

## “Notes from Underground”: a Digital Archive of Public History on Network

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### Abstract

*“Notes from Underground” is the continuation, at a qualitatively higher level, of the project “A hundred years ago ... the Great War”. It intends to use the existing network of schools that have joined and created the school laboratories to find, identify, and elaborate sources and new findings about the Great War. It aims at the construction of an archival of territorial pole (the former Terra d’Otranto), where can be settled all the unpublished sources, found by the work of the school laboratories, under the scientific supervision of CeSRAM (Study Center of the Atlantic-Mediterranean Relations), Institute for the History of the Italian Risorgimento-Lecce Committee, and the University of Salento.*

**Keywords:** digital archive, unpublished primary sources, school labs, Great War, Public History

*The train stopped at Bazancourt [...]. We got off.  
 Respectfully incredulous we listened to the slow rhythmic rumble  
 of the battle front, to that rolling mill melody  
 which would for many years be familiar to us. [...]  
 Did we know that that the dull rumble behind the horizon,  
 growing until it became never-ending thunder,  
 would swallow nearly all of us, one after the other?  
 Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*(1920)*

The metaphorical use of the title of Dostoevsky’s 1864 tale is not casual. For the Russian novelist, it meant taking a lamp and coming down from the first floor of his home into the subsoil of it, “au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver *du nouveau*”.<sup>1</sup> As part of the Great War war project, intitled “A hundred years ago ... the Great War”, “Notes from underground” has meant a great deal in many respects: first of all, the recovery of countless unpublished sources of the Great War, which could go irremediably lost; then, direct involvement in historical research by students, who have learned the “historian’s craft”<sup>2</sup> in the school labs; finally, the participation and direct sharing of territory in the construction of specific historical-cultural and tourist paths for the safeguarding and protection of monuments. For this reason, the idea of a digital archive in which we may redirect all the found sources, making them available to the community, is an important step in the growth and in sharing the Public History.

### ***The WWI’s Project: from three years of “unconscious” Public History...***

The centenary of the first World War, the “Great War”, as it was immediately called by people at the time, was an occasion to redefine one of the most important events of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We wanted to give our children the opportunity to “feel” this historical period, which although “distant”, is still ours, especially since the soldiers who left to go into battle were mostly very young boys, and many of them did not return.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Fleurs du mal: Le voyage. À Maxime du camp*, Paris, Poulette-Malassis, 1857.

<sup>2</sup> See Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou Métier d’historien*, Paris, A. Colin, 1949.

In order to do this we had drawn up a research project which ideally connected schools, University and territory, not only because important local and national associations have requested this, but also to enhance the educational guidance the University of Salento has been offering young students for years. Within this great historical event, for example, we could find a small but important reality: that of AFS, a voluntary ambulance service, brought into being during the Great War, and, nowadays, the major international body of exchange projects for young people and for intercultural education. Every year 12,000 students in more than 60 countries are involved in AFS school exchange projects, which in Italy are organised by the volunteers of Intercultura. The European Council drew on the AFS program for its Comenius project, as have many other organisations whether governmental or not, realising how important it is to leave one's own culture and look at things through a foreigner's eyes in order to become cognizant citizens of one's own Country, of the European Union and of the world as a whole.

Some general considerations: one of the characteristics of educating young people is that of preparing them to comprehend and handle the latest emerging problems in a society in which knowledge is both a basic value and a dynamic instrument in learning new skills, especially in the context of the new relationship between European citizens on the one hand, and the Establishment and other institutions on the other. Of the latter, schools, especially, have the task of educating and training each young person who – thanks to the knowledge acquired during their schooling – will be enabled to live a social dimension as a European citizen, positively participating in a broader citizenship and open democracy, but, above all, with the new forms of *governance* the present-day world seeks. However, this kind of learning is not always guaranteed by schools which must deal with swift, profound change, both from the generational point of view and that of the knowledge instrumental in enabling an immediate connection with young people – sometimes without an adult's intercession – to the surrounding world, as a “global” context in which individual personalities risk disappearing. Neither can we imagine that young people's transferring to university will solve the problem tout court. In fact, many students enrolled in liberal arts degree courses have grievous shortcomings in their basic historical and linguistic knowledge, shortcomings which compel them to proceed more slowly in their degree course, or, even worse, opt out. So, not only do shortcomings emerge in historical knowledge, but they are even more serious if they have to do with the important international context in which we live. Ignore, or not be able to understand, the importance of the principal changes in international relations which become aspects of everyone's daily life, means being frozen out of the principal processes of change.

Moreover, it is essential the interaction between Universities and secondary schools both for the orientation of the students in their choice of post-secondary course of study, both in the development of strategies that takes into account, in particular, its potential users. This latter aspect, indeed, not only is a fundamental step in the pre-registration (managed by the preparation of conventions or specific projects that strengthen a closer relationship with schools in order to make a more efficient orientation in entrance, as well as the University of Salento is trying to do in recent years), but also in the development of tools that will lead students to explore personal resources and to evaluate both their preparation, and their attitudes and inclinations, so to adequately inform them about the knowledge required for admission to degree courses; all this, of course, contributes significantly to increase their chances of success and reduce the dropout rate.

Another key element is the effective connection between school, University and Territory, the latter considered not only from the institutional point of view, but also from the perspective of cultural subjects that together contribute to mutual growth. An important role in this field have also the associations, including, for youth, AFS Intercultura that is in the forefront for promoting individual and group mobility programs. Individual mobility is a resource, because it allows all the students – both those who start out, and those who accommodate – to deal with diversity in everyday situations, which, for teenagers, are given by family habits, school systems, customs, values, myths and heroes, local and national, as seen from inside and from outside. This is a way to enhance the functions of memory and identity in the formation of a planetary consciousness. These experiences represent an extraordinary opportunity for young people to improve their personal growth and to be projected into the future, not only with the understanding that diversity poses other problems compared to those with which they are accustomed to face, but also with a greater interest in the global challenges of the third millennium.

From this point of view, Salento (the ancient “Terra d'Otranto”) is experiencing a very positive impact on the cultural level. It can be said that, despite the crisis – or, perhaps, thanks to the crisis – our young people look at the world with different eyes and, most importantly, with a desire to innovate creatively. And all this, of course, can only be a starting point by which it is possible to strengthen the existing synergy or create it.

Ultimately, also thanks to the law no. 78 of March 7, 2011, on the “Protection of the heritage of the First World War” and the work of the historical-scientific Committee “Centenary of the First World War”, established by the Decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers dated 3 August 2012, 27 May 2013 and 6 June 2013. The project regards: 1) the enhancement of the extraordinary heritage of the tangible and intangible evidence of the First World War; 2) the preservation of historical and cultural background of past events by the recovery of the places where the events happened, to hand down their story to future generations; 3) the organization of exhibitions, conferences and events, or other cultural initiatives, defining and organizing them in close cooperation with the local authorities concerned and with other committees/commissions in the country operating under various ministries.

The general objectives of the project were:

- 1) to create a strong interaction between School, University and Territory, promoting the orientation in the choice of University studies;
- 2) to innovate methodology of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to the study of history and international relations, by the simulation of a historical research in the sources and archives;
- 3) to foster social interclass relations by the exchange of experiences and building / sharing a work project;
- 4) to promote the exchange of students of Salento with foreign students or common Italian twin Municipalities, both during some phases of laboratory (foreign students or other Municipalities not of Salento may be invited to attend), and at the final stage (public event) or in two next years (for example, a student exchange to explore "physical" places (trenches, battlefields, etc.), historical-geographical and cultural war places (shrines, documentation centers, etc.);
- 5) to stimulate the creativity of the workshop groups, even encouraging them to achieve audiovisual products of various kinds (a “short” on the work in progress of the group laboratory, a power point presentation, and a final movie, a “show” with the used sources, a collection of writings, letters, diaries, etc.);
- 6) to celebrate the centenary of the First World War by a series of laboratory activities of research, instead of relying only on the formal rhetoric, little stimulating for young people;
- 7) to promote young people’s awareness that, from the great historical events, even tragic, can arise experiences of international solidarity and voluntarism, aimed at building peace by dialogue between cultures.

But it was above all in the school labs that the project worked very well: the school labs have been the heart of our territory, the most important node in the territorial network, from which the research and the reconstruction of the collective historical memory began. Many primary sources (artifacts, written documents, manuscript diaries, soldiers’ letters from the trench, war medals, matricularsheets, etc.) have been received from school laboratories, classified, surveyed, contextualized, dated and elaborated by students. They presented historical sources closer to the experience of the students, using the names of the fallen soldiers of their countries in order to reconstruct and widen the social context, to the global historical event. In this way, the First World War was not alone a mere object of study, but also has become a time-sharing (including mnemonics) of a factor which has directly affected the lives of the persons closest to them.

After exploring the sources, they recognized the type, associating implicit and explicit data and information, contextualized, chronologically reconstructed sequences of facts and events and proposed questions; they used the specific disciplinary methodology to analyze sources of various kinds, translated in Italian the possible sources/documents/treaties in foreign language; they– after understanding the political context and literary-artistic and philosophical sources on which they were working – they have rebuilt on maps the important events of the First World War and recognized the key strategic areas.

Students analyzed the interplay between historical events and methods of propaganda, among the leading artistic and literary movements of the time, and the use of photography and cinema to witness some episodes of war; they understood the role of the press in creating the consensus of the masses and enhanced the experiences, with a view of peace education and the possible non-violent resolution of international conflicts, of institutions and non-governmental organizations that have operated during the First World War to help the wounded and save lives.

Young students analyzed the topography of their communities, to identify any historical references to the First World War; did a little sociological and statistical research on the victims and found out if, in their towns or in that of their own school, there were buildings used as hospitals, or other activities associated with military operations. They learnt how to “manage” a laboratory, dividing tasks and roles, based on the recognition of the skills of others; how to be able to work in a team, recognize and solve problems, all together tend to achieving the goal, step by step.

### ... to a conscious and shared project of Public History

The moment of communication and explanation of the course to the students is one of the most important phases of the project because it must serve to stimulate or enhance their motivation: as a result, it is essential, first of all, tell the kids the passion for research, give them the Aristotelian sense of “wonder”, which is the first step to ask questions and seek answers, element, this, that opens up the world of knowledge and the desire to explore it. Make the kids to participate in the first person to historical research is, therefore, very important. For this, they will be just the ones who are the main protagonists of the course of the laboratory, a process that starts with the procurement, in their families, the sources on which they will articulate the work of the group.

This is an important phase for another reason: finding the sources the kids might be induced to consider non-relevant sources, of a different era, for example. In this case, just the error – and let’s not forget that the boys will be working “in the dark”, without a thorough knowledge of the period of the First World War, and, therefore, in an initial state of “cognitive obstacle” – must take a fundamental educational value. The fact that the sources come from the families of the students involves another significant element: once completed the phase of the laboratory, the found sources – with the consent of the owners – were sent to the European site for the collection of material relating to the Great War (<http://www.europeana-collections-1914-1918.eu/>). In this way, there was the opportunity to contribute to the enrichment of the digitized material of the site, made available to all.

This project has confirmed the crucial importance of cultural heritage and of its role in education; for this reason, we have passed from an unaware approach to Public History to the idea of developing a conscious project based on the experience of school labs and the network of schools and local associations already formed. This project is precisely the digital archive, in which all the primary sources, found by the students in their small research work, can be poured. The model could be that of “Europeana”, the EU digital platform for cultural heritage, originally born as the European Digital Library Network (EDLnet) by the European Commission and whose prototype was launched on November 20, 2008. Over time, it has become an increasingly thematic portal where it is possible to include content of various kinds and contextual informations (or metadata) about the items. On the occasion of the centenary of the WWI, it was realized “Europeana Collections 1914-1918”.

Building a digital archive for the network of linked schools means, therefore, making an important leap of quality, with significant educational and cultural impacts on the entire territory. Students learn the basic methodology of the craft of the historian, learn to work on unpublished primary sources, classify them and elaborate them within school laboratories, digitize them even in 3d and then, under the supervision of the public historian, put them into the online digital archive. Over time, the digital archive can be connected to a linked data and, by means of an agile digital tool kit – as “Wotify” (what-if-I), used by “Europeana labs” – but also linked to the State Archives, the Municipal and Parish Archives, the historical school libraries, such as the “P. Siciliani” Institute in Lecce, which – on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of its founding – has developed a project of “recovery” of its historical archive by the State Archives of Lecce and today, according to the indications of the public historian, is trying to make it accessible to all. The “Siciliani” story is not the only one: there are other archives and school libraries to be retrieved: some – like the ancient “Presta Columella” Institute – have a collection of rare photographs; others have old class registers in which students’ votes were recorded (during the Great War, many margin notes indicate that “the student is in a war zone”) or a collection of “veils”, that is, those communications that came directly from the Ministry to the School Institutes and which gave directions on the choice of textbooks, programs, and so on. In this regard, for example, it is very important refer to the introduction of racial laws in Italy in 1938 and all the ministerial recommendations not to adopt Jewish textbooks or discuss “Jewish” arguments.

Making an online digital archive also means laying the groundwork for a series of interventions on the territory of the historical and cultural tourist routes: as far as the Great War in Terra d’Otranto, we could imagine a series of meetings in some locations from Leuca, *finibus terrae* of Italy and Europe, to Lecce, along the Adriatic coast, in which some very important naval battles were fought. In each of these locations, an event would be organized with neighboring project partners and with schools: there would be a memorial moment in front of the monument to the fallen soldiers and one of the historical description of the places that, in various ways, were involved in the events of the Great War. The historic part would be handled by the public historians, who would work in team with some local historians or with people, who may make their personal archives available for that day.

The sporting part would be cared for by the Nordic Walking associations, which would choose the routes (of course, it would be paths and not roads accessible by cars); the horsemen would exhibit, riders and amazons of the places included, and also could participate sports associations and all those who, personally or as an association, would want to adhere to this initiative. It is possible to think of a series of “encampments” (of course, it is an idea to develop), but also of B&B resorts proposed by the local Pro Loco, with food products offered by local firms. The other route, that along the Ionian coast, until Taranto, should be organized later.

**In conclusion**, the digital online archive, thus, would be a truly fluid and living archive, able to reflect that “digital turn” that is happening in the field of historical disciplines: it would also allow young people to reformulate the way they approach the study of history, a discipline often characterized by a lot of prejudices and that students do not like because they consider it a mere container of dates and events which are difficult to remember.

With a type of search and discovery “in the dark” (that is, without a research method and without a specific knowledge), the boys would begin to see that history starts from their homes, remains in their grandparents’ trunks, lives again when a discolored photograph is kept in the trunks of their grandparents and saved from oblivion and brought back in the light of memory. Already in their school, young people would learn to “taste” the passage of time in history and the significant presence of family memories that are part of a wider, national, international, and global history. In short, they would understand firsthand the importance of safeguarding and preserving individual and collective history memory and would feel part of a community, that has deep roots in the past and that, for this reason, is able to look with great impetus to future.