

## International Conference

# AT WAR WITH WORDS

## *Letters, diaries and memoirs of soldiers, women and children in the First World War*

Genoa, 26-28 November 2015

### **Organisational Bodies:**

Università di Genova-Dipartimento di Antichità, Filosofia, Storia (Archivio Ligure della Scrittura Popolare); Soprintendenza Archivistica per la Liguria; Institut français-Italia (IFI); Genova Palazzo Ducale-Fondazione per la cultura; Université de Picardie; Institut Universitaire de France; Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino-Archivio della Scrittura Popolare di Trento; Università di Trento; Corpus 14 (Praxiling - Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier, CNRS); Collectif de recherche international et de débat sur la guerre de 1914-1918 (CRID 14-18); Université de Toulouse II-Laboratoire Framespa; Trinity College of Dublin; Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore Aeronautica; École française de Rome.

The project obtained the official label of the Commemorazioni del Centenario della Prima Guerra mondiale and belong to the official program overseen by the Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri-Struttura di Missione per gli Anniversari di interesse nazionale.

### **Introduction:**

What were the feelings, the perceptions and the mental attitudes of soldiers and civilians, of women and children, during the war? What strategies of psychological resistance did they employ in response to such destabilising experience? It is possible to answer these questions by consulting the wide variety of writings produced by the combatants and by the civilian population "mobilised" during the conflict. These letters, diaries, and memoirs – some still hidden in old drawers, though many collected in 'folk writing' archives – are also of considerable narrative and historical interest, due to their linguistic peculiarities, and their efficacy as depth-probes and guides into the war. This conference will address the methodological debates that are still ongoing, while presenting texts of particular significance, as well as the results of European research in historical and linguistic fields.

### **Section I**

#### ***THE WRITING WORKSHOP***

This section will investigate the relationship between war and writing. It will focus especially on the processes of increased literacy brought about by the war, and on the context--the time, place, method, textual form (be it letter, postcard, diary, memoir, autobiography) and physical support--of writing. It will also consider the linguistic characteristics and peculiarities of the texts themselves.

### **Avenues of research:**

- The context (time, place and textual form) of writing: when and where one writes.
- The methods, physical supports and materials of writing: how the form of the physical support and the dimension of the graphic space can influence the nature of the text.
- The war as education to writing: learning how to read and write in the trenches.
- Battling with grammar: the characteristics and peculiarities of the language employed by semi-educated individuals---both military and civilian---who were involved in the conflict.

## **Section II**

### ***INSIDE THE WAR***

This section will analyse and evaluate the texts as common tools of communicative resistance connecting the trenches, the rears, and the home front. It will focus on: (1) narrative approaches to, and descriptions of, the ongoing experience of war (heavily inflected by practices of censorship and self-censorship); (2) writing as a form of psychological escape from conflict and imprisonment; and (3) how the war was perceived away from the front. Beginning with the main authorial subjects who were involved in this sundered dialogue---the soldiers and prisoners, the women (wives, mothers, girlfriends, sisters, Red Cross nurses, godmothers) and children---it will investigate issues related to gender roles and relationships, and to the redefinition of the model of masculinity/femininity.

#### **Avenues of research:**

- Word bridges: writing as a tool of communicative resistance in the trenches, behind the front lines and at home.
- The intimate war: letter-writing and journal-writing as escapes from horror and as introspective shelters.
- Writing and perception: the sensory stresses of war.
- Censorship and self-censorship in correspondence.
- Feeding on words: food as both a necessity of survival and a symbol of identity in the testimonies of the soldiers.
- The sense of homeland in the writings of the soldiers.
- The vision of the enemy in the words of the soldiers.
- Words to heaven: religiosity in the testimonies of soldiers.
- Words in flight: the writings of airmen as an alternative viewpoint, both physical and psychological, on the war.
- Prison writings: the writings of prisoners of war as a means to: (1) ask for assistance; (2) effect their escape; (3) pass the time; and (4) maintain control of their identity.
- The writings of women: the redefinition of gender roles, the decline of masculinity and the changing model of femininity during the war.
- The writings of children.
- The journey of words: the services of the military mail.
- Images and words: postcards with propagandistic images and the drawings of soldiers.

## **Section III**

### ***AFTER THE WAR***

This section will investigate the post-war period---the context within which, and the methods through which, the memories of war were reprocessed. It will also focus on the relationship between oral memory and written memory, and the utilisation of written testimonies in the construction of the war myth. Finally, attention will be brought to bear on the cultural and historiographic processes that have transformed these writings from memorials to historical sources, and on the foundation of centers dedicated to the collection and preservation of written testimonies---important custodians of Europe's collective memory of the Great War.

#### **Avenues of research:**

- The contexts and methods of reprocessing memory: writing as an *a posteriori* reworking of the

lived experiences of war.

- The relationship between oral memory and written memory.
- Monuments of words: the utilisation of the letters and diaries of the fallen in the construction of the war myth.
- From monument to document: the reclamation of these writings as historical sources.
- The collection and preservation of the war-time writings of the populace, in both the real and virtual worlds: from physical recovery to textual analysis.

**Submission Guidelines:**

Proposals (max 300 words) should be accompanied by a brief CV and sent **first 15 April 2015** to: [inguerraconleparole@gmail.com](mailto:inguerraconleparole@gmail.com)

**Languages:**

Italian, French, English.

**Registration fee:**

80,00 €

**Calendar:**

- Deadline for proposals: 15 April 2015
- Acceptance of proposals by: 15 May 2015
- Conference: 26-28 November 2015

**Scientific Committee:**

- Quinto Antonelli (Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino-Archivio della Scrittura Popolare di Trento)
- Sonia Branca-Rosoff (Università Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3)
- Fabio Caffarena (Università di Genova)
- Rémy Cazals (Università di Tolosa)
- Gustavo Corni (Università di Trento)
- Antonio Gibelli (Università di Genova)
- John Horne (Trinity College di Dublino)
- Nancy Murzilli (Università di Genova/Institut français Italia)
- Manon Pignot (Università della Piccardia)
- Frédéric Rousseau (Università Paul Valéry di Montpellier)
- Agnès Steuckardt (Università Paul-Valéry di Montpellier)
- Carlo Stiaccini (Università di Genova)
- Stefano Vicari (Università di Genova)

**Organising Committee:**

- Maria Teresa Bisso (The Ligurian Archives of Folk Writing, Genova)
- Fabio Caffarena (University of Genoa)
- Nancy Murzilli (Università of Genoa/ French Institute Italy)
- Nella Porqueddu (Trinity College Dublin)
- Carlo Stiaccini (University of Genoa)
- Benoît Tadié (French Institute Italy)
- Stefano Vicari (University of Genoa)