

## ARCHIVE

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### ITALIAN ANTHOLOGIES ABOUT RUSSIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE. AN OVERVIEW (1926–1944)

The “Archive” section publishes four fragments selected from studies of Italian authors who wrote about children’s literature — the writers and teachers Giuseppe Fanciulli (1881–1951) and Olindo Giacobbe (1880–1950), the children writer, translator and publisher Mary Tibaldi-Chiesa (1896–1968) and teacher Olga Visentini (1893–1961). These works, written between 1926 and 1943, are taken from textbooks and are interesting in that they present the view of Italian experts on Russian children’s literature. The authors build the history of Russian literature for children, give an overview of contemporary émigré children’s literature, and try to determine the national identity of children’s literature in Russia. Giuseppe Fanciulli turns to Russian folklore, to the fairy tale genre and brings the line of his research to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The work of Mary Tibaldi-Chiesa gives a detailed review of translations of Russian literature into Italian, made with a focus on children’s and youthful readers, and also presents a detailed biography of Alexander Pushkin. Olga Visentini’s essay is based on the previous experience of Olindo Giacobbe, supplementing and continuing his work up to the first attempts at Soviet children’s literature.

*Keywords:* history of textbooks, Russian children’s books, Giuseppe Fanciulli, Olga Visentini, Olindo Giacobbe, Mary Tibaldi Chiesa, Italy, 20<sup>th</sup> century

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This section of original documents collects four selected excerpts from some critical studies, which can also be considered textbooks of the history of children's literature written by important authors, such as Giuseppe Fanciulli (1881–1951), Olindo Giacobbe (1880–1950), Mary Tibaldi Chiesa (1896–1968) and Olga Visentini (1893–1961), writers and translators of famous children's books, published in Italy from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s.

The period they belong to is relatively broad and includes fascism (1922–1943), since the first book by Giuseppe Fanciulli was published in 1926 and subsequently appeared in numerous revised editions during the 1930s, Olindo Giacobbe's book is published in 1934 and Olga Visentini's essay comes out in 1936 (the passage here presented is from the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of 1940), whereas the first edition of Tibaldi Chiesa *Letteratura infantile (Children's literature)* is published in 1944 (the extract here presented is from the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of 1953). This timespan represents for Italy the different stages of fascism, a period of great political transformations, which influenced both the values transmitted in children's books and the approaches of literary criticism of children's books.

The excerpt of the first volume was written by one of the most important children's writers of the beginning of the twentieth century, Giuseppe Fanciulli [Montino 2009], who wrote many books before and after the rise of fascism. Fanciulli devoted himself to works of a psychological nature, before approaching children's literature. In fact, in 1906 he began to work under the pseudonym of Mastro sapone ("Master soap") for the "Sunday Magazine" ("Il Giornalino della Domenica"), directed by the well-known Italian writer Luigi Bertelli. He also wrote a lot of successful books including *The Little Blue Man (L'omino Turchino)*, 1911) and for example *Lis-Beth (Lisa-Betta)*, 1932) and later *Heart of Twentieth Century (Cuore del Novecento)*, 1938)<sup>1</sup>, published during the fascist period. *Lis-Beth*, one of the best examples of Fanciulli's poetics, had a great success during fascism, which he supported, although the novel contained only a slight exaltation of its values (family and rural life).

It should be noticed that Fanciulli's critical volume accounted for a literary production for children which, in Italy, had experienced a particular development only in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the early Twentieth century thanks to the work of Luigi Bertelli, founder of the "Giornalino della Domenica", who tried to promote the practice of reading among adolescents of middle-class origin [Barsotti 2020], since in general the reading activity for the popular classes was limited to the instrumental skill acquired at school. From the 1860s

onwards, some Italian and Russian publishers, on the other hand, tried to welcome new foreign authors in their catalogues in order to propose a more varied choice of genres and themes and published them both in children's magazines and separately [Bagicalupi, Fossati 1988, 22–48; Hellman 2013, 161–168]. At the end of the nineteenth century, thanks to greater access to reading, both Italy and Russia showed a particular interest in foreign authors. In Russia, the Tolstoyan publisher “Posrednik” promoted the translation of some Italian books, such as the novel by Edmondo De Amicis, *Cuore* (Heart), which is a real classic of the Italian literature for children [Caroli 2020, 101–135; Caroli 2021, 44–69].

Giuseppe Fanciulli published the study *Children's literature*, in collaboration with his cousin Enrichetta Monaci Guidotti. The volume includes children's literature authors from ancient times until the contemporary period, coming from France, England, Germany, Nordic countries and naturally Russia. Thus, this study presents books written by well-known Russian writers, next to less renowned authors of fables, fairy tales and tales about animals. Some chapters deal with Russian literature from its origins to contemporary authors. One of the most interesting aspects is the vision of literature as a mirror of a national soul, also defined as a result of “race” to explain the features and genres of books for children and young people [Fanciulli, Monaci 1926, 150–161].

In general, Fanciulli referred to works of famous Russian children's writers published in various versions that strive to integrate favorite genres such as fairy tales, animal stories, autobiographical stories and family memories that could be offered to young people and children.

One of the most interesting aspects of the analysis of the Russian authors and genres presented by Giuseppe Fanciulli is that he clearly considers children's literature as a national literature. Indeed, Russian children's books mirror the aesthetic features that characterized the culture of the Slavs, indicating the genres and themes also linked to the folkloristic tradition, as shown by the following excerpts from Fanciulli's book, here translated into English: “A great variety of aspects are reflected in these people, due to the immense extension of the territory — from the freeze of Siberia to the burning heat of Crimea, — the diversity of races and nationalities merged or gathered within such vast borders, and the long history marked by the choice between eastern and western life: resigned fatalism and active enthusiasm, creating contradictions that are often mysteries for Westerners” [Fanciulli, Monaci 1926, 150] and “Children's and youth literature is also rich in Russia.

This can be explained, in part, by the exuberance of imagination, in the 'race', we were just talking about. But there is also another reason. Almost all Russian writers, during the past regime, felt the duty to promote the liberation of their people through education, and therefore they often spontaneously addressed children and young people, hopes of the longed-for future" [Ibid].

The same idea of literature as a typical product of a national popular culture also emerged in Fanciulli's children's books, where the Italian people were seen as having their own characteristics in the context of the national ideals that fascism cultivated, forming the aesthetic canons of the fascist regime, which valued national identity in a more markedly patriotic key.

It is worth noting that Mariella Colin, one of the leading scholars of children's literature, states that in the second half of the 1930s Giuseppe Fanciulli and Olga Visentini integrate and complete their volumes on children's literature based on the work of Olindo Giacobbe. This section includes two excerpts of the works of Olga Visentini and Olindo Giacobbe on Russian books. In the edition of *Children's Literature* by Fanciulli reprinted in 1935, chapter VIII on "Contemporaries" is completely revised. In fact, Colin describes trends of genres to focus on the classification of the authors who bring innovation and states that "C'est dans la dernière partie du chapitre — une vingtaine de pages intitulées 'la Guerre et le Fascisme' — qu'il se penche enfin sur la littérature 'vraiment excellente pour l'éducation de l'âme nationale'" [Colin 2010, 235–237]<sup>1</sup>. Fanciulli classifies literature by themes, the authors who wrote novels and short stories about the First World War, the authors who dealt with the post-war period and described the reactions of defense of the national spirit in literary fictions, the authors who wrote the biography of Mussolini and finally the literature on the Balilla. In conclusion, Colin states that "les livres les plus représentatifs de la littérature nouvelle sont ceux dans lesquels est pleinement mise en lumière la régénération réalisée par le Fascisme dans les âmes et dans les choses" [Colin 2010, 238]<sup>2</sup>.

Olga Visentini, who follows the footsteps of Giacobbe and Fanciulli, in the 1936 edition of *Books and Children*, updates the "state of the art"

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<sup>1</sup>"It is in the last part of the chapter — about twenty pages entitled 'War and Fascism' — that he finally turns to the literature which is 'really excellent for the education of the national soul'" (translated by Dorena Caroli).

<sup>2</sup>"the most representative books of the new literature are those in which the regeneration brought about by Fascism in souls and things is fully brought to light" (translated by Dorena Caroli, edited by Federica Gubbi).

of recent publication status of fascism children's books. On the other hand, the National Congress for children's and Youth Literature held in Bologna in 1938, four years later the one of the Socialist Writers (1934) [Colin 2010, 306–310], to which Fanciulli himself took part, banned most of the books by authors of Jewish origin, highlighting how new books imposed the canons of fascist aesthetics. The need to describe children's book became more important in order to offer also tools to teachers, who should choose and collect books for the school Libraries. From the historical point of view, after the Second World War, it was necessary to break with the past and among the different authors, Gianni Rodari [see Roghi 2020] became the protagonist of an important renewal, proposing democratic educational models.

In 1933 Olga Visentini writes *Libri e ragazzi: storia della letteratura infantile e giovanile (Books and Young People: History of Children's and Youth Literature)* which we propose here in the third, extended edition. In 1931, Visentini had moved to Milan to teach at the technical institute "C. Cattaneo" and joined the Action Group for the People's Schools ("Gruppo d'azione per le scuole del popolo"). After the resignation of Adelaide Coari and other collaborators, between 1932 and 1940 she takes on the teaching of Children's Literature for the Group's teachers. Since 1943 she moves to the "G. Parini" secondary school in Milan, where she remains for eighteen years.

There is no doubt that her studies and teaching help shape her intense desire to express herself and write for young people, but the advantages of her kinship with the publisher Arnoldo Mondadori, her cousin, should not be underestimated.

Visentini's beginnings as a writer date back to the years immediately before the Great War, and in the 1920s she mainly focuses on fairy tales and short novels. In the 1930s a gradual adaptation to the climate and ideals of fascism takes place; fascism is perceived by Visentini as a continuation and enhancement of the Risorgimento, and therefore she does not seem to see any dark sides to this rise [see Gasparini 1968; Lollo 1996].

In her opinion, given the multi-ethnic territory which is neither Asia nor Europe, Russia has been influenced by both West and East and rapidly developed "a vibrant and imaginative oral tradition" in which "the written children's literature has no distinct character of its own like that of some other nations, but is part and parcel of the great literature of all Russia" [Visentini 1940, 414].

In her text Visentini divides Russian children's literature either by genre (such as legends and fairy tales) or by authors (Tolstoy or fabulists).

She usually offers a brief account of the story and does not disdain personal comments about the quality of the text. Great attention is paid to Tolstoy's books for children and his activity in schooling children of peasants' who do not have free access to education.

Visentini also includes other major classics of Russian literature, such as Gogol', Chekhov and Korolenko who wrote also for children. Referring to the books of the end of 19<sup>th</sup> — beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, she claims that the main protagonists are “the countryside, its rivers and the mountains of Russia, that seem to close off the boundless horizon... ..and from that immensity melancholy blooms like a flower” [Visentini 1940, 422]. Such atmosphere and topics fade into the background after the troubled years of First World War, Revolution and Civil war, and by the beginning of the Soviet Union “‘popular’ didactic works, whether geographical, scientific, literary or philosophical” [Visentini 1940, 423] are at the centre of the stage. Curiously enough, the successful children's poetry by Korney Chukovsky and Samuil Marshak, as well as Gaydar's or Panteleev's remarkable stories remain probably unknown to the author, who complains the lack of art in the new Soviet children's literature: “These works, though, are strangers to art. We no longer hear the soul of the people, their ‘song’, melancholy as may be, but song, nor the life and spirit with which her poets had imbued their homeland” [Ibid].

Giacobbe's fragment on Russian children's literature is very much in debt of Visentini's account. Published only one year after *Books and Young People: History of Children's and Youth Literature*, he accounts for many writers and works cited by Visentini.

Olindo Giacobbe (1889–1951) is as a teacher and school headmaster, but also works as a poet and writer. From his adolescence, he begins to express the turmoil of his feelings in verse, especially in *Emmaus*, a volume of sonnets, whose title is taken from the passage in Luke's Gospel about Jesus' encounter with the disciples who do not recognize him: Giacobbe's book also signifies an encounter, that of the poet with his readers.

In 1923 he publishes *Notes on Children's Literature*, in which he does not seem to embrace idealistic orientations [Lollo 2003], whereas in the 1925 edition the adherence to the thesis of art as a “subjective moment of the spirit” is already clearer. In 1934 Giacobbe gives his work on children's literature a broader and more systematic treatment, and publishes *La Letteratura Infantile (Children's Literature)*, which is further followed in 1947 by the *Manuale di Letteratura Infantile (Handbook of Children's Literature)*, where the vast subject matter treated previously is given its definitive structure.

It is very easy to spot the analogies between Visentini's and Giacobbe's view on Russian world of childhood; however, Giacobbe puts more emphasis on the longstanding relationship between art and education that has been already taking place in Russia, even during the Tsarist regime. His account is shorter and, unlike Visentini, less space is given to personal opinions and comments. It is nonetheless worth noting that at the beginning the author claims the importance of knowing this "apparently humbler and more modest side of Russian writers' activities" [Giacobbe 1934, 379], namely children's literature, in order "to get a handle on the complicated and obscure psychology of their mysterious and distant lineage, which today other peoples may well feel pressing at the doors of their history in the form of a dark threat of hegemony and empire" [Ibid]. A statement that even in completely different contexts and situations may be still hold true.

The most accurate account of Russian children's literature is offered to the Italian public by the writer and translator Mary Tibaldi Chiesa (1896–1968), who from the late 1930s is active in the Milanese area which becomes more and more important for the editorial market. Together with Milly Dandolo, she quickly becomes an active promoter of Russian literature in the Italian language. The two writers narrate and rewrite, often taking wide margins of freedom, popular fairy tales and legends from all over the world, including those of Slavic origin, but also the 'adult' tales of Turgenyev and Tolstoy [Bandini Buti 1941–1942, 300–301; Gastaldi, Scano 1957, 191; Pellegrini Baiada 2000, 131–143]. Tibaldi Chiesa has also the merit of bringing several Italian publishers into contact with emigrant Russian artists such as Nikolai Benois, Boris and Inna Zuev, Lilia Slutskaya, Vsevolod Nikulin [Vassena 2012, Vassena 2015].

The author begins with a detailed account of Krylov's fable production, since she herself has translated (or rewritten) a lot of stories by the famous Russian fabulist and then dwells on those works of Alexandr Pushkin, both in verses and in prose, that soon became part of the compulsory children's reading in Russia. She includes all the authors already mentioned by Visentini and Giacobbe: Tolstoy's production is presented in great detail, other classics are briefly accounted for in their attempts to address children or at least put them as protagonists of their books.

Tibaldi Chiesa moves with great agility in the Russian literary panorama for children, which makes her one of the greatest experts of this genre in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, probably also thanks to her closeness to the circles of the first Russian emigration to Italy. She is, for instance, the only author to mention Lidia Charskaya's successful

books “for young ladies” some of which she has translated together with Adriana Lyanowa. The last part of her account is a long list of names and titles without any particular comment or description, probably because of the lack of first-hand acquaintance with this almost contemporary production.

After Second World War a whole new approach to children's literature will become soon predominant and, although some of the concepts and ideas here collected still remain, the general feeling is to break with the past and shape a whole new way to address and educate children on more democratic basis. It will be a very long and difficult process which nonetheless would bring many new Russian author's for children in Italy and make it possible to open a small window into the vast and varied world of Russian children's literature.

The title of all the Russian works mentioned in the following texts has been translated into English and put into brackets in Italian. Some of them may slightly differ because of the translation into Italian whom the authors refer to.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For his biography, see <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-fanciulli/>;  
D. Montino: <http://dbe.editricebibliografica.it/cgi-bin/dbe/Scheda?883>.

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ИТАЛЬЯНСКИЕ АНТОЛОГИИ О РУССКОЙ ДЕТСКОЙ  
ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ: ОБЗОР (1926–1944)

В разделе «Архив» публикуются четыре фрагмента, выбранные из исследований итальянских авторов, писавших о детской литературе — писателя и педагога Джузеппе Фанчулли (1881–1951), учителя и литератора Олиндо Джакоббе (1880–1950), детской писательницы, переводчицы и издательницы Марии Тибальди-Кьезы (1896–1968) и преподавательницы Ольги Висентини (1893–1961). Эти работы, написанные в период с 1926 года по 1943 год, взяты из учебных пособий и интересны тем, что в них представлен взгляд итальянских экспертов на русскую детскую литературу. Авторы выстраивают историю русской словесности для детей, дают обзор современной им эмигрантской детской литературы, пытаются определить национальное своеобразие детской литературы в России. Джузеппе Фанчулли обращается к русскому фольклору, к жанру волшебной сказки и доводит линию своего исследования до начала XX века. В работе Марии Тибальди-Кьезы дан детальный обзор переводов русской литературы на итальянский язык, выполненных с ориентацией на детскую и юношескую читательскую аудиторию, а также представлена развернутая биография А.С.Пушкина. Эссе Ольги Висентини базируется на предшествующем опыте Олиндо Джакоббе, дополняя и продолжая его работу вплоть до первых опытов советской детской литературы.

*Keywords:* история учебников, русские детские книги, Джузеппе Фанчулли, Ольга Висентини, Олиндо Джакоббе, Мария Тибальди Кьеза, Италия, XX век