

## Antifascism in Uniform: About 3000 Letters of Italian Soldiers and for Italian Soldiers Censored by Their Command for Lack of Optimism

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### Abstract

History and archives have a completely different attitude towards the past. While history tends to demonstrate only the monumental side of what has happened and conceal the rest of itself, the archives tend to take care of what happens to humans as individuals, being it even a casual care, opposing in this way the "destiny of the age" which comes on the focus of the former. Half a century ago, when the "eight million bayonets" had already created the "lictor's empire", "Luce" Institute, through the cinematic diaries of war reporters, tried to demonstrate the triumphalist spirit in the soldiers' hometowns, a spirit which derived from the "myth of superiority". In fact, since antiquity, mankind, through literature, have learned that even the most horrible heroes have a weak point somewhere: Achilles had it in the heel, Samson of the Jews in the hair, the protective fairies of heroes in the Albanian epos at three gold-horn goats. But the "hero with a weakness" probably should not be expected from history.

**Keywords:** second world war, antifascism, italian soldiers, censored letters

### Introduction

Some time ago, while the usual preparations to meet the requirements of activities following the schedule of "Open Archive Week", one of the archivists in charge mentioned for the first time a collection of letters by Italian soldiers, which had remained in Albanian archives since they were written. Despite not being so many, these letters were written in a simple way just to convey human stories to the families of soldiers mobilized in the war, not to witness the history of this war, in the relaxed "de-tente" season which had fortunately warmed the world, can serve precisely to relativize the traditional image of history. The people who wrote these letters, if they managed to survive the dangers of war, must be at the age of anti-fascist Albanian veterans. They must be grandparents, or great-grandparents. It has passed more than half a century, but their letters have not reached to the destined addresses yet. They have remained in this side of the Adriatic, because within the soul of the soldier who wrote them was not the "heroic soldier" of the cinematic diaries, but the humble Italian who expresses his own pain without justifying the logic of the commanders for "war necessity". Within the collection of censored letters of Italian soldiers, there is a confused world full of emotions and emotional lightings. Some of them joined the anti-fascist movement, "Antonio Gramsci" battalion or the "Circolo Garibaldi" battalion, but they do not know what is happening back at their hometowns. Others have become part of Albanian life as Albanians, love the girls of this country and write in letters to their families that "Albania is a paradise". Some others surrender to their destiny and handed in fate and have no other concern than to return home, or as they put it in "casa, dolce casa!". The whole history of repatriation of Italian soldiers after the war, except correspondence in governmental level, bilateral commissions talks, debates within the Peace Conference missions has also a secret reality: the reality of "personal attempts": wives who have written to the Albanian state to ask assistance for finding their husbands, ex-soldiers who beg for facilitation of their return at home, others who do not know on which part of Adriatic their relatives can be found. This is the psychological outlook of the war, where there are no extraordinary heroes who shoot their guns continuously, but there are "heroes" whose tears of pain fall of their eyes with the noise of an earthquake. The war itself would not be imaginatively complete if this outlook was missing. The quotes of Italian soldiers letters which never reached their destination are no longer mandatory. But they are a part of the human souls who never managed to return. To return at home in form of a letter, which was written and destined to your wife, brother, parent and which is received by a grandson or a great-grandson after such a long absence is almost a revival.

It was exactly the urge to approach the relation between *the lived time* of the past (not by us) and the *universal time*<sup>1</sup>, whose passengers we are, (for at least a part of this journey), and the research work we conducted in the General Directorate of Archives in Tirana, which lightened us even more about a part of the historical past, which does not belong only to our Albanian nation. The confession in history depicted through historical narration, and the relation of this type of narration with the truth behind the archives, resulted quite a surprising journey for us which had the tendency to be revised and possibly rebuilt, due to the changes of proving evidence the archives may present from time to time.

The aforementioned research reinforced the opinion that historical narration can be neither predetermined in time, nor determine an absolute truth. But, it is precisely the archives, parts of which are *the documents* and *traces* stored in them, which inform us about the past by providing evidence.

History and archives consider the past in almost completely different ways. While history tends to represent only the monumental side of what is happening and conceal the rest of itself, the archives tend to pay attention to what happens to the man as an individual, being it even a casual attention, in contrary to the "destiny of the age" which comes into the focus of the former. It is precisely the archives which are the true testimony, or the bearers of historical truth, and not always the narrations brought by the written history of the past.

Half a century ago, when the "eight million bayonets" had already created the "victor's empire", "Luca" Institute, through the cinematic diaries of war reporters, tried to demonstrate the triumphalist spirit in the soldiers' hometowns, a spirit which derived from the "myth of superiority".

In the periods of times which followed, local historiography, with the aim of magnifying the victory of anti-fascist partisans, hardly deviated from monumental approach, but the "glorious army" changed its emotional position, by turning itself into "a fierce hostile army".

In fact, since antiquity, mankind, through literature, has learned the lesson that even the most horrible heroes have a weakness somewhere: Achilles had it in the heel, Samson of the Jews in the long hair, the protective fairies of heroes in the Albanian epic poems at three gold-horn goats. But this type of hero, which refers to the "hero with a weakness" probably should not be expected *from* history and *in* history.

Some years ago, in Tirana, as they were making the usual preparations to meet the requirements of activities following the schedule of "Open Archive Week", it was mentioned for the first time the existence of a collection of letters by Italian soldiers, which have remained in Albanian archives since they were written.

To be more specific, in the General Directory of the Archives in Tirana, we found and witnessed, about 50 dossiers which contained thousands of letters of different Italian citizens. We read and were deeply touched by the letters of Italian soldiers in Albania, their family members, Italian traders, or other Italian citizens who came to work in Albania during the Second World War. Neither of these letters reached their destination including the ones which were sealed "*verified for censorship*".

These letters serve now as *documentation*. "When we say documentation, the emphasis is not on the learning function which the term etymologically underlines, but on the *support*, the *guarantor* for a certain story, a confession or a debate. It is precisely this role of the documentation which creates the material evidence."<sup>2</sup>

Although they were not numerous, these letters were written in a simple way just to convey human stories to the families of soldiers mobilized in the war, not to witness the history of this war in the relaxed ("de-tente") season which has fortunately warmed the world. They can serve precisely as material evidence to enable the relativism of the traditional image of history.

The people who wrote these letters, if they had managed to survive the dangers of war, might be at the age of anti-fascist Albanian veterans nowadays. They could be grandparents, or great-grandparents. It has passed more than half a century, but their letters have not reached to the destined addresses yet. They have remained in this side of the Adriatic, because within the soul of the soldier who wrote them was not the "heroic soldier" of the cinematic diaries, but the simple Italian who expressed his own pain without justifying the logic of his commanders about "war necessity".

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<sup>1</sup> We have borrowed here two terms used by Paul Ricouer, widely used in *Il tempo raccontato*, Volume III, Jaca Book, Milano, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricouer, *Il tempo raccontato*, Volume III, Jaca Book, Milano, 1994, page 179.

Below is an excerpt of one of the letters:

Year 1945, letter written in Tirana, by Francesco Franco for Teodora Franco, Bari:

*"...I feel so sorry that I spent this Easter far from you all, but I believe that God will repatriate us and I will hug you all quite soon. I am absolutely exhausted by the fact that I am sacrificing my own life....and about what???"*

This soldier, who had written the letter just a little time ago, may symbolize the character of "Agush" in the novel "The man with a gun" written by the Albanian writer Dritëro Agolli. He neither had the desire nor the willingness to fight: he did not consider the Albanians as enemies: he was looking forward to seeing and to living with his family; he even sympathized with Albanians and admired the nature of this country.

This is precisely the main reason why the letters of these "disserted bayonet" soldiers failed to pass the sea. The censorship of the time could not allow these "weak-hearted heroes" to grow despair in the places where the war spokesmen had talked about the glory of martial victories. Those letters remained in Albanian archives, not as family stories, but as narrations about history, to make us understand the "diabolical mind" of the protagonists of the latter, in trying to conceal something from oneself, just as the heroes of "Satan's Ark" made disappear "the box of writings".

There is an unclear and chaotic world within the collection of the censored letters of Italian soldiers, full of emotional lightning. Some of them had joined the anti-fascist movement in the battalion "Antonio Gramsci" or "Circolo Garibaldi" but did not know what had happened beyond that, in their homeland, even fearing that the consequences of their actions could have affected their family members back in Italy. As it can be read, for example, in the below extract:

Year 1945, letter written in Peshkopi, by Ezio Farnetani for Flora Farnetani, Lucignano (Arezzo):

*"The danger has already passed ...so has the winter ... and when spring comes I wish I could turn back to Italy. We always hope for the best and that everything goes well ... I can't wait to be back and tell you about the adventures I've been through since the day Italy capitulated. I believe that you have experienced bad times as well. Flora, I will continue to cooperate with partisans. I still do the same job. Make bread for them. "*

Or we might take into considerations the letters of some other soldiers, who, because of joining the partisan movement after the capitulation of fascist Italy, suffered different sentences in Nazi prisons, but whose life was well integrated within the Albanians:

Year 1945, extract by the letter written in Shkodër, by Mario Nesi for Natalina Chiarugi, Florence:

*"I was finally released after all these months imprisonment in the Nazi prison. Today I am able to write to you, not just to confess my miserable life in the German prison, but above all to say that I am still alive. Darling, I am in Albania, in the city of Shkodra and I cannot complain about anything. I have now joined the partisan troops ... I thank God who gave me the power to face this difficult and tough life".*

They even have become part of Albanian life as Albanians, love the girls of this country and write in the letters to their families that "Albania is a paradise". Some others are exhausted and they surrender to their destiny and their own concern is just to be back home, or as they put it in "casa, dolce casa!"

Such a narration, comes in the below extract of a letter.

Year 1945, dated 6 March, Tiranë. Letter sent to Narciso Mostarda, Rome:

*"Dear Narciso,*

*"If it happens that you receive this letter, I would beg you to send this piece of news to my wife because I haven't heard from her for more than 18 months . If only you knew how desperate I am! ... I hope and I pray to God so we could be repatriated soon, but who knows when that day may come ???!!!"*

The whole history of repatriation of Italian soldiers after the war, except the correspondence in governmental level, bilateral commissions talks, debates within the framework of the Peace Conference missions has also a hidden reality: the reality of "personal attempts ": wives who have written to the Albanian state to ask assistance for finding their husbands, ex-soldiers who beg for facilitation of their return at home, others who do not know on which part of Adriatic sea their relatives

can be found. Everything is well-documented and saved in Albanian archives. This is the psychological outlook of the war, where there are no extraordinary heroes who shoot their guns continuously, but there are "heroes" whose tears of pain fall from their eyes with the noise of an earthquake. The war itself would not be imaginatively complete if this outlook was missing.

"Save my Ryan!" It is worthwhile to bring into attention the case when American cinematography created a movie blockbuster three years ago inspired by the content of a similar letter to the ones described above. An American family wrote to the commander to save the brave Rayan, their only survived son. That letter was not censored. The words written in it forced the command to change orders and operations.

The narrations of the Italian soldiers letters which never reached their final destination are no longer mandatory. But they are a part of the human souls who never managed to return. Returning home in form of a letter, which was destined to the wife, brother or parent and which has only been received nowadays by a grandson or a great-grandson after such a long absence is almost a revival.