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# Children, Soldiers and Heroes: The Great War in Past and Present Italian Children's Literature

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Along with the Great War came new forms of propaganda, in Italian children's literature too. In fact, children's literature was adopted as a powerful communication tool, conveying emotionally pervasive and deceitful messages to children and adults alike. Today's Italian literature for children no longer suffers from such a strong influence of wartime censorship and political propaganda. It is much more a narrative space for recollection and reflection. But how has it really changed? What are the modern tendencies of publications for children on the topic of the First World War in Italy? Do the narrative models differ very greatly from those of the past? After sketching the historical, cultural and political picture of Italy at the time of World War I, this essay analyses and compares a significant corpus of past and present Italian children's literature. The findings demonstrate that with the arrival of new directions in Italian historiographical research, with a new generation of Italian children's authors, and with the centenary of the ending of the First World War Italian children's literature has somewhat belatedly painted a more balanced picture of the historical, cultural and political events of those times.

**Keywords:** First World War, history of Italian children's literature, propaganda, mobilised childhood, ethico-political awareness, contemporary Italian children's literature

The upheaval of the Great War had a significant effect on social, political and cultural life in Italy. On the one hand, the war seems to have contributed to accelerating the country's modernisation and to consolidating its national identity. On the other, the

conflict paved the way to the end of the liberal State and to Italy's hand over to Fascism. The Great War changed the worldview of the Italian people.<sup>1</sup> For the first time, factory and office workers, merchants, students, army chaplains, and the peasant masses above all (people coming from mountain regions, shepherds, men who were illiterate or semi-illiterate and who generally knew little or nothing about the reasons behind the conflict) were called up to fight at the front. The call to arms was continuously being made to younger and younger people, accompanied by an unprecedented mass mobilisation of the civilian population. The latter were expected to contribute to the nation's war effort and support an efficient fighting force by manufacturing weapons and equipment. As Gibelli points out (1998/2014), two fronts emerged – an outer front where young and older soldiers went to battle, and an inner front where women, the elderly and children contributed to their families' survival by working hard in the fields or factories.

### **Propaganda, mass pedagogy and the role of children's literature**

The need to involve the Italian people *en masse* in the conflict posed a very delicate problem of how to ensure effective mobilisation strategies. Differently from in other European countries, propaganda had to fill a gap in national identity, as the country's population hardly identified itself with a single collective whole.<sup>2</sup> People needed to be convinced about the justice of a war which could not be qualified as defensive. New forms of propaganda were therefore developed to convince Italian people to join the conflict and defend their country, which was often still perceived as a distant and obscure entity. The traditional political rhetoric was inadequate: it was too remote from the mindset and logic of its audience (Gibelli 1998/2014: 131). Italian politics thus opted for innovative engagement strategies to attract the uneducated masses, and to inspire them with values, ideas and a new sense of involvement by declaring the conflict terrible but necessary.

The information industry and the world of education contributed to patriotic indoctrination and war education campaigns. They managed to numb public opinion by exploiting some of the fundamentals of political propaganda, by demonising the enemy, naturalising the idea of personal sacrifice for patriotic reasons, glorifying heroism, and trivialising death. These campaigns were directed both at soldiers in the trenches and at people at home, children included (Gibelli 1998/2014: 134–135):

It was actually the first large-scale mass pedagogy experiment, the first great indoctrination operation, aimed at preparing and conditioning public opinion from

<sup>1</sup> According to official estimates, about 5,900,000 men were enlisted in Italy (alongside the 7 million already in the army). This massive call to arms profoundly altered family relationships (Bianchi 1995).

<sup>2</sup> “The national state was created by a minority of the population and the profound social and territorial divisions of the country, especially between North and South, were the reason why the majority hardly accepted the idea of a single nation – i.e. an entity which goes beyond single isolated families, parishes and local communities. Most people identified the notion of ‘homeland’ with their own village or the place where they were born, the notion of ‘country’ and even of Italy itself remained obscure” (Gibelli 1998/2014: 92).

the nationalistic-patriotic point of view. What school had not managed to or wanted to achieve in this sense, was now attempted in the *sui generis* “school” of the trench experience. The best communication technicians, famous writers, artists, designers and pedagogy experts – in other words, the mass-media professionals of the time – were all involved in the project.<sup>3</sup>

University professor Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, a distinguished academic in the pedagogic field who later co-operated with the philosopher Giovanni Gentile on the school reform of 1923, was appointed director of the new Propaganda Office in 1918. In line with the principles of neo-idealistic pedagogy, his contribution to the renovation of the Italian school system focused on children’s active involvement. During the war years, in fact, certain strategies of persuasion based on a reinforced national ideology tended to identify children with soldiers. The scale of the propaganda was massive, and, not limited to printed media (daily newspapers, magazines, trench newspapers, bulletins, posters, postcards, and literature for adults), it invaded the cinema and children’s literature too. Schools became ideal places for constructing the war myth and for spreading slogans and stereotypes celebrating victory and the sacrifice of soldiers at the front (the new heroes).

This propaganda systematically adopted images of children and children’s literature as a powerful communication tool for conveying emotionally pervasive and underhand messages to adults, systematically and effectively instilling the stereotypes of the war iconography. It is no accident that most of the illustrators involved in the national propaganda programme – artists like Umberto Brunelleschi, Carlo Chiodi, Alberto della Valle, Eugenio Colmo (Golia), Aldo Mazza, Attilio Mussino, and Antonio Rubino – were recruited from among professionals in the field of children’s literature (Cesari 2007: 9).

The representative and communicative framework of children’s literature, based on simplicity, didactic clarity, and ample use of images (27), was an ideal communication tool for the uneducated Italian masses, too. The Italian population at large was considered immature and naïve; it needed to be educated. As Maria Truglio highlights (2017), children’s literature written before Fascism represents Italy as a child that has to grow together with its children. It had to become economically and politically modernised, just like its young citizens that needed to grow cognitively, psychologically and morally.

## Mobilised childhood

The Great War was the first 20<sup>th</sup>-century conflict where childhood was given a special role in the adult war apparatus. Indeed, even during the Libyan war, which began in October 1911, the country’s press and all its cultural agencies mobilised in defence of this new colonial adventure, which focused on the symbolically central role of children. The world of imagination, toys, cinema, and comics became involved in the

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<sup>3</sup> Where no published English translation is available, the quotations have been translated into English by the authors.

propaganda, multiplying the message of consensus based on childhood through many different communication channels, anticipating an aspect of the spread of the culture of war which was to mark subsequent years. The Great War, however, offered a further, more total meaning for the involvement of childhood and adolescence in the practices of nationalisation. No longer seen as mere spectators and victims, children became supporting actors on the “home front”. This contributed to the children’s practical and symbolic mobilisation, while they were exposed at the same time to complex manipulation for political and nationalist objectives. The younger generations now had a dual role: they themselves were mobilised, and they contributed to mobilising collective consent.

While both the language and the narrative style of the new mass propaganda were simplified, childhood suffered the aggressive, capillary influence of war indoctrination. Most of children’s literature was soon converted into a communication workshop, using stylised and simplified, persuasive propaganda concepts and emotional involvement procedures that were also clearly addressed to adults (and parents). The Italian war propaganda machine saw children as the audience of a mass communication strategy intended for the whole population (Gibelli 2005: 39–176). If we exclude the initial gradualness of the propaganda and the tendency to link the war experience to Risorgimento traditions, in its most intense period the mobilisation of Italian childhood used strategies very similar to those of other European countries. Child-sized heroic discourse spread all over Europe: children were often at the heart of the call to arms, representing the reason to fight, the moral lever for the strategy of consent. Children’s patriotism was a recurrent theme of the literature of the time, and made every adult feel acutely responsible for doing their bit. The children likewise felt the need to recompense the adults’ sacrifice by providing moral support for their efforts, mirroring and honouring their elders’ disciplined, virtuous attitude to the fatherland (Mondini 2014: 232).

Italian children’s literature and teaching materials generally feature a strong continuity of topics, metaphors, narrative systems, and civil and ethical arguments from the Unification of Italy to the First World War. As early as the book *Cuore* (1886), the sanctity of the nation was a concept that brought the whole cultural edifice together. Building on the inheritance of Italian Unification, and tending to underscore the identity and historical meaning of national unity in effective, readable works offered recognisable models of value and behaviour for a people, and a nation, that was still young and characterised by a huge cultural divide. During the years of the Great War, Italian children’s literature adopted a broad repertoire of 19<sup>th</sup>-century clichés. It described exemplary actions, exalted the civilising role of the army, and placed rhetorical emphasis on the importance of sacrifice and heroism (as a sublime ambition even for children), as a continuation and inheritance of the new national mythology. It was a popular patriotic pedagogy targeting children and their families and had a similar function to the process of nationalisation of the masses. It revived the edifying public image of the new colonial, national, imperial power popular in the 1880s,

becoming increasingly authoritarian, driven by the need for ideological mobilisation (Todaro 2016: 192). The First World War saw the widespread use of the pedagogical models of popular educational literature. As the publisher Bemporad (one of the most committed to the sector) wrote, the true patriotic mission of the publisher in wartime was to explain that the most serious problems of the time, and of the Great War, were related to the population, to young people and soldiers, and that it should do this in pleasant and colourful terms, so that even the simple and uneducated could understand (Gibelli 2005: 38).

Italy's belated entry into the war allowed for a softer start to the propaganda. The key ideology supporting the entry into war was nationalism, supported by well-educated men intent on demonstrating that the conflict could lead to a clear break with Giolitti's Italy and its old, stale values. Intellectuals and authors such as Marinetti, D'Annunzio, and Renato Serra started the broad national debate in newspapers and journals in the early months of the conflict, also promoting the idea that young people could make an important contribution. One of the most significant contributions, as far as educating children about the reasons for going to war is concerned, was *I bimbi d'Italia si chiaman Balilla* [The Children of Italy are called Balilla] (1915) by Vamba – a pseudonym of Luigi Bertelli, the former director of the children's Sunday paper *Il Giornalino della Domenica* [Sunday Journal]. This work supported the "war of liberation" with enthusiasm, a direct derivation of the heroic myth of the period of Italian unification, the *Risorgimento*. As the author wrote in the preface to the first edition, the book was the result of research conducted for some conferences held at the start of the First World War. The author described numerous heroic actions of the Italian Unification in detail, set against a backdrop that depicted the First World War as a final, redemptive continuation of the struggle against Austria – the hated oppressor of the past – for Italy's unification. For this particular work, Vamba abandoned the light-hearted, ironic tones typical of his writing in *Il Giornalino della Domenica* and other publications, providing a grave, ominous picture of the situation that reiterated all the nationalist images of the repertoire in use at the time. Despite its rhetorical tone and use of belligerent language, the book is not an example of 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic fiction and pietism, like *Cuore* by De Amicis, for example. It describes what happened during the Italian *Risorgimento* in the form of short historical chronicles, using a clear, concise and direct style that Vamba had learned to use effectively in all his works for children. In the terrible events of the Five Days of Milan, the First and Second Wars of Independence in 1848 and 1859, and Garibaldi's Expedition of the Thousand, the very young (adolescents and often children) involved are brave protagonists of heroic actions described in crude detail, in epic tones and charged with rhetoric. The pedagogical approach to the idea of nation aimed to actively involve the whole population in the enterprise of war, starting with the youngest, using emotional pathos to instil patriotic faith based on emulation and the suggestion of a virtuous example. In *Piccoli eroi della grande guerra* (1915a) by Térésah (the pseudonym of Corinna Teresa Ubertis), the message targeting children

in the atmosphere of wartime was very clear: “Talk to the children about our land, our brothers, our glories, and they will understand immediately. Move them, stir in them that purest and most ardent of sentiments and they will know how to make the sacrifice with faith and simplicity” (7).

Another significant author of the time was Giuseppe Fanciulli, who explained to the Italian youth the reasons for the war: *Perché siamo in guerra* [Why We Are at War] (1915) in a volume characterised by a heavily didactic tone that included geographic maps. This book was part of a collection published in Florence under the emblematic title *Bibliotechina illustrata Bemporad: per la gioventù, per i soldati, per il popolo* [Bemporad Little Illustrated Library: For Children, Soldiers and the People]. These publications actively contributed to spreading the general conviction that the non-defensive war was being waged for “sacred reasons” through different age groups and social classes. In the text, the author overlaps the sense of duty towards the nation at war with irredentist reasons to fully justify total support for the war effort. Responding to the oppression of the ruthless, putting a stop to Austrian tyranny over innocent compatriots outside the homeland, in Trentino, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Rijeka, was presented as a holy duty, a just revenge.

Initially, this literary mobilisation mainly involved exalting children’s bravery and transfiguring war and its material atrocities into an edifying scenario that rarely left room for realism. An emblematic instance of this approach is the volume *La ghirlandetta. Storie di soldati* [Ghirlandetta. Stories about Soldiers] (1915b) by Térésah, which presented a watered-down image of the conflict, represented almost as if it were a sporting competition. The devastating consequences of war on the natural landscape were sublimated in a rarefied, cocoon-like environment. There were no snipers, and the soldiers enjoyed pleasant moments of respite from the war and engaged in activities such as collecting “the innocent little mountain flowers that make such gentle wreaths on the tombs” (Térésah, 1915b: 52). The artist Brunelleschi – one of Rubino’s future fellow contributors to *La Tradotta* – graphically reproduced the idealised vision of the text with pictures of young, unnamed soldiers set against an idyllic, flowering landscape.

After the defeat at Caporetto in 1917, the propaganda increasingly began to target the masses. It was structured and far reaching, driving intellectuals to a second wave of mobilisation and patriotic enthusiasm. Writers went to the front to volunteer for trench journalism, and were exploited by the Propaganda Service to reach the troops directly, thus occupying a social role and providing a public service. With the gradual worsening of the conflict, and its unexpected duration, the wartime narratives started to present young readers with stories that carried stronger involvement and emotional identification. The minimising canons of the early censorship and propaganda – i.e. a simplified parody combined with a rhetorical and reassuring description of war – were supplanted by darker tones (even in the playful stories of the *Corriere dei Piccoli* [Courier of the Little Ones]), the urgency of the war effort, and the sacrifice that was increasingly demanded even of children. *Il romanzo di Pasqualino* (1917) [Pasqualino’s

Story] by Térésah evokes the atrocious reality of soldiers dying in the trenches through the nightmares of the little protagonist, Pasqualino, and his sister Lalla (Colin 2012: 32–35).

### **War as a game: little heroes “for fun” in the *Corriere dei Piccoli***

In the *Giornalino della Domenica* (1906) directed by Vamba in the early 1900s, and later in the *Corriere dei Piccoli*, significant changes were introduced in the expressive techniques used in children’s literature, characterised by new synergies between visual and verbal language. A new compositional syncretism emerged, based on economic and cultural factors, and on innovations introduced by avant-garde movements. Well-qualified authors and illustrators made their fundamental contribution to the success of new periodicals, in which humour and satire were combined with a new journalistic style, less inclined to bombast and sentimentalism. At the same time, children’s literature became a melting pot of different artistic experiments.

When the *Corriere dei Piccoli* was first published (on 27 December 1908), it was an illustrated supplement to the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* [Evening Courier]. In a society where 40% of the population were still unable to read, this editorial project was intended mainly for the modern and affluent upper middle classes of northern Italy. However, the low cost and the choice of cartoons as the main means of communication made it accessible to the middle classes and semi-literate adults, as the high circulation of the newspaper demonstrates. The opening page by the editor-in-chief, Silvio Spaventa Filippi, already showed a different layout from that of traditional periodicals for children. Pictures became as important as words. Texts, written by famous authors, guaranteed “high” cultural standards and paid attention to an all-round education for its readers, combining information and fun facts, storytelling, scientific experiments and game construction. The content covered both theoretical knowledge and practical activities, in an integral approach to children’s personal skills, based on creative spirit and imagination (Fava 2009: 54–60).

On the pages of the *Corriere dei Piccoli*, the atmosphere of war was recreated in stories that featured nationalist ideals, reflecting recent events like the Libyan war of 1911. These stories combined exotic and adventurous elements with an explicit militarist point of view. The early stages of the conflict, with advances and retreats on the frontline, were accompanied by Attilio Mussino’s successful character Schizzo, who appeared for the first time in 1912. Destined to be a lasting success, Schizzo was a patriotic local version of *Little Nemo* by Winsor McCay. The dream of Slumberland was replaced with the dream of being at the front, and the early pacifist ideas were soon supplanted by accounts of heroic enterprises when Italy entered the conflict. Fantastic creatures, magical animals, divinities and heroes from fiction used at school typically featured in the series. Explicit violence or bloodshed was carefully avoided, even in scenes of war. The inevitable happy ending, with the victory of Italy and its allies, was often achieved thanks to imaginary creatures such as Garibaldi’s ghost, the Roman deities Vulcan and Mars, or Schizzo himself, transformed into a giant and endowed

with extraordinary super-powers. A few days before entering the war, it was Schizzo who reminded young readers and their families of the reasons for the conflict. Having heard his father's sad stories about the defeated Italian Unification effort, he retrieved the shipwrecked *Re d'Italia* [King of Italy] from where it had sunk in the Battle of Lissa with the help of a fairy and her dwarfs. He succeeded in repairing it and took command, launching himself into avenging the past and fighting for the "new glory" of Italy (*Corriere di Piccoli*, 16 May 1915, cover page).

The young readers of "*Corrierino*" [Little Courier] were not expected to identify with soldiers. Instead, the imaginary conflict described in the magazine involved a child hero who avoided bad behaviour and who was ready to support the national war effort. This child hero had effectively assimilated the adults' patriotic ideals and rhetoric, and was ready and able to re-interpret and emphasise them in his own way, thereby contributing to a strong consensus. In 1917, the year of the defeat at Caporetto, Schizzo had the chance to meet Leonardo da Vinci, and could then suggest powerful new weapons for the troops to strengthen the Italian arsenal. He supported organised propaganda, falling asleep at the cinema and waking up in a war film, in "a bizarre case of meta-propaganda between two different media" (Mondini 2014: 238).

Two months after the war broke out, Antonio Rubino – a poet and painter from Sanremo who had been a contributor to *Corrierino* since 1908 – went in the same direction with his story of two young friends, Luca and Gianni, who were fighting for two opposing armies (the Hungarian and an imaginary "Selvonian" one). Luca decided to volunteer for the army and, despite his young age, was enlisted as a drummer. So, when the war started, Rubino chose to describe a child who wanted to become a soldier, confirming the idea that everybody could and should consider themselves as active participants in the conflict and take responsibility for the final victory.

The stories of the two children were divided into a series of episodes in which their friendship seemed at times to prevail over their divisions, like the time when Luca and Gianni saved each other's lives, and they freed each other when they were taken prisoners, while at other times they caved in to the need to fight for their own countries, just like when Gianni firmly refuses to pardon Luca's imprisoned father. Despite the trench environment and the shooting, Rubino's drawings showed a benevolent attitude to the characters, whose naïve faces and curly hair helped to downplay even the most dramatic situations. Tragic events were sometimes taken lightly, as in the episode of Luca's false death and burial. Rubino's graphic repertoire relied on a fabulous, dream-like atmosphere, on the swirling flowery details typical of the art nouveau combined with complex surreal polychromies.

Rubino's stylistic choices help to tell the tale of war in a playful, non-brutal manner. Rubino's characters shared the typical traits of what Piaget calls the child's world: animism, realism, and syncretism. All these formal ingredients came not only from Rubino's wish to be close to his readers, but were also part of the aesthetic and expressive research on which the author embarked. Rubino's toys and marionettes became increasingly independent, and the protagonists of his artwork were often



represented as puppets, “improvising acrobats and clowns”, who moved with exaggerated, ridiculous gestures, and whose human features were almost deconstructed in a cubist style, combining art nouveau with the geometries of futurist machinery (Bertieri 2005: 7–20).

Luca and Gianni’s friendship became more difficult to represent as the war dragged on because the Selvonian army was an explicit metaphor of the central European empires. Gianni tended to disappear from the pictures, and to be replaced by the character of his superior, the cruel General Bombarda. The Selvonian army was represented as a mass of cowardly, inept soldiers at the service of a potbellied, physically disgusting and morally inadequate leader (Bombarda), who was constantly mocked and ridiculed by Luca in his clumsy attempts to impose his will.

On 20 June 1915, Rubino introduced a new character, and started to develop a fantastic interpretation of the wartime mobilisation of Italian children. This character – Italino – was an example of anti-Austrian propaganda featuring special “chromatic patriotism”. Deeply rooted in the unredeemed territory of Trento, Italino proclaimed his Italian identity not only through the media of his time (radio, newspapers, cinema, posters, and even hot-air balloons and kites), but also by means of new inventions of his own. He used cans of white, red and green paint to cover walls, trees, roads, landscapes, animals, and human beings with Italian flags, in a creative explosion of grotesque and paradoxical effects. Italino’s war caused no bloodshed, and his funny jokes were a playful version of the official propaganda about the Austrian oppressor in the unredeemed territories, and a supreme act of national liberation achieved by comical forms of intervention.

The main targets of Italino’s escapades were the imperial representative Kartoffel Otto (an egg-shaped, snout-faced, dull and clumsy man), and his daughter Kate (an ugly, sexless creature). Through the pictures and poems of his narrative, Rubino established the “institution of ridicule”, an unrestrained irreverence towards the enemy. His pictures foreshadowed the terrible caricatures contained in *La Tradotta* [The Troop Train], a weekly magazine intended for the soldiers of the Italian Third Army and published between 1918 and 1919. Rubino’s artwork recalled the typical satirical pictures of wartime journalism: playful tools used to distance himself from the terrible reality of the trenches, and to humiliate the enemy by alluding to sexual perversions (metaphorically represented by tall, thin, unattractive women). The enemies become “puppets”, the Kaiser was given the silly nickname *Cecco Beppe*, and then there was the general with the *Pickelhelm*, the dull and petty middle-class patriot – they all formed part of the wartime puppet theatre. They all came under the spotlight to create hilarity and diversion (Isnenghi 1977: 47–49).

Rubino, Brunelleschi and other artists for the *Corriere dei Piccoli* applied to remarkable effect the various iconic codes and communication models they had previously used for child readers in a war magazine, using these models for the playful and carefree entertainment of the soldiers. Propaganda thus became a sphere steeped in specialised pedagogical, communicational and psychological expertise, designed for

a childish and immature mass of people who needed to be addressed in a simple and direct language, much like children (Loparco 2011: 171–181).

Abetino was the last little soldier to be created by Rubino for the *Corriere dei Piccoli* in January 1917. The “good and gentle” Prince of Legnazia (Wood-land), a joyful and idyllic land inhabited by toys, had a terrible archenemy, King Arcipiombo of Piombania (Lead-land), who metaphorically represented Prussian militarism and its metal resources. Although Abetino’s wooden army had little chance of victory against its metallic enemies, it still managed to prevail through cunning and determination, combined with strong faith in its good cause. This metaphorical war was more violent than ever: the metal soldiers drowned or burned, while most of the wooden soldiers were devoured by woodworm before Abetino was able to save them with turpentine. Rubino’s fantastic battles between imaginary lands inevitably evoked plausible connections between Arcipiombo’s evil soldiers (who wore *Pickelhelms* in the pictures) and the German Empire, thus offering a precise key for interpreting contemporary events (Surdi 2015: 230–233).

The *Corriere dei Piccoli* continued to support the war effort. With time, the effort to reassure children prevailed, and characters like Abetino were used mainly to “detach” readers from the real war and show them an imaginary conflict between puppets. In spite of everything, the literary protagonists were always victorious in a Neverland where all reasons for anxiety were accepted with serene optimism.

After the disastrous defeat of Caporetto on 24 October 1917, bleaker tones were interlaced with an ironical tendency towards minimisation, albeit in a patriotic tone. The episode about Schizzo for the New Year of 1918 contained a significant picture of the ghost of the Old Year (an elderly soldier) taking his leave in his tattered uniform, while the New Year (a young soldier bravely carrying the promise of great new enterprises) emerged from the calendar (*Corriere dei Piccoli*, 6 January 1918, front cover). This picture represented the mobilisation of new generations: future soldiers were called to do their duty, and war was represented as an insatiable Moloch, ready to demand sacrifices from everybody.

### **Children and puppets: little bodiless heroes**

The emphasis in the *Corriere dei Piccoli* tended to be on the powerful, but non-violent weapons of savings, propaganda, and correspondence with soldiers at the front, together with military discipline applied to domestic settings. But there were also some stories about young, invincible heroes ready to fight real or imaginary battles, little explorers sent out to patrol enemy territories, or little rascals who left home to join the army: Luca, Gianni, Schizzo, and Abetino formed part of this *repertoire*.

The new model children described in the national propaganda stopped behaving like children, as seen in the radical images of girl-heroes, mobilising to support propaganda and at times participating in life on the front. Didì, for example, was the protagonist of a story under the same name written by Mario Mossa de Murtas for the

*Corriere dei Piccoli* in 1916. Together with a goat, a cat and a dog, the little girl had adventures in a newly “redeemed” village near Trento. Her mission was to help the Italian army and actively contribute to the victory of *Alpini* soldiers by sabotaging the strategic plans of the enemies, creating false trails, damaging the weapons of the Croatian army, and setting fire to bridges.

Generally speaking, when girls were not involved in pathetic stories based on the social inferiority of female characters, and on their “endless debt” in terms of charitable generosity and dedication to the family, such girl-heroines reflected the nationalist stereotypical childhood created by the propaganda. The fundamental educational value of adventure was only legitimate when children imitated adults, when they mixed with adults and emulated their lives, possibly displaying significant examples of courage and the spirit of initiative. The heroic childhood model contributed to the creation of a strong, mobilising idea of the nation. It reminded adults that they were fighting to protect their children, especially when children actively proved themselves worthy and valiant patriots by setting important examples in real or legendary stories of boys and girls who were ready to sacrifice their lives at the front. This propagandist exploitation underscored the inevitable shortening of individuals’ childhood and their inescapable premature conversion into adults.

As explained earlier, the descriptions of the heroic events of the First World War showed a certain continuity with those of the *Risorgimento*, and Italian children’s literature continued to describe the adventures of many young heroes of the past, war orphans proud of their parents’ sacrifice, or little soldiers wishing to offer their lives for their country. The heroic literature of the time celebrates military glory and the ludic dimension of war and also reflects a rather disquieting social phenomenon, repeatedly reported during the First World War: the escape from home of children who wanted to join the army and fight at the front. Once again, this showed childhood as an age that should be precociously abandoned, in favour of adult fights. Paradoxically, the new military rules and war prohibitions found an alternative in the substantial freedom from school education and traditional family values of this wartime epoch. This topic was emblematically embodied in the story of Giacomino Rasi, the little protagonist in Salvator Gotta’s *Piccolo Alpino* (1926), a novel written in the Fascist period which was destined to influence the education of entire generations of Italian boys. The temporary loss of his parents offers the character the freedom to join the army and enter an idyllic military life of discipline, conviviality, and solidarity.

In the war years, one of the most famous characters in Italian children’s literature soon became the subject of a series of humorous reinterpretations. The metaphorical persona provides a particularly effective outline of how propaganda and pedagogy expanded after the Unification of Italy into Fascism, becoming increasingly radical, authoritarian and violent (Curreri 2002: 181–202). In fact, Pinocchio had already been recruited for the war in Libya in 1911: the Milanese publisher Bietti launched a collection of volumes including *Pinocchetto a Sciara Sciat* [Little Pinocchio at Sciara Sciat] (Lucatelli 1912a), and *Pinocchetto soldato a Tripoli* [Little Pinocchio, Soldier

in Tripoli] (Lucatelli 1912b), while the Florentine Nerbini published *Pinocchio alla Guerra* [Pinocchio Goes to War] (D'Aloja 1912), and *Pinocchio a Rodi* [Pinocchio in Rodi] (Athos 1912). The protagonist of *Pinocchetto contro l'Austria* [Little Pinocchio against Austria] (1915) by Bruno Bruni was a 16-year-old long-nosed boy, who left home for the army barracks in the enthusiastic hope of joining the fight. The boy became the protagonist of bold stereotyped adventures, such as unmasking some spies, exploding a mine, and causing the death of twenty soldiers. In all of his daring stunts, the enemies were reified, deprived of their values, easily captured and “locked up”, as in a theatrical farce.

The pedagogical metaphor of the wooden puppet started to take on new symbolic meanings. In a short play by Ettore Berni, *Pinocchio al fronte. Scene eroicomiche per fanciulli* [Pinocchio at the Front. Mock-heroic Children's Stories] (1917), for instance, everybody was invited to take part in the war experience, even those who were unfit for service or who were disabled. As Carlo Merlin explained in his foreword to the play, a bold connection might be established between the bodies of Pinocchio and Enrico Toti. The brave little fighter and runaway Pinocchio was thus compared with the legendary disabled hero, who insisted on joining the army at all costs and threw his wooden crutch against the enemy in his very last action, before being shot dead in 1916. The rest of the story followed the literary clichés, with Pinocchio's escape, the Blue Fairy, the soldiers at the front, the Fox and the Cat who tried to blow everybody up, and the Talking Cricket's protective intervention. As Fochesato explains (2015: 73–81), the use of such a popular character as Pinocchio, a small, light, wooden puppet, showed readers that even a handicap can become a resource, and that nobody should shy away from the duty of “being useful to the fatherland in one way or another, at the front or behind the lines” (Gibelli 2005: 39).

An impossible reconciliation between the two major masterpieces of Italian children's literature – *Pinocchio* (1883) by Collodi, and *Cuore* [Heart] by De Amicis (1886) – was attempted in 1917 by Paolo Lorenzini (Collodi's nephew), who wrote *Il Cuore di Pinocchio. Nuove avventure del celebre burattino* [Pinocchio's Heart. New Adventures of the Famous Puppet] for the Florentine publisher Bemporad. The protagonist was a boy in flesh and blood – portrayed by the illustrator Carlo Chiostris as an extremely tall and thin figure with a large head – who went to the front to join the Bersaglieri Corp (anticipating by a few years the adventures of the Little Alpino, Giacomino Rasi). What caught the readers' attention and went beyond the usual *topoi* of juvenile heroism, however, was the huge emphasis on wounds and mutilations. Pinocchio had a leg amputated, then lost the other leg, and later even both arms, in an enemy air bombing. The consequences of the explosion were charged with ludic, caricatured connotations, which evoke the idea of creative destruction of the avant-garde and futurist movements. When Pinocchio was eventually transformed back into a puppet, he was happy to have served his country with his boy's heart, and he told Geppetto many beautiful things.

The insistence on mutilation had a two-fold propagandist purpose: it tended to exalt the sacrifice, while downplaying the pain in the name of a sublime ideal, and it also showcased the advances made in medicine and care. In children's literature, as in the postcards dedicated to him at the time, the highly popular character of Pinocchio thus symbolised some of the most frequently recurring themes of children's stories in wartime. His childish bravery was taken to extremes, and with his scornful attitude to danger and physical harm, he played down the drama and tragedy of war. He also bore witness to the fact that, especially in the last months of the war, even the very young who were still only adolescents were called to die in the conflict. So it was "not by chance that the young officers just out of a quick training course could easily identify with a clumsy, stubborn and recalcitrant puppet" (Fochesato 2015: 80).

### **Narrating the Great War today: new perspectives in children's literature**

The literary corpus analysed so far was based on the narrative coordinates of patriotism, heroism, order, discipline, sacrifice, obedience and moral integrity. During the Great War, in fact, most children's books were expected to inform and persuade their readers about the positive aspects of the conflict, to make it seductive by instilling the idea that fighting, dying, and in general sacrificing oneself for one's nation was not only necessary, but also natural. The whole operation consisted in a kind of normalisation and trivialisation of war, intended as something compatible with everyday life. Since war permeated every single aspect of people's existence, it was possible and necessary to get used to it (Gibelli 1998/2014: 232).

Although the Italian panorama of children's literature during the Great War was rather homogeneous, as we can see from the above-described works, it is worth remembering that some works appearing in Italy painted a slightly different picture, out of line with the political and cultural climate of the time. In describing the adventures of their protagonists, novels such as *L'aereoplano di Girandolino* [Girandolino's Airplane] (1916) by Arturo Rossato, and *Ciuffettino alla Guerra* [Ciuffettino Goes to War] (1916) by Enrico Novelli (Yambo) showed a degree of originality while emphasising the pervasive, negative effects of armed conflict, and the destructive and dehumanising power of war (Myers 2016a: 121). These novels were nonetheless profoundly influenced by the propaganda of the time. They contain no trace of the heroism exhibited in other children's books (Faeti 2014), but support for certain interventionist attitudes and the irredentist rhetoric of the period were still very much in evidence.

We need to wait until the end of the 1950s and the novel *Il favoloso '18* [The Fabulous '18] (1957) by Maria Azzi Grimaldi (winner of first prize at the S.E.I. Società Editrice Internazionale competition in 1956) to see a significant story dedicated to the First World War re-emerge in the children's literature of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when much more attention was being paid to historical novels about the Second World War. Grimaldi's story is set in the terrible years of the Great War and tells of three brothers' daily difficulties and hard lives, combining sadness and fear with dreams and desires, and a capacity for resilience. The narrative setting is still anchored in a sort of

nostalgic representation of the climate of “victory”, but the story stands apart for its clear denunciation of the cruelty and inhuman face of war.

This “nostalgic” and, in some aspects, “patriotic” climate still seems to be present in many contemporary works of Italian children’s literature nowadays. We refer not only to some dated novels such as *Una magica notte*<sup>4</sup> [A Magic Night] (1999) by Guido Petter, *Cecilia va alla guerra*<sup>5</sup> [Cecilia Goes to War] (2000) by Lia Levi, or *Lorenzo e la Grande Guerra*<sup>6</sup> [Lorenzo and the Great War] (2008) by Marco Tomatis, but also to works published in recent years, and particularly between 2010 and 2015 (years with a higher concentration of Italian publications for young people about the Great War). These works feature a distinctly traditional and nostalgic narrative approach, as in *L’armonica d’argento: La Grande Guerra vista con gli occhi di un ragazzo* [The Silver Harmonica: The Great War Seen Through the Eyes of a Boy] (2014) by Mauro Neri, or *Hemingway e il ragazzo che suonava la tromba* [Hemingway and the Boy Who Played the Trumpet] by Luisa Mattia (2014), or *Amici su due fronti* [Friends on Two Fronts] by Ave Gagliardi (2014). In addition, some of these books have also been further burdened with a heavy didactic apparatus. The reason is probably due to the fact that these novels have been conceived by authors and publishing houses to respond more to the practical and “uncritical” didactical needs<sup>7</sup> of teachers than to children’s appetite for a story about the Great War.

Alongside such publications, there have nonetheless been others that are genuinely significant from the aesthetic standpoint and which paint a markedly different picture of the Great War from the narratives of the past, bearing witness to an ethical and more political maturity of considerable interest concerning an event that has branded the history of Italy. These books have, somewhat belatedly, reconsidered in a more balanced way the historical, cultural and political events of those times in these last years.<sup>8</sup> There are a few reasons for this reconsideration. Firstly, the 1960s and 1970s coincided with

<sup>4</sup> The novel tells the story of four adolescents who, on the strength of an old army map, explore the sites and traces of the First World War in the Dolomites. The Great War only provides the background for the various adventures and love stories of the young protagonists, who find themselves on their own for the first time as they go in search of bunkers, trenches and forts.

<sup>5</sup> Set in Friuli, this story is presented in the form of a diary. It tells of the adventures of a young girl called Cecilia and her friend Marco, who go in search of the diary of Cecilia’s father, stolen by a mysterious countess and containing precious information about the Great War.

<sup>6</sup> This is the story of a young boy who finds himself catapulted onto the waterfront and caught up in the tragic Italian withdrawal after the defeat at Caporetto. Captured by the Austrian army he succeeds in finding comfort and salvation. The story is interwoven with news items and anecdotes about the weapons used in the First World War, and the living conditions at the front, and on the battlefields.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth saying that for a long time the First World War was largely depicted in many Italian school textbooks as the “fourth” Risorgimento War, fought for freedom against the old Austrian enemy and for possession of the cities of Trento and Trieste.

<sup>8</sup> Some theories advanced in a recent study (Myers 2017: 167–185) on the topic of modern Italian children’s literature about the Great War seem rather surprising. While the study is worth mentioning for its accurate reconstruction of the historical and political picture in Italy at the time, it claims that the way in which war is presented to young readers has remained largely unchanged, based on Levi’s work *Cecilia va alla Guerra* published in 2000. This work was undeniably an

the early signs in Italy of a significant reorientation of the historiographical studies on the Great War. The studies by Mario Isnenghi (1967) and Enzo Forcella and Alberto Monticone (1968), for instance, shed new light on the defeat of Caporetto and the role of the victims caused by a very repressive military system or on the role played by Italian intellectuals in producing the Italian myth of the Great War (Isnenghi 1970). These new directions in historiography research also testified to an emerging anti-militarism approach in Italian society, literature and cinema.<sup>9</sup> These studies were taken up again with strong renewed interest in works published in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Antonio Gibelli's (1991; 1998/2014) and Giuliana Procacci's (1993) research revealed, for instance, the historiographical resources of war letters. They made "extensive use of the letters written by and to soldiers (subject to censorship), which give us fresh perspectives on the conditions and mentality of the soldiers, with particular attention paid to the refusal to fight, whether from indiscipline or mental breakdown" (Ferrari 2015: 123).

Secondly, the memory of the Great War is still very much alive in the north-east of Italy, where the conflict was fought. Some Italian children's authors, who live in that area, are able to present a new historical, cultural and political perspective and a more intimate awareness in their books, also because of their family or local community memories about the Great War. This, for instance, is the case of Chiara Carminati or Guido Sgardoli. Their families lived very close to the territory or to the battlefields described in their novels and they could study documents and artefacts in many small local war museums from that period.

Finally, the arrival of the centenary of the end of the First World War, remembering and reconstructing the complex, multifaceted dynamics of the Great War at several levels of interpretation (the historical, cultural, social, ethical, political, and educational) has served to prompt scholars and Italian children's writers to pay more attention to this type of work, revealing a greater maturity of the ethico-political conscience in Italy's literature for children.<sup>11</sup>

As discussed earlier, most of the Italian children's books published a century ago served the ideological demands of the political situation at the time. They tended to

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editorial success (probably thanks more to the attractive teaching materials accompanying the story than to the real aesthetic quality of the work), but it is certainly not representative of all the new contemporary tendencies of Italian publications for children dedicated to the First World War. As we have tried to demonstrate in this article, there is an abundance of such literature on the topic and, in a few instances, the narrative models differ considerably from those of the past.

<sup>9</sup> In 1959 Mario Monicelli directed the lauded movie *La Grande Guerra* [The Great War] which focused on the perspective of ordinary soldiers and their unhuman conditions during the war. In 1970, Francesco Rosi produced another well-known movie *Uomini contro* [Men Against] where he depicted the misery of trench warfare and the resulting insubordinate behaviour of the troops.

<sup>10</sup> See, again as an example, the studies by Mario Isnenghi (1998; with Giorgio Rochat 1998/2008) and Antonio Gibelli (1991; 1998/2014).

<sup>11</sup> There has been a remarkable flourishing of critical essays, from both Italian scholars (Bellatalla & Genovesi 2015; Campagnaro 2015; Fochesato 2011; 2015; Orestano 2016) and authors from abroad (D'Eath 2014; Myers 2016a; 2016b; 2017). It is also worth mentioning some significant further analyses published in Italian specialist journals for children's literature, such as the numerous monographs dedicated to the First World War in *LiBeR* (101: 18–35) in 2014, and in *Pagine Giovani* (159: 1–79) in 2015.

offer an idealised, simplified, one-sided representation of war, and a sterile, deformed viewpoint on the conflict. Violence was barely mentioned, and the supreme aesthetic beauty of self-sacrifice for one's country left no space for any tragic representation of death, inflicted or suffered. In many cases, words and pictures offered a reassuring, bucolic, watered-down version of daily life in the army, where the brutal, macabre and dehumanising aspects of life in wartime were entirely avoided. Soldiers were deprived of their physical dimension and sensorial perception, and described as "objects" taking part in a great adventure of human history. There was almost no sign of any physical pain or psychological suffering. Heroes were not real men in flesh and blood, with their own strong and characterising identities; they were idealised soldiers – certainly brave, but also law-abiding and obedient to their superiors. By alternating between playful registers and mocking tones, and exalting heroic deeds, the authors presented a simplified parody, a rhetorical description of war. Perfectly in line with typical propagandist values, the brave young heroes of children's books kept emulating adult soldiers. Even though some plots started to give a glimpse of gloom and bitterness after the disastrous defeat of Caporetto (1917), the overall narrative goals of this literature did not change. Heroes remained anchored to stereotypic propaganda ideals, and the crux of what war means – i.e. the mass killing of young people – was deliberately blurred (Isnenghi & Rochat 1998/2008: 516).

Today, children's literature no longer suffers from the strong influence of wartime censorship and political propaganda of that time. It is much more a narrative space for recollection and reflection. Objectivity gives way to subjectivity, and the war is no longer the narrative's priority. As explained, some contemporary authors are interested in the human condition in general, and – rather than concentrating on the child hero or patriotic adult models – their stories focus on the plausible and tormented experience of young people forced to face violence and death, as in the graphic novel *La Grande Guerra. Storia di nessuno* [The Great War. Nobody's Story] by Alessandro di Virgilio and Davide Pascutti (2015), which concentrates on the soldiers who fought and suffered at the front.

The above-mentioned reasons for this ethical and political maturity is particularly evident in some of today's novels. Contemporary authors do not need to convince their readers of the negative or positive aspects of war. On the other hand, they are aware that, to understand the Great War, we need to see it through the eyes of those who experienced it (Gentile 2014: X). The 2016 Young Strega prize-winning novel *Fuori fuoco* [Out of Focus] by Chiara Carminati (2014) concentrates on civilians, for instance. The protagonists, Jole and Mafalda, are two young Italian girls of Austrian descent who are forced to flee from their little village near Udine (in Friuli)<sup>12</sup> during the conflict, moving to Grado (an island and peninsula in the Adriatic Sea between Venice and Trieste) to find protection and safety with a grandmother they had never known. A highly original feature of this novel is that, although the two girls (modern heroines)

<sup>12</sup> Friuli was a region in which citizens of the same city often fought on opposite fronts. The city of Udine saw both Italian and Austro-German troops march along its streets.



are not directly involved in any battles, they are invisible (out of focus) witnesses of the Great War. Their actions and thoughts show that the moralising and political ambition to reduce the conflict to a questionable over-simple battle between right and wrong, good and evil, heroes and enemies is no longer the crucial issue. The propagandist need to naturalise sacrifice and suffering, and trivialise death, while avoiding any description of its devastating consequences, has been replaced with a more complex interpretation of the physical and psychological conditions and the relations of soldiers and civilians, at the front and at home. A few of today's authors tend to focus more on human suffering, the population's desperate need for normality and hope, and the need to reflect on wartime choices and wounds, as in the novel *La notte dei biplani* [The Night of the Biplanes] by Davide Morosinotto (2011).

A new sensitivity (Filograsso 2015: 42) has taken the place of the oblivious and legitimising attitudes of the past. Day after day, battle after battle, the identity of the soldiers and civilians described in today's works becomes increasingly multifaceted. As demonstrated by contemporary historiography, a careful examination of historic documents (diaries, notebooks, memoirs, letters and postcards sent from the front between 1915 and 1918) provides authors with a new picture of the physical dimension and the complexities of human beings, which have finally begun to receive the attention they deserve in children's literature, as in the graphic novel *Unastoria* [Onestory] by Gipi (2013).

Clear distinctions – between friend and foe, hero and coward, and so on – tend to fade in contemporary works, as will be discussed and analysed in depth in the next section. The boundaries become blurred, interlaced, and more difficult to identify, as in the picturebook *Il nemico* [The Enemy] by Davide Calì and Serge Bloch (2013).

The stereotyped images of kind, efficient and handsome soldiers and civilians have often been swept away by violent descriptions of weak and bony, disoriented boys and men immersed in the aberrant dimension of life in the trenches, with its macabre visions, nauseating smells and incessant disasters. Girls and women, left behind alone, have to fight their own war, hardly coping with the terrible difficulties of such a life. The protagonists of these stories are entangled in borderline situations, where they are obliged to face the painful reality and its tremendous consequences.

### **An emblematic work: *Il giorno degli eroi***

The novel *Il giorno degli eroi* [The Heroes' Day] (2014) by Guido Sgardoli is a particularly emblematic example of this new awareness in representations of the Great War. The book was awarded the Special Jury's Prize in the "Andersen Italia" competition of 2015. It tells the story of the Morettis: a family of Venetian peasants destroyed by the outbreak of war. Carlo, the eldest son, is enlisted at the beginning of the conflict; his brother Aldo, initially rejected because of health, is called to arms after the defeat of Caporetto; and Silvio, the youngest (born in 1899), dreams of taking part in the war. Through the brutal experience of the trenches and the dehumanising disappointments of the conflict, the three brothers come to terms with the crude reality,

and each finds his own personal answers to the tragic existential questions that emerge at the front.

For Silvio (the youngest brother) in particular, the story is an “epic poem”. His long-craved enlistment soon loses its fascination and appeal when he comes face to face with the horrors of the war. Silvio is honest, and believes in justice, liberty and the common good. He joins the army convinced that the war will help Italy to establish its national identity, and he actively strives to make this happen. But the violent, brutal life in the trenches destabilises his teenage ideals and helps him to realise that human life is what matters most, and that dignity, justice and respect – for the enemy too – are the sole foundations of any civilised society.

By exploiting the laws of contradiction, the author questions the sacredness of hierarchy, emphasises the absurdity of unfair orders and nonsensical military rules, underscores the reasons for insubordination and disobedience, and demolishes vetoes and obligations. In his depiction of deviant behaviour, he insists on the authentic significance of heroic acts, and on the ethical dilemma of certain thoughts and actions (Sgardoli 2014: 132–133):

They send us to the front as an expendable asset, cannon fodder, and woe betide those of us who contradict an order. They are shot immediately [...]. On the Bassòn, when they gave us a medal, we were sent out in groups of fifty, up the steps and away. Everybody was killed, all fifty, and the lieutenant just kept sending us to our death ... Someone said, “Lieutenant, if you go first, I’ll come too”, and the lieutenant shot him in the heart and asked, “Who’s next?” [...] I saved my skin because I stayed hidden behind a rock. Forget the hero! I was lying with my face in the shit, in the place that had served as our latrine for weeks [...]. I don’t know how long I stayed there, thinking I was going to die like all the rest, until the rifles stopped screaming and the bombs stopped falling, and I was still alive [...]. Forget the hero!

Cowardly actions (escaping, abandoning your post, hiding), categorically banished from children’s literature in wartime, now gain visibility. Sgardoli concentrates on the origin of inconvenient and anti-propagandist feelings and attitudes, such as fear, anguish, cowardice, dissociation, delusion and scepticism, and he does so through the vicissitudes of his characters.

Carlo’s ideals soon fade too when he is faced with the brutality of life in the trenches: he is terrified, changed, dehumanised. He considers escape as the only possible way out of the daily horror, the only chance to survive all the violence and death (133):

“This war is wrong.”

“Wrong? It was you who said that a war is right when it defends your land and your home!”

“There are no right wars, do you understand?”, Carlo wanted to cry, grabbing his brother’s shoulders. “All wars are wrong.” [...]

Silvio stepped back, disoriented. Was Carlo really talking to him, telling him to desert, to escape like a coward? Was his brother really the same person who had received a bronze medal of honour?

Life at the front is a devastating experience: going through dangerous, disorienting territories; crossing pestilent places like trenches and no man's lands; coping with mud, cold, hunger, lice, rats, filth, and putrefaction – the gloomy consequences of such traumatic experiences cannot fail to become sedimented in the remotest corners of a man's inner self. The daily unavoidable confrontation with death, usually imagined as a rapid passage from life to non-life (Leed 1985: 33), becomes an oppressive experience for the protagonists of *Il giorno degli eroi*, from which they can no longer free themselves. The dirty, wounded, lacerated bodies of the soldiers are a sort of incarnation of the war (Ricca 2007: 83), a human landscape of the horror, atrocity, violence, and repugnance with which they are forced to cope at the front (Sgardoli 2014: 88):

[...] Fatigue duty: an elegant expression to indicate cleaning up the trench after the fight. The dead were standing that day, close to one another, or crouching in absurd positions made even more grotesque by their stiffened limbs, which looked like the dry branches of a tree. And, where the bombs had exploded, there were torn shreds, parts of those bodies, of those soldiers, who had once been happy men and boys. Alive. Silvio and the others had taken everything up, they had placed whatever they had found on the stretchers, taking care not to end up like those soldiers, because the Austrians beyond the river were good shots. And that wasn't all: they were going to dig a deep mass grave and throw them all in together, at random, their legs, arms and bodies bunched up together.

“War is these things here”, someone had whispered.

Every night Silvio dreams of that grave full of bodies.

Studies on the misleading myth of the Great War and on the traumatised sense of identity and imagination of soldiers involved in the Great War (Bianchi 2001; Fussell 1984; Gibelli 1991) underscore that their injuries tended to leave an indelible mark both on their bodies and their minds, especially when they involved multi-sensory experiences. The roaring bombs and whistling bullets, the howling of agonising comrades, the horrible sight and nauseating smell of devastated bodies were unforgettable. From the sensory point of view, the 1914-1918 war was the last to involve soldiers' bodies so directly (Ricca 2007). The tragic experience of the body became even more devastating with the extraordinary destructive capacity of new military technologies: the lethal shrapnel (Sgardoli 2014: 86), the poisonous mustard gas (87), the deadly *Schwarzlose*, the Austro-Hungarian machine guns vomiting 880 rounds a minute (216). As the renowned military historian John Keegan points out in his book *The Face of Battle* (2001), the impact of novel weapons was not a consideration at the beginning of the conflict. War was ingenuously waged with rifles. Troops stood in column formations. Mass attacks were ordered, using the cavalry. In the face of such suicidal schemes, the only solution the generals could think of was to place the men in trenches and resort to attrition tactics. This did nothing to limit the destructive power of the new weapons, quite the contrary. It emphasised their negative features: mechanisation, industrialisation, dehumanisation (246–247). Soldiers would open fire from a distance on a faceless enemy hidden in rat holes. Although these boys were manipulated and persuaded by means of a massive political propaganda based on “the clear division of

reality into good and evil, friend and foe” (Ventrone 2005: 4), a few weeks at the front sufficed to change their minds, words and actions. A new understanding of the nature of the enemy soon emerged. The human distance between friend and foe gradually became weaker, smaller, more blurred, until it disappeared. The enemy turned into a disorienting and destabilising entity. The limits of a Manichean point of view became evident. In this novel, the often-evoked image of theatre as a mirror held up to children, soldiers and heroes offers young readers an extraordinary testimony of the need for truth, justice and human solidarity, which – whatever the space, time and war front – may be an effective way to remember and understand the errors of human history.

#### Note:

In this paper, the introductory section and the sections “Propaganda, mass pedagogy and the role of children’s literature”, “Narrating the Great War today: new perspectives in children’s literature”, “An emblematic work: *Il giorno degli eroi*” were written by Marnie Campagnaro. The sections entitled “Mobilised childhood”, “War as a game: little heroes ‘for fun’ in the *Corriere dei Piccoli*”, and “Children and puppets: little bodiless heroes” were written by Ilaria Filograsso.

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## **Djeca, vojnici i heroji: Prvi svjetski rat u talijanskoj dječjoj književnosti nekad i danas**

S Prvim svjetskim ratom pojavljuju se novi oblici propagande i u talijanskoj dječjoj književnosti. Zapravo, dječja je književnost prihvaćena kao snažno priopćajno oruđe kojim se prenose emocionalno prodorne i prijevarne poruke podjednako i djeci i odraslima. Suvremena talijanska dječja književnost više nije podložna tako snažnom utjecaju ratne cenzure i političke propagande, nego je više narativni prostor za prisjećanje i promišljanje. No kako se doista promijenila? Koje su suvremene tendencije književnosti za djecu s temom Prvoga svjetskoga rata u Italiji? Razlikuju li se narativni modeli bitno od onih iz prošlosti? Nakon kratkoga prikaza povijesne, kulturne i političke slike Italije u vrijeme Prvoga svjetskoga rata, u ovome se radu analizira i uspoređuje značajan korpus nekadašnje i suvremene talijanske dječje književnosti. Rezultati pokazuju da su novi smjerovi talijanskih historiografskih istraživanja, nove generacije talijanskih dječjih pisaca i stogodišnjica završetka Prvoga svjetskoga rata, premda i sa zakašnjenjem, pridonijeli nastanku uravnoteženije slike povijesnih, kulturnih i političkih događaja toga vremena.

**Cljučne riječi:** Prvi svjetski rat, povijest talijanske dječje književnosti, propaganda, mobilizirano djetinjstvo, etičko-politička svjesnost, suvremena talijanska dječja književnost

## **Kinder, Soldaten und Helden: Der erste Weltkrieg in der vergangenem und gegenwärtigen italienischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur**

Der Erste Weltkrieg führt in der italienischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur zum Erscheinen neuer Formen von Propaganda. Vielmehr noch, Kinder- und Jugendliteratur wird als ein mächtiges Werkzeug aufgefasst, das zur Mitteilung emotional durchdringender und täuschender Botschaften an Kinder und Erwachsene gleichermaßen eingesetzt wird. Die gegenwärtige italienische Kinder- und Jugendliteratur unterliegt nicht länger diesem starken Einfluss der Zensur und politischen Propaganda der Kriegszeit, sondern stellt einen narrativen Raum für Erinnerungen und Nachsinnen dar. Doch wie hat sie sich wirklich verändert? Welche gegenwärtigen Tendenzen weist die Kinder- und Jugendliteratur zum Thema Erster Weltkrieg in Italien auf? Unterscheiden sich die Erzählmodelle wesentlich von denen in der Vergangenheit? Nach einem kurzen Überblick der geschichtlichen, kulturellen und politischen Lage Italiens zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs wird in dieser Arbeit ein bedeutender Korpus der einstigen und gegenwärtigen italienischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur analysiert und miteinander verglichen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen,

dass neueingeschlagene Richtungen italienischer Historiographie, neue Generationen italienischer Autoren der KJL und die hundert Jahre die zwischen dem Ersten Weltkrieg und heute liegen, wenn auch mit einiger Verspätung so dennoch zur Entstehung einer balancierten Darstellung der geschichtlichen, kulturellen und politischen Geschehnisse jener Zeit beigetragen haben.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Erster Weltkrieg, Geschichte der italienischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur, Propaganda, mobilisierte Kindheit, ethisch-politisches Bewusstsein, gegenwärtige italienische Kinder- und Jugendliteratur