and reading they could gain moments of intimacy which military life, especially at the front, had almost completely eliminated. For those who stayed at home, the same difficulties were sometimes overcome thanks to the work of trusted intermediaries, such as parish priests or mayors. In several villages, in fact, parishes and municipal buildings became, during the war, real news offices concerned with the production and sorting of mail. A very similar task was carried out by the heads of the Houses of the Soldier, recreation centres (many, at the beginning, had a Catholic background) set up in villages near the front. In these centres, the soldiers received material and moral assistance.

Faced with a vast and unexplored field of writing produced by semiliterate soldiers, many scholars, in the 1980s and even in the early 1990s, thought and wrote, a little hastily, that the letters were basically all the same, regardless of who had produced them and who the recipient was. In fact, through the counting and systematic analysis of this very large documentary heritage, today fortunately preserved in public and private archives, it is possible to see the account of the experience of war in its most authentic and traumatic aspects. However, they are certainly burdened by the insuperable limit of being condemned to remain, always, a small amount compared to the enormous total produced. Nonetheless, they show, beneath the veneer of apparent uniformity and repeatability, and a poor and inappropriate lexicon, a more or less eloquent silence. Quite a few "letters of the illiterate"⁷ – thus were these writings effectively defined – not only defy any model but give us interesting views on the conflict: repulsion, when not a hidden protest against the war and its mechanisms, accompanied by resigned waiting to return home. In numerous letters from the war zone, disappointment, discouragement, anxiety and uncertainty about the outcome of the conflict, as well as the hope of peace, also emerge without too much censorship. When a close relationship with the interlocutor permitted it, there were even confessions about the horrors of war, even if they were sometimes tempered by a sense of modesty and by the appropriateness of not mentioning the most common taboos. These included recounting the violence inflicted, the promiscuity of death, and the deplorable hygienic conditions of fellow

soldiers forced to live for weeks in the mud in contact with unburied corpses, waste and sewage.⁸ However, there were satisfied accounts of attacks, shootings and killings, without the slightest embarrassment at having felt pleasure at shooting and killing the enemy.⁹

More generally, the letters have permitted the emergence of the gap between the mass of peasant soldiers sent to fight for ideals almost unknown to most of them, and the minority of young volunteers or officers of bourgeois extraction and education, who were more motivated and more likely to exhibit being in favour of the conflict, though no less careful to keep the sentimental and emotional relationships with family members back home alive through writing. There are, in this regard, interesting love letters produced by soldiers or officers, who were protagonists of very intense exchanges of correspondence with girlfriends or wives at home, characterized by very formal writing, within which, with calm and sober tones, they recounted the war-time events, emphasizing the most edifying aspects of the conflict, and often not mentioning the horrors.¹⁰ The writing produced by the more literate, bourgeois soldiers, in some instances underwent processes of monumentalization even during the war, as they were published, in accordance with [propaganda](#) aims, through newspapers or books, or used as spiritual testaments of soldiers who died at the front. The war zone was not the only place of intense correspondence: internment and [imprisonment](#) also forced soldiers to come to terms with writing. For many, this was an opportunity, away from the activity of the front line, for reflection, or for thinking about their war-time experience. The confinement in prison camps, made even more unbearable by the preliminary charge of desertion and the resulting lack of supplies from the [Italian government](#), made the soldiers resort to writing, mostly using the duty-free postcards distributed by the Red Cross, to ask family members, almost always obsessively, to send parcels containing goods of prime necessity such as food and clothes.¹¹

Far from the prison camps and the front, women, wives, mothers and sisters resorted to writing in order to communicate not only their moods or feelings about a war experienced at a distance, but also the latest news about the tasks and the responsibilities to which they had been called as a result of the conflict. These included the management of family affairs in situations of obvious economic and food difficulties, working in the fields or factories, and educating and supporting their children. In the writing of women belonging to the upper classes there are also stories of their socially useful and publicly recognized work: this was the case for the ladies, patrons, soldiers' pen friends and [Red Cross](#) nurses who worked within the complex world of war welfare.¹²

Quite often, the war letters were accompanied by pictures. In rare cases, it was the soldiers

themselves who drew sketches, which were either more or less successful in ornamental terms, or, more often, enriched and supported a limited and stunted lexicon and repertoire of information. The more creative, challenging the censorship, were able to reproduce the curious objects handled at the front, hutments and make-shift housing, outlines of mountains and views of landscapes. More often, the correspondence was accompanied by illustrations commissioned from professionals or well-known sketch artists, including illustrated postcards. The diffusion of the latter was accompanied by intense propaganda whose real potential was not unknown, given that all the belligerent countries adopted every means in this direction. On the Italian front, the most recurrent themes were those related to the campaigns for war loans, which aimed at convincing Italians to invest, before the intervention, then in the mobilization and resistance to the bitter end, and finally in the reconstruction of the country. This incalculable series of images also proposed, in their various facets, the heroism and courage of the Italian soldier, the demonization of the enemy, and the solidarity of the combatants. Also very widespread among the soldiers were the postcards with a religious background, which, through a clever mix of mottos, slogans and icons borrowed from religious doctrine and patriotic propaganda, explicitly supported the arguments for the war and only rarely expressed [pacifist](#) views. Many of these images contained drawings that were based on standardized iconographic models, which were also used, for the same purpose, by institutions in other countries at war. In this sense, the illustrated postcards were one of the most obvious and early examples of linguistic standardization of mass communication, suffice it to mention the common matrix of the many images used in those years by commercial advertising and then taken up and adapted to the language of political propaganda in various European countries.¹³

Monuments of Memory or Sources for Historical Research?

The war was immediately subjected to a process of monumentalization which naturally included the written testimony of the soldiers, particularly those killed at the front. These testimonies were subjected to real processes of collection, classification and distribution throughout the country. Some collections of letters made available by families of fallen soldiers were subjected to careful selection and published as early as the summer of 1915.¹⁴ In the same period, the Ministry of Education became a promoter of campaigns collecting artifacts and memorabilia related to the war, including the written testimonies of the protagonists, useful in implementing didactic-exhibitory projects in the museums of major Italian cities. Of these collection projects, also repeated and amplified by [Fascism](#) in the 1920s, there remain, today, a few traces in some public archives, libraries and museums.¹⁵ The public exposure and the diffusion, through the press, of letters from the front line

satisfied the partisan desire to “give a voice” to those protagonists who could best convey persuasive messages of mobilization and support for the war, by highlighting its most edifying aspects.

The first pioneering studies of war-time epistolography date back to 1921, when the Austrian censor and philologist [Leo Spitzer \(1887-1960\)](#) published a study of the letters of the Italian prisoners of war. He had used these letters to consider different aspects of the experience of war, among them working-class soldiers’ substantial extraneousness to the ideals and outcome of the conflict.¹⁶ The Austrian linguist and literary critic’s research was a real discovery, but it did not make much of an impact, at least in Italy. After more than a decade, [Adolfo Omodeo \(1889-1946\)](#), in publishing a selection of texts produced during the conflict, viewed the writings of fallen soldiers in hierarchical terms, giving space and consideration to those produced by the officers and relegating those of ordinary soldiers to an appendix, because he regarded them as “insignificant”.¹⁷ The following period of publications, perhaps influenced by the concurrent events of colonial war, were certainly more useful for political propaganda, and only produced the occasional collection of texts chosen for ceremonies or commemorations, without any [historiographic](#) objective. It was only in the 1970s that some studies on the analysis of the writing practices of ordinary people were begun, with the aim of finding possible links with the processes of the emergence of mass society. It is no coincidence that it was precisely in those years that the first Italian translation of Spitzer’s above-mentioned work appeared.¹⁸

In the 1980s, also in Italy, there was renewed historiographical interest in issues related to the history of popular culture in the First World War. There were significant works, which analysed the experience of war using sources that were unusual and unrelated to traditional lines of study. Research aimed at the recovery of the eye-witness accounts of the protagonists of the conflict, which served to initiate social history studies about the combatants’ mentality and behavioural problems, led, in subsequent years, to an overall change in perspective and, so to speak, in the historiographic climate. Those were the years of the first fruitful seminars in Rovereto (Trento), on the subject of the war-time writings, that led to the creation of the National Federation of the Archives of Popular Writing, and that witnessed the active participation of historical, literary, linguistic, paleographic and anthropological scholars.¹⁹ Since then, a great deal of literature about the themes of common people’s writing, methodological issues, and the treatment and preservation of an increasingly copious documentary heritage has been produced. The results of some research has crossed national borders and contributed to the creation of new research centres, which have produced interesting new lines of study and valuable publications.²⁰

Conclusion

The war unleashed a veritable epidemic of writing that affected not only the combatants of every belligerent country and on every front, but also those who stayed at home. The conflict came to represent, in its tragedy, an unexpected opportunity of forced acculturation for hundreds of thousands of soldiers who were illeterate when they went to war. Thanks to writing, the soldiers were able to not only communicate their health status at a distance, but also continue to maintain affective relationships, and manage family affairs, the trend of agricultural matters, and all the issues relating to the economic affairs of their kin. The fear that the correspondence, with requests for help or information on the progress of the war, would not reach home was widespread among soldiers and, in many cases, this fear resulted in correspondence containing monotonous, repetitive and uninformative formulas. Despite the censorship and self-censorship, the soldiers, even those with an extremely poor vocabulary, were able to put their war experiences down on paper. They addressed issues that were not at all obvious, even communicating the horror and senselessness of war, the sacrifices that were called for every day, and bringing out elements of their intolerance of the war and military discipline. In some cases, the results were even more original than the communications of some of their commanders, because they were more spontaneous and lacked the officers' rhetoric. Perhaps they were enlivened by unusual communicative stratagems such as the use of dialect in more intimate and personal passages, or by expressions usually used in oral communication. Undoubtedly, the letters, taken together, reveal the existence of people far removed from the arguments for the war, invoking peace more than victory, without, however, expressing positions, which, today, would justify a completely unpatriotic interpretation of their attitude towards the conflict. In many cases, the use of writing helped the protagonists to make sense of an event with an immense impact. It is no coincidence that some soldiers attributed a tangible value to writing itself, even an apotropaic function: it was a habit to keep, jealously guarded in the pockets of their uniforms, letters or postcards received at the front. The soldiers entrusted them with tutelary if not providential tasks.

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Notes

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2. Cadioli, Beniamino/Cecchi, Aldo: La posta militare italiana nella Prima guerra mondiale, Rome 1978, p. 274. [↑](#)
3. Caffarena, Fabio: Armed with Pen and Paper. Soldiers and Writing between Story,

- Memory and the History of the Great War, in Piredda, Patrizia (ed.): *The Great War in Italy. Representation and Interpretation*, Leicester 2013, pp. 167-177. ↑
4. Gibelli, Antonio: *L'officina della guerra. La Grande Guerra e le trasformazioni del mondo mentale*, Turin 1991, pp. 99-103. ↑
 5. Regarding memoirs and war diaries, not dealt with here, see the numerous works by the scholars of the Archivio della scrittura popolare di Trento and the Museo storico italiano della guerra di Rovereto. Leoni, Diego/Zadra, Camillo: *La Grande Guerra. Esperienza, memoria, immagine*, Bologna 1986. ↑
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 14. Holl, Lavinia (ed.): *Lettere di soldati italiani*, Rome 1915. ↑
 15. Caffarena, Fabio: *Lettere dalla Grande Guerra. Scritture del quotidiano, monumenti della memoria, fonti per la storia. Il caso italiano*, Milan 2005, pp. 111-169. ↑
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 17. Omodeo, *Momenti della vita di guerra. Dai diari e dalle lettere dei caduti* 1934. ↑
 18. Spitzer, Leo: *Lettere di prigionieri di guerra italiani (1915-1918)*, Turin 1976. ↑
 19. For archives of the writings of ordinary people, see *Materiali di Lavoro* 1-2 1987; Conti, Piero/Gibelli, Antonio/Franchini, Giuliana (eds.): *Storie di gente comune nell'Archivio Ligure della Scrittura Popolare*, Acqui Terme 2002; Antonelli, Quinto: *Scritture di confine. Guida all'archivio della scrittura popolare*, Trento 1999. ↑

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- [La censura postale \(Storia postale Italiana\) \(Article\)](#)

- [La morte, le trincee, il gas, le fucilazioni, Cent'anni dopo i diari raccontano \(La grande guerra 1914-1918\) \(Database\)](#)
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- [Spitzer, Leo: Italienische Kriegsgefangenenbriefe. Materialien zu einer Charakteristik der volkstümlichen italienischen Korrespondenz, Bonn 1921 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Testimonianze di Guerra \(La Grande Guerra 1915-18\) \(Article\)](#)
- [UNESCO: Progress of literacy in various countries, Italy 1901-31, pp. 114-119 \(UNESCO\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Wilcox, Vanda: Encountering Italy. Military service and national identity during the First World War, in: Bulletin of Italian Politics 3/2, 2011, pp. 283-302 \(University of Glasgow\) \(Article\)](#)

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