

Europeana Research Grants Progress Report



Upgrading History. Diaries from the War Front



Source: [Kostis Charitakis with the pilot on a biplane](#)

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Results

The main goal of *Upgrading History* is to preserve historical memory and to reactivate old personal stories. Europeana Collections include a good amount of soldiers' writings (especially in Italian, French and English) and paintings, as well as a collection of letters from the trenches by Isaac Rosenberg. By now, Rosenberg's letters and eight diaries in Italian and French were processed.

The materials are arranged on the [StoryMap](#) platform, highlighting the different itineraries travelled by a single soldier. Each journey track is enriched by the text itself and other media from the [1914-1918 Collection](#). Having the chance to follow the soldier's itinerary is the best way to read a war diary.

For the skilled user who wants to deepen knowledge of the diaries and to read a technical analysis of the text, the project offers digital editions based on [EVT](#), with full transcriptions, historical and linguistic comments.

I've processed images and texts from the war diaries written by [Arrigo Montorsi](#), [Augusto Moricci](#), [Celestino Bruno](#), [Luigi Del Ben](#), [Camille Croisé](#), [Louis Bastet](#), [Marie-Lydia Rouanet](#), [Maurice Peurey](#). As it is clear by their names, they are equally split in Italian and French speaking authors. The first and most important issue to focus on is that they come from different places and experiences. Each one lived a personal war, because they played different roles: [Camille Croisé](#) travelled a lot during those years, given the fact he was an engineer, a rails and trenches builder. On the contrary, [Marie-Lydia Rouanet](#) was a nurse, so she didn't move. [Arrigo Montorsi](#) fought on several fronts, from Albania to France, from Macedonia to Belgium, while [Augusto Moricci](#), a fine carpenter, spent his time just fighting Austrians in Northern Italy, but he is a witness of Benito Mussolini's injury on the front.

One of the most interesting items is [Celestino Bruno](#)'s one. It is a memoir, not a diary, since it was written after the war. It begins with satirical excerpts from songs and poems, but then Celestino is caught by Austrians and become prisoner of war. His path around Eastern Europe is hard and widespread. When the war is over, he manages to escape his captivity, to kill Austrian patrols, he meets a Belgic spy and then he walks to Thessaloniki, in order to travel back to Italy on a ship.

From the French side, [Maurice Peurey](#)'s diary is certainly one of the best written, together with [Marie-Lydia Rouanet](#)'s one. Maurice peculiarity is an innate gift in describing what he sees and feels. He wrote scenes which seems to come from a script, since he crosses abandoned villages, flowering fields, he takes fruits from the trees and plays piano in an empty house.

So, with *Upgrading History* I've tried to share with the community a peculiar perspective about the war, those of common people who fight and live in the flaming Europe. Memory is the real treasure of present times, and our role as researchers and citizens is to understand what it could be if we were thrown in those hard times, in order to immunize society from warlike thoughts and plans. From this point of view, even the smallest witness is important.

For what it concerns the linguistical aspects, it comes to light that French authors feels comfortable in writing their story and placing a text in a layout, while Italians are still too much influenced by the dialect of their birth town. The reasons are not just historical (France was a Nation since the XIII Century, while Italy reached the unification in 1861) but also social and cultural, since the illiteracy rate in France at the beginning of the XX Century was the 17% of the population, while in Italy that

rate was the 48%, despite the earlier promulgation of the Italian School Reform (Coppino Law, 1877) in comparison with the French one (Ferry Law, 1879).

Isaac Rosenberg's selection of letters represents the other pole of the project. In this section, the main issue is to understand what it means to be a poet in the trenches. Rosenberg sent many letters to Gordon Bottomley and Laurence Binyon, the very same poets who will publish his verses after his death. The first drafts of Rosenberg's poems are published with comments and comparisons between the early versions and those published in the 1921 edition.

In order to create the platform, I followed the transfer of our department server in a new site, and I took deals with the head of the Department of Classic Philology and Italian Studies (Prof. Francesco Citti) and the head of [DH.ARC](#) (Digital Humanities Advanced Research Centre, prof. Francesca Tomasi). They allowed [the project to be hold in the DH.ARC website](#), the main showcase of our activity as Excellent Department, as ratified by the Italian Ministry of Universities, Education and Research.

[The project website is available here](#). Italian, French diaries and the letters by Isaac Rosenberg are published in StoryMap and EVT. StoryMaps are enriched by introductions, both in Italian and English, and Europeana images. EVT editions share the same introduction (they will show just clicking on the REGESTO menu, at the top-right of the page) but they also offer comments, both in Italian and English (just click on the black circles in the text to show them).

Target audience

The aim of the project is to reach both the common and the academic audience. I planned to build StoryMaps to encourage the common user to approach hidden stories of WWI, taking advantage of a smart tool which appears as the best one to enlighten the tracks of each soldier. When reading war and travel literature, it makes the reader uncomfortable to check page by page where the main character is. StoryMap solves the problem, making these stories readable for people with a general interest in WWI, teachers and students. The platform is then usable to give lessons in secondary schools, in order to teach history in an alternative way.

The second type of audience is the academic one. I have chosen to use the EVT standard for critical editions because it is the most accredited and recognisable to faculties and students. In my Department ([FICLIT](#) at UNIBO), it is now usual to give [TEI XML](#) seminars, and TEI XML is the foundation of the EVT platform. It gives the chance to mark the text up with several options, to show lists, to split the text in sections. So, academics will be able to use the EVT editions in many ways.

Use of the data

Europeana preserves items in many formats. Even when an item is clearly presented as a diary, it also preserves photographs, medals and decorations, documents which certify the recruiting. I have chosen to use just the handwritten material and the photographs, since the other items require different skills and move the focus on different subjects.

I downloaded the photographs and I post-produced them to fit my needs. The post-production includes resizing white borders, aligning pictures, splitting them in two pages in some cases, and trying to make the text clearer. I was aware that each Creative Commons licence allowed it.

In the case of Isaac Rosenberg's letters, I had to strongly post-produce the items, together with a technician at my Department (Marco Serra), because we had to increase dimensions, decrease DPIs and still make the images readable.

I used transcriptions from Transcribathon too, but they always needed a deep revision.

Then I uploaded the materials on StoryMap and EVT, and I used extra images from the [Europeana 1914-1918 Collection](#) to adorn the website.

I've used the very well done [Europeana templates](#) to create flyers, posters and slides for meetings, lessons and presentations. Europeana Collection and Templates give the chance to disseminate in a uniform way the materials, even on different platforms: I did it on my [Twitter profile](#) and on [the project page on Facebook](#).

Publications

StoryMap Editions: [Arrigo Montorsi](#), [Augusto Moricci](#), [Celestino Bruno](#), [Luigi Del Ben](#), [Camille Croisé](#), [Louis Bastet](#), [Marie-Lydia Rouanet](#), [Maurice Peurey](#).

EVT Editions: [Italian Diaries](#), [French Diaries](#), [Letters from Isaac Rosenberg](#).

Lessons learned

The development of *Upgrading History* was precious for my research experience in many ways. First, I had the chance to uniform my skills and my research interests: in the past I have focused on late XIX Century and on WWII. First World War was always touched in my writings, but not as the core of my articles.

Then, building a platform in a Department which is developing several projects in Digital Humanities made me involved in a higher plan, in which the scientific community shares skills, knowledge and technology. Theory and practice, when talking of XML TEI and EVT, are always distant, because everything has to be based on the available servers, which could have different structures.

The involvement of two technicians at my Department, Tommaso Vitale and Marco Serra, was crucial. We managed to work as a team, so we tried different workflows to better accomplish our separate duties.



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