

## *Il piccolo garibaldino* Revisited Underage Risorgimento Volunteering and the Case of Fourteen-Year-Old Giovanni Martinelli

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to outline the early contours of the history of underage volunteering during the Italian Risorgimento, using the case of fourteen-year-old Giovanni Mattia Martinelli as a micro-historical example. Giovanni clandestinely enlisted as a volunteer in the Italian Volunteer Corps in 1866, was arrested for desertion, and tried by a court martial. The article explores how young boys managed to enter the ranks, what their families thought of such enlistments, and to what extent the military institution facilitated their presence. Despite the relative ubiquity of this phenomenon, underage volunteering appears to have been far from unproblematic within family circles. Parents, for instance, wrote letters to volunteer commanders not only requesting the annulment of enlistments but also stressing that their sons' youth and inexperience made them unfit for military life. The role of the armed forces in enabling the enlistment of minors, however, remains ambiguous. Although military authorities discharged underage volunteers when parents intervened or legal proceedings required it, some evidence suggests that they were more tolerant of their presence than the law strictly allowed.

### Keywords

Risorgimento Volunteering, Third War of Italian Independence, Court Martial, Underage Soldiering, Adolescents and War

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\* I would like to extend my gratitude to the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome (KNIR) and the Werkgroep Italië Studies (WIS) for their generosity in providing a scholarship to prepare this article in Rome. I would also like to thank the kind staff of the Museo Centrale per la Storia del Risorgimento in Rome for providing digital copies of some of the source material.

## Introduction

‘Mamma, vado a raggiungere il babbo al campo con Garibaldi. Addio, non piangere; tornerò, sai!’<sup>1</sup> This is what twelve-year-old Augusto wrote to his mother, just before he sneaked out of the house with a military uniform, a pistol and an Italian flag wrapped in a sheet. It is a scene from the iconic silent film *Il piccolo garibaldino* (1909), in which the young Augusto travels to Sicily to join his father in the *Spedizione dei Mille* of 1860. Landed on Sicily, his father and fellow company men celebrate Augusto’s arrival and cheer ecstatically as he poses with his rifle. When father and son both find themselves on the battlefield, young Augusto suffers a gunshot to the chest and is brought to Garibaldi in order to die in his presence. In the final scene, Augusto appears in a vision of his mother. He proudly shows her his chest wound and finds protection under the robes of the female personification of Italy.

It was not just the erroneous historical accuracy of the film, nor its early twentieth-century militarist imagery that had me watch the full twelve minutes in disbelief. Rather, it was the striking contrast with a case I had only recently reviewed for a project on volunteering in the Third War of Italian Independence (1866). While going through a series of court martial files of the *Corpo Volontari Italiani*, I stumbled upon the case of Giovanni Mattia Martinelli, fourteen years of age, who had deserted his company and was arrested by the carabinieri. Like many of his contemporaries, Giovanni Martinelli had felt a mystical attraction to Garibaldi and his redshirts, and secretly left his home to fight for the unification of Italy. Unlike Augusto, however, Giovanni’s young age turned out to be far from celebrated, becoming the decisive factor that saved him from a court martial verdict. In many ways, his case contrasts with the ongoing romantic representation of child soldiers in Risorgimento commemoration, and can provide further historical understanding of this omnipresent, yet highly understudied phenomenon.

As long as armies have existed, women and children have followed in their footsteps. Children’s participation remained for the most part unofficial, however, and their presence was usually incidental to their parents’ services. This changed in 1786, when the French government became the first in Europe to institutionalise *enfants de troupe*. The French army incorporated male children and young adolescents into their parents’ regiments and allowed them to conduct active service from as young as two years old.<sup>2</sup> Apart from a numerical resource for expanding armies, childhood also turned into an important category for the politicisation of the masses.<sup>3</sup> Italian films and literature of the 1880-1919 years increasingly adopted the formula of the child soldier protagonist as a means to enhance youthful patriotism. As such, they could also convey underhand and emotionally persuasive militarist messages to adults.<sup>4</sup> Edmondo De Amicis’s 1886 book *Cuore* is full of short stories of children who participate in military campaigns, and has been a popular read in elementary schools for subsequent decades.<sup>5</sup> Italian film production companies like *Cines* also gladly exploited these

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<sup>1</sup> *Il Piccolo Garibaldino*, Cines, 1909. The film is available open-access, and can amongst others be viewed via <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YY909JktTuE>> (9 April 2025). In this particular version, his letter appears in minute 3:50.

<sup>2</sup> T. Cardoza, “‘These Unfortunate Children’: Sons and Daughters of the Regiment in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France”, in: J. Marten (ed.), *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2002, pp. 205-215.

<sup>3</sup> A. Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino: Infanzia e nazione dalla Grande Guerra a Salò*, Turin, Einaudi, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> M. Campagnaro & I. Filograsso, ‘Children, Soldiers and Heroes: The Great War in Past and Present Italian Children’s Literature’, in: *Libri & Liberi*, 7, 2 (2018), pp. 223-246.

<sup>5</sup> See for example ‘La piccola vedetta lombarda’ and ‘Il tamburino sardo’, in: E. De Amicis, *Cuore*, Milan, Treves, 1886.

Risorgimento themes to promote Italian identity and patriotic sentiments in Italian youths, all the while instilling into them the stereotypes of war iconography.<sup>6</sup>

In doing so, they could actually draw from real life examples. The film *Il piccolo garibaldino* was inspired by the story of eleven-year old Giuseppe Marchetti, who had accompanied his father - a medical doctor - during the *Spedizione dei Mille*. We know virtually nothing of his experience and actions during the 1860 campaign, other than what eye-witnesses can briefly account for.<sup>7</sup> The vagueness surrounding his figure is symptomatic for our lack of knowledge of this historical phenomenon. Despite, or precisely *because* of this lack of context, fascination with his figure continues even into the present day. In 1963, Giuseppe's birth commune Chioggia erected a celebratory statue to the 'youngest participant of the *Mille*'.<sup>8</sup> As recent as May 2024, this was followed by a commemorative plaque placed onto the house where Giuseppe was born:

Qui nacque Giuseppe Marchetti il 21 agosto 1849, dall'unione dello studente Trevigiano Luigi che si trovava a Chioggia con i Cacciatori del Sile in difesa dell'esperienza repubblicana, e Antonia Carlotta Tessaro. Partì a 11 anni con I Mille il 5 maggio 1860 assieme al padre che ricopriva il ruolo di medico. Morì a Napoli, il 16 maggio 1877.<sup>9</sup>

What are we communicating when we put children like Giuseppe Marchetti on a pedestal in this day and age? In what ways would his experience have differed from any modern child-soldier equivalent? In absence of historical context, an ongoing romanticised representation of young Risorgimento soldiers is deeply problematic. It risks echoing the twentieth-century militarist tropes that were meant to instil an aggressive patriotism in Italian children, while relying on an erroneous representation of young adolescents in contemporary army life.

The legal context in which young adolescents operated already questions their room for manoeuvre in military environments. At the time of the Third War of Italian Independence, the minimum enlistment age for the volunteers formally stood at seventeen years. Furthermore, participation of young adolescents depended largely on the consent of their parents, who, as this article will point out, were often far from enthusiastic about the idea of their sons enlisting.<sup>10</sup> Evidently, the legal context is only part of the story, and the presence of Giuseppe Marchetti and Giovanni Martinelli amongst the volunteers suggests that a lot more was going on in the margins. The

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<sup>6</sup> G. Lasi, 'La Presa di Roma and *Il Piccolo Garibaldino*: The Risorgimento and National Identity in Early Italian Cinema', in: *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 18, 2 (2013), pp. 244-255; A. Boylan, '*Il piccolo Garibaldino* and *Le Medaglie di Bidoni*: Gender and Nationalism Performed Across Genres in Early Italian Cinema', in: *The Italianist*, 39, 2 (2019), pp. 134-150.

<sup>7</sup> In his famous memoirs on the expedition, Giuseppe Cesare Abba recalls a brief interaction with Giuseppe's father: 'Il dottor Marchetti che ride sempre quando mi vede scrivere, non sa che ora scrivo del suo figliuolo. Compagno d'esilio, l'ha voluto seco sin qui. Il giovinetto può avere dodici anni; eppure è di piglio sì ardito! Fortunato lui, che ha un mattino così splendido nella sua vita! Se la morte non lo coglierà, sarà un uomo levatosi per tempo nella sua giornata. Che c'è? Tutti guardano da poppa...' (G.C. Abba, *Da Quarto a Volturno: Noterelle di uno dei Mille*, G. Cenzato (ed.), Milan, Mursia, 2013, <[https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/2022/09/25/1664111911940\\_abba\\_da\\_quarto\\_al\\_volturno.pdf](https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/2022/09/25/1664111911940_abba_da_quarto_al_volturno.pdf)> (9 April 2025), p. 35).

<sup>8</sup> This is taken directly from the inscription on the statue's pedestal, which reads: 'al più giovane dei mille'.

<sup>9</sup> For pictures of the statue and a video of the plaque reveal, see: B. Boscolo, 'Targa commemorativa a Giuseppe Marchetti', *Beniamino Boscolo*, <<https://www.beniaminoboscolo.it/2024/05/targa-commemorativa-a-giuseppe-marchetti/>> (13 April 2025).

<sup>10</sup> The new Pisanelli civil code of 1865 had determined that parents maintained formal authority over their unmarried male children until they reached the age of twenty-one. See: L.L. D'Ancona, 'Padri e Figli Nel Risorgimento', in: A.M. Banti & P. Ginsborg (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali 22. Il Risorgimento*, Turin, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2007, pp. 153-179.

purpose of this article is therefore to open up research into the history of underage Risorgimento volunteering, using the case of the aforementioned Giovanni Martinelli as a micro-historical stepping stone. It inquires how children such as Giovanni could end up amongst the ranks, what their families thought about their enlistment and to what extent the military institution was complicit in their presence.

Giovanni Martinelli's biography is particularly suited for this quest, as there is a considerable body of source material that documents his journey. There is his court martial case file, containing transcripts of his police hearings, instructions from the military prosecutor, and a letter he wrote to his parents while detained in prison. Next to institutional sources, the archive of the *Museo per la Storia del Risorgimento* in Rome holds multiple letters from his father, who reached out to the military officials to intervene in Giovanni's case. His letters were saved in the administration of Giovanni Cadolini, colonel of Giovanni's regiment, who also archived numerous other letters from relatives who asked to cancel their boys' enlistments. Onto these requests, he usually added his views and instructions, giving practical insight into the procedure for annulment in such cases. The availability of both institutional and biographical-epistolary sources provides rich historical context to Risorgimento volunteering below the legal enlistment age. Furthermore, the fact that Giovanni's case is well-documented and commented upon by the military itself is particularly helpful in understanding the military's complicity.

The historically contingent social categories of childhood and adolescence remain problematic, however, and require some further reflection on the use of terminology. Although it may be tempting to speak of fourteen-year-old Giovanni Martinelli as a child soldier, adopting this concept uncritically may obscure how contemporaries considered his life stage and viewed Giovanni's age and actions in the context of the war. That is why I take the legal framework as my starting point and apply the term "underage volunteers" onto adolescents below the legal enlistment age who volunteered for military service.

With regards to the social categories of childhood and adolescence I aim to leave room for emic views, analysing how military administrators and relatives themselves spoke of this life stage. To that end, the relative ubiquity of this phenomenon means that whenever Giovanni's own account leaves gaps, I can supplement it with cases of other underage soldiers who left a comparatively modest record through letters, military reports or other court martial cases. Together, their stories illuminate their particular experience of the war and reveal the conflicting position that underage enlistment held both within the family and the military institution.

### **A Thrilling Opportunity**

In early June 1866, Lombardy was filled with a mixture of excitement and opportunism. Only a few days before, a decree had announced the formation of a new Garibaldian volunteer corps to fight alongside the regular army in what would become the Third War of Italian Independence. The *Corpo Volontari Italiani* had been subsumed by the Ministry of War and was stripped of its most "republican" Garibaldian officers after the successful expedition to Sicily in 1860. This did not bother the thousands of inexperienced young men, however, who flocked to the cities in search of local enlistment opportunities. In Lombardy, as well as in the former Kingdom of Naples, several recruitment and training centres had been opened to prepare volunteers before they embarked to the northern mountains.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> H. Heyriès, *Italia 1866: Storia di una guerra perduta e vinta*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2016, p. 73. Enlistment and training offices were for example opened in Como, Varese, Foggia, Bari, Barletta and Naples.

As Lucy Riall has argued in her biography of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the popularity of the general and his volunteers was the product of a carefully constructed myth, gladly adopted by many contemporary men in search of a national hero.<sup>12</sup> Prior to and during the years of unification, European counterparts such as France and Prussia considered Italian men to lack military virtue, and this perception of emasculation had become a symbol for Italy's moral and political decline. As Silvana Patriarca has argued, Italians had largely internalised stereotypes that others attributed to them, as shown when they wrote of their vices with linguistic 'parameters that were not of their own making'.<sup>13</sup> Notorious tropes such as *ozio* (indolence) and *mollezza* (love of luxury and sexual laxity) illustrated how Italy's early nineteenth-century disease was considered an 'affliction of the will, a moral sickness that had emasculated and feminised a previously highly endowed people'.<sup>14</sup>

One of the ways in which such emasculation could be reversed, was by invoking a new Italian fighting spirit. In his bound-breaking work on the morphology of the Risorgimento discourse, Alberto Mario Banti describes how various propagandistic works argued that Italian masculine honour had been in peril after centuries of foreign oppression.<sup>15</sup> Taking up arms against these foreign oppressors was one way to demonstrate Italian masculinity and to redeem such stolen honour. Republican patriots such as Giuseppe Mazzini envisioned a particular role for Italy's youth in doing so. The young, Mazzini believed, were 'uncompromised by the failure of the old sectarian organisations' of the *ancien régime* and as such were 'the bearers of a new, romantic spirit and culture' that should comprise the revolutionary moment.<sup>16</sup> Garibaldi's volunteers represented the ideal romantic and revolutionary spirit: full of energy, not yet bound by the limiting ties of family life, and receptive to idealistic impulses.<sup>17</sup> The first generations of volunteers subsequently inspired artistic and literary works that described 'war for the fatherland' as a meaningful, comradely, positive and even sacred event, hiding its evidently violent and brutal aspects from the public.<sup>18</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that, amidst this idealisation of war, volunteering could become the subject of peer pressure and bets. It was, in fact, one of the reasons why adolescents decided to try and enlist. In his book on the Third War of Italian Independence, Hubert Heyriès presents the example of a sixteen-year-old Neapolitan, who, while being embarked to Varese on 25 May, could not stop crying. The boy claimed that he had been misled by his comrades who had conspired to get him enrolled.<sup>19</sup> We read something similar in a letter from father Francesco Porta, who wrote in his annulment request to the volunteer corps that it was out of 'youthful thoughtlessness, or better yet, at the urge of his mates' that his son had enlisted.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> L. Riall, *Garibaldi: The Invention of a Hero*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 389.

<sup>13</sup> S. Patriarca, 'Indolence and Regeneration: Tropes and Tensions of Risorgimento Patriotism', *The American Historical Review*, 110, 2 (2005), pp. 380-408: p. 383. See also her more elaborate book on the topic: S. Patriarca, *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Patriarca, 'Indolence and Regeneration', cit., p. 389.

<sup>15</sup> A.M. Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento: Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita*, Turin, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2000. See also: A.M. Banti & M. Mondini, 'Da Novara a Custoza: Culture militari e discorso nazionale tra Risorgimento e unità', in: *Storia d'Italia. Annali 18. Guerra e Pace*, in: W. Barberis (ed.), Turin, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2002, pp. 415-462: p. 417.

<sup>16</sup> Riall, *The Invention of a Hero*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> E. Cecchinato & M. Isnenghi, 'La nazione volontaria', in: Banti & Ginsborg (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali 22. Il Risorgimento*, cit., pp. 697-720: p. 698.

<sup>18</sup> L. Riall, 'Eroi maschili, virilità e forme della guerra', in: Banti & Ginsborg (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali 22. Il Risorgimento*, cit., pp. 253-288: p. 257.

<sup>19</sup> Heyriès, *Italia 1866*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>20</sup> Museo Centrale del Risorgimento, Roma (MCRR), 458/23 (18a). Francesco Porta to Giovanni Cadolini, 13 May 1866.

It was also around this time that Giovanni Martinelli, the main protagonist of this story, went to the church of Saint Agata in his hometown Brescia.<sup>21</sup> With the minimum enlistment age at seventeen years, Giovanni knew that he was too young to enter the volunteer army. When he arrived at the church's office, therefore, he asked for a copy of the birth certificate of his eighteen-year-old friend Pietro Franzoni, with the intention of enlisting under his name. Although the concrete reason why he enlisted is not elaborated upon in any of the sources, his efforts to conceal his real identity do speak to the depth of his motivation. Giovanni himself was a student, and may have been inspired by the same social and literary circles that incited many a student to enlist. Both the parish and the enlistment office accepted his request, and on 16 June Giovanni was assigned to the fourth regiment commanded by Colonel Cadolini.

### **Army Life and Giovanni's Desertion**

How exceptional was Giovanni Martinelli's enlistment into the volunteer corps, and what could the scale of the phenomenon tell us about its general acceptance? It is a difficult question to answer, seeing that official statistics are incomplete and even occasionally unreliable. In 2014, the Trentino-based Associazione Araba Fenice published an online database of the official 1866 enlistment books, containing names of 183 volunteers of sixteen years, twenty-five of fifteen years, five of fourteen years and even three of a mere thirteen years.<sup>22</sup> Compared to a total strength of around 40.000 volunteers, this suggests that officially, underage soldiers made up approximately 0,5% of the total volunteer army. On the one hand, the enlistment books thus suggest that the legal enlistment age of seventeen years was not applied in all cases. On the other hand, enlistment fraud was omnipresent and cannot be traced in the official records. With many young adolescents like Giovanni enlisting through a false certificate, the real number was undoubtedly higher. Furthermore, most of the underage soldiers that are the subject of family letters in Cadolini's administration are not in this database. If their names do appear, they are erroneously, or perhaps intentionally, listed as seventeen years of age.

With fraud and legality existing alongside each other, the general acceptance of underage volunteering remains difficult to study through statistics alone. Most likely, those legally registered below seventeen years had simply followed their parents, and were as such assigned a regiment without necessarily executing any military tasks.

For those that were assigned military tasks, what could their army life have looked like? In the case of Giovanni, he was most likely sent to the nearest training facility in Bergamo. Here, he was drilled in discipline and learned to shoot the long 1859 French rifle. Afterwards his regiment was sent north to Edolo, from where one of the regiment's battalions participated in the Battle of Vezza d'Oglio on 4 July. With few provisions at their disposal and with limited fighting opportunities, the campaign was far from glorious. Both the heavy rifle and the arduous marches through the mountains took a heavy toll on those with a fragile or small physique. Furthermore, volunteers received only one pair of military clothes - if any - and relied on their own finances to replace broken equipment or supplement poor food rations.<sup>23</sup> For young

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<sup>21</sup> During his court investigation, Giovanni himself declared that he obtained his friend's birth certificate at the Church of Saint Agata. His friend, he claims, was not aware of this (Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Tribunale Militare del Corpo Volontari Italiani, b. 2, fascicolo 3006, Giovanni Martinelli, Esame del Martinelli, carta 6).

<sup>22</sup> Federazione Araba Fenice, 'La Mappa Dei Garibaldini Ritrovata: L'elenco e Le Biografie Dei Garibaldini Del 1866 a Bezzacca', *Araba Fenice*, <<https://www.arabafenice.tn.it/index.php/progetti/la-mappa-ritrovata-le-biografie-dei-garibaldini-del-1866-a-bezzacca>> (13 April 2025).

<sup>23</sup> Heyriés, *Italia 1866*, cit.

volunteers without their relatives' support, affording such expenditures would be nearly impossible.

Yet financial and physical hardships formed only part of their challenge. Youngsters in particular formed an easy target for more experienced soldiers, *anziani* or 'old hands', who exerted psychological pressure and sometimes even physical violence against those who seemed less experienced.<sup>24</sup> It had been amidst such circumstances that sixteen-year-old volunteer Michele D'Aponte had deserted, fleeing because of the 'ill-treatment' received (*mali tratti ricevuti*) by his fellow soldiers.<sup>25</sup> When he was taken to a police station for questioning, Michele searched all his bags in vain for his absence license and pretended he had lost it. 'It resulted', the local carabinieri noted in his report, 'that the same had fled out of fear'.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, our fourteen-year-old protagonist Giovanni seems to have successfully hidden his identity for about a month. That is until he reappears in the military records through his arrest report. On 17 July, he ran away from his company after he lost his rifle, trading his military uniform for civilian clothing with a farmer along the road.<sup>27</sup> He tried to find his way to Brescia, yet ended up walking in the opposite direction, going north to Vezza. There, he approached two foot carabinieri who 'took him for a suspect', halted him and proceeded to questioning. Trying to talk his way out, Giovanni created an even denser cloud of mystery around his identity. First he claimed to be Giovanni Bernardini, son of a farmer in Vezza, and that he was just returning from a visit to a nearby family member. The carabinieri, noting the inconsistencies in his speech, took him to the police station for further questioning after he could not list a single acquaintance there. Once at the carabinieri station, Giovanni changed his testimony. He still claimed his real name was Bernardini, but that he had enlisted under the false name of Pietro Franzoni because he was too young to be enrolled. Now that he had admitted his desertion, the carabinieri decided he should be sent to the military prison in Breno to await his trial.<sup>28</sup>

## Relatives

How did his home environment respond to both his enlistment and his desertion, and what options were available to relatives to deal with such cases? Apparently Giovanni had told no one of his intentions - not even his friend Pietro - and the family learned of his whereabouts through one of Giovanni's letters. The next sections delve deeper into the family correspondence, uncovering the perceptions of underage soldiering amongst the volunteers' own relatives.

In Giovanni's regiment alone, the military command received at least nine letters from parents whose sons were below the legal enlistment age.<sup>29</sup> With his fourteen years of age, Giovanni was by far the youngest amongst them. Here we must carefully note the upper-middle to upper class character of these letters. Most of them were written by the parents themselves, and were formulated in standard Italian. With Italy's illiteracy rates sky-high in 1866, most lower-middle to lower class families would not have been able to write letters of their own.<sup>30</sup> That we still have a letter from Giovanni

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<sup>24</sup> M. Rovinello, 'The Draft and Draftees in Italy, 1861-1914', in: E. Zürcher (ed.), *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative Study of Military Labour 1500-2000*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2013, pp. 479-518: p. 507.

<sup>25</sup> ACS, TMCVI, b. 4, fasc. 3074, Michele D'Aponte. Interrogatorio del D'Aponte, c. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> ACS, TMCVI, b. 2, fasc. 3006, Giovanni Martinelli. Verbale d'arresto, c. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> MCRR, 458/20 (19); 458/21 (18); 458/24 (2); 459/11 (21); 459/14 (10a); 458/25 (16); 460/1 (19); 461/6 (19); 464/3 (8a).

<sup>30</sup> According to a 1861 census, some 78% of people could neither read nor write. This had decreased to 73% in 1871. See T. de Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1963, pp. 35-43.

- written in his own hand no less - is what makes his case incredibly rare. It does beg the question whether his case can be representative of larger segments of society, or whether it speaks predominantly to a middle to upper-middle-class experience. The same applies to the resources at the disposal of his parents, who seemed well-equipped at finding their way through the municipal and military institutions.

Most likely it was Giovanni himself who had alerted his parents to his dire circumstances prior to his desertion. When his father discovered his whereabouts around 13 July, he informed the mayor of Brescia that

senza alcun permesso del padre ed all'insaputo di tutti, presentavasi alla Commissione per l'arruolamento dei Volontari [...] onde poter far parte del corpo medesimo. [...] Lo scrivente, venuto ora in cognizione della triste posizione del proprio figlio, e che lo stesso non può più oltre sostenere i disagi dei lunghi viaggi e le dure fatiche, di cui resterebbe certamente vittima per mancanza di età e forte costituzione fisica [...] prega con tutto il cuore codesto Sigor Sindaco, perché in base all'unità Certificato, voglia colla più possibile sollecitudine esercitare le pratiche necessarie onde il detto Giovanni Martinelli venga dal Comando [...] rimandato in seno della famiglia.<sup>31</sup>

The voice of Giovanni's mother remains conspicuously absent in the letter correspondence, especially if we consider the importance of the mother-figure in the Risorgimento discourse. Nonetheless, this letter-writing practice points to the weight of the *pater familias* in dealing with such circumstances and speaking on behalf of the family. In absence of a male head of the household, however, women also wrote their own letters to the military command. A preliminary review of the available letters suggests that men and women also employed a distinct and gendered type of rhetoric in getting their requests granted. Where fathers would usually appeal to their parental authority, mothers and wives were more inclined to refer to their declining personal and financial wellbeing in absence of their male relatives.

The surviving correspondence between Giovanni, his father and the mayor of Brescia enables us to explore the views on underage volunteering within the family realm, even if we should remember that they are presented from a male perspective. Returning to the letter of Giuseppe Martinelli, we recognise, for example, the same appeal to fatherly authority. It also stands out that his father claims his son's 'lack of age and strong physique' make him unfit for the long and arduous marches. Giuseppe's argument leans heavily on Giovanni being not yet of age, making him not just subject to his father's authority, but straight-up unable to bear the requirements of military life. Rather surprisingly, the father does not appeal to the legal enlistment age at all, meaning that he either did not know about it, or that he considered this a self-evident fact in defence of his request. Other parents did refer directly to the seventeen years of age requirement to cancel their sons' enlistments, suggesting that this information was somehow within their reach.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that Giovanni had not asked for permission, nor alerted anyone to his ambitions, is also highly relevant. It tells us something of the way in which he thought his volunteering would be perceived by others. Furthermore, both his conscious decision to run away from home and his decision to desert eventually instilled in him a strong sense of shame. We see this in Giovanni's emotional, and occasionally erroneous letter that he sent to his father from the Carabinieri prison:

lo vi prego con tutta l'anima a venire in questo quartiere dei Reali Carabinieri a liberarmi perché, volendo disertare, sono venuto fin quà [sic] vestito di Borghese e i Carabinieri m'hanno

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<sup>31</sup> MCRR, 461/6 (19). Giuseppe Martinelli to the mayor of Brescia, 13 July 1866.

<sup>32</sup> See for example: MCRR, 458/25 (16). Venanzio De Rossi to the Command of the Fourth Regiment of Volunteers in Varese, 15 June 1866.

preso per sospetto ed io oggi raccontai al maresciallo tutta la pura verità e non so come andrà a finire la cosa. Venite mio caro padre, venite a liberarmi, che vi prometto con tutto il cuore che questo fallo che ho commesso di andar via di casa, lo scolpirò nel mio cuore [...]. Maggiormente mi prende passione: non essermi arrivato nessuna lettera di casa ancora io temo che voi siete ammalati. Dunque carissimo padre, venite a salvarmi e vedrete come vi compenserò coll'amore che è un giorno che mi ritrovo qua sempre piangere.<sup>33</sup>

Giovanni knew that he had committed a mistake (*fallo*) by clandestinely leaving his home. It leaves us wondering if he really thought that his father or both his parents were ill, or whether he secretly feared the extent to which his actions might have damaged their relationship.

The quest to set Giovanni free was not only made arduous by Italy's stalled war and postal bureaucracy, but was further complicated by the inconsistencies in Giovanni's own testimonies. Having feigned two identities, the court martial now had three names to verify: Pietro Franzoni, Giovanni Bernardini and Giovanni Martinelli. All company records pertaining to Giovanni's desertion listed him as Pietro Franzoni, and it took several weeks before every military body was made aware that this name was based on a false certificate. Furthermore, Giovanni's court file was initially assigned to the name of Giovanni Bernardini, based on the name that was included in the carabinieri's first report. As such, the court martial had to make inquiries with the mayor of Vezza, who declared on 2 August that no such Giovanni Bernardini lived in their commune.<sup>34</sup> The name Martinelli only starts circulating in the file after the carabinieri wrote a new report on 4 August (containing Giovanni's latest testimony), meaning that several weeks had gone by before Giovanni's real identity was known by all the relevant military authorities.<sup>35</sup>

The strenuous investigation into Giovanni's real identity also explains why the initial attempts of Giuseppe Martinelli and the mayor of Brescia to set him free made virtually no progress. Despite Giovanni's concerns over the lack of letters from his parents, his father in fact did everything he could to get his case annulled. Apart from his letter to the mayor on 13 July, Giuseppe Martinelli also reached out to the prison after he learned that his son had been held captive there.<sup>36</sup> Even this attempt, it appears, was unsuccessful. Desperate, and probably with no other resource at hand, Martinelli wrote a final letter to Garibaldi himself on 4 August:

fino dal giorno 14 Luglio p.p. a mezzo del Municipio di Brescia, presentava al Comando del 4. Reggimento l'istanza tendente ad ottenere il rilascio del proprio figlio, dacché gli veniva riferito per mancanza di salute e di buona costituzione fisica, il figlio non si sentiva in grado di ulteriormente reggere alle fatiche militari ed alle lunghe e disastrose marcie. - Se non che nel successivo giorno 17 Luglio, il volontario Martinelli-Franzoni, debole di mente, privo di quella matura intelligenza che distingue l'uomo dal ragazzo, privo d'esperienze, e senza riflettere alle conseguenze che ne seguivano, si assentava dal proprio Corpo, e dai Reali Carabinieri veniva poscia tradotto nelle carceri di Storo. Qui non valsero nè istanze nè preghiere del padre e d'altri presso il Comandante del 4. Reggimento, perché sollecitasse a dar evasione in una qualunque maniera all'istanza già predetta, e procurasse la scarcerazione del povero ragazzo per cui ora lo scrivente si fa umilmente e con tutto il cuore e dolore di un padre disgraziato, a pregare in via di grazia la Magnanima Bontà Vostra a voler dare i necessari provvedimenti

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<sup>33</sup> ACS, TMCVI, b. 2, fasc. 3006, Giovanni Martinelli. Lettera di Martinelli, c. 4.

<sup>34</sup> ACS, TMCVI, b. 2, fasc. 3006, Giovanni Martinelli. Lettera del Municipio di Edolo, c. 14.

<sup>35</sup> ACS, TMCVI, b. 2, fasc. 3006, Giovanni Martinelli. Lettera dei Carabinieri di Cedegolo, c. 16.

<sup>36</sup> We know this because Giovanni's original letter is in the court martial file, meaning that Giuseppe brought it with him to the Carabinieri as proof of their acquaintance. The letter is not accompanied by a secretarial note, nor is it referred to in any procedural letter or report. It is highly unlikely that the letter was never sent, for in order for Giovanni to write the letter in the first place he had asked permission for the materials to be brought to him.

perchè sia liberato dal carcere il povero figlio, compatibile per la sua tenera età, e munito del relativo congedo sia anche restituito in seno alla propria famiglia.<sup>37</sup>

More strongly than in his letter to the mayor, Martinelli positions his son as immature, incapable of overseeing his act of desertion due to being '*debole di mente*' and lacking the necessary experience. One could wonder whether he even positions these qualities as inherent to his young age. Martinelli argues that Giovanni is conditioned by the lack of mature intelligence that distinguishes a man from a boy. Worse than enlisting without permission, however, is to subsequently remove oneself from the military body. Here Martinelli actually attributes an adult-like responsibility to his son, claiming that he should have been able to consider the consequences of his acts. Of course, his carefully chosen rhetoric should be considered within the context of his request. Giuseppe Garibaldi was one of the most renowned generals of his time, and to request the discharge of one of his volunteers would not have been a small matter. The fact that father Martinelli considers it self-evident that his son should be returned to his family is therefore very telling. It was an argument Giuseppe Martinelli apparently thought Garibaldi would be receptive to, attesting to the ongoing important role and image of the *seno della famiglia* in late nineteenth-century Italy.

In conclusion, Giuseppe's letters, as well as the annulment requests from other parents, show us that even though underage enlistment might have occurred relatively often, it was certainly not regarded as unproblematic. Not only did secret underage enlistment transgress the notion of parental authority, young adolescents were often also seen as unfit for military service. According to their senior relatives, they lacked not only the physical requirements needed for military activities, but also the general life experience that separated boys from adult men.

### **The Military**

With Giovanni's home environment disapproving of his actions, it is now time to shift attention to the military. How complicit was the volunteer army in the facilitation of underaged volunteering amongst the ranks? Furthermore, with regards to the social category of childhood, would military officials have shared Giuseppe Martinelli's views on the availability of soldierly qualities in underaged boys?

As mentioned before, the 1866 volunteer army received several requests from parents who tried to cancel their sons' enlistments. In theory, procedure dictated that in those cases volunteers under the age of seventeen were to be immediately discharged, provided that their families could submit a valid birth certificate.<sup>38</sup> A further glance at the available material suggests that the volunteer army did not always live up to these rules, however. Particularly luminating is the report delivered by the captain of Giovanni's company, in which he was asked by the court martial to provide his views on Giovanni's desertion. In response, he reported:

Sulle circostanze che possono avergli consigliata una tale mancanza, il sottoscritto crede dover accennare per debito di giustizia che non devono certamente procedere da una intenzione precometa di disertare dal corpo, ma solo da quella trascuranza, si può dire in lui innata, e per mancanza di quel criterio che regola l'uomo ad operare, sicchè non si può errare qualificandolo per giovane di poco esperienza, tanto più ancora per la sua tenera età di anni 16. Dietro poi informazioni avute risulterebbe che per essergli mancato dall'accompagnamento

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<sup>37</sup> MCRR, 463/10 (7b). Giuseppe Martinelli to Giuseppe Garibaldi. 4 August 1866.

<sup>38</sup> This procedure comes to light through Colonel Giovanni Cadolini's own notes on the back of the letters, giving instructions to his secretary. In case a birth certificate was missing, Cadolini wrote that they could not proceed with an investigation.

sopracitato, l'intero armamento, non ebbe poscia il coraggio di presentarsi in tal modo alla compagnia.<sup>39</sup>

It seems that by the time of writing this report, the captain was not yet aware that Giovanni had enlisted under a false certificate. It therefore stands out that he lists Giovanni as sixteen years of age. Perhaps during his month of service, Giovanni had admitted that he was below the legal enlistment age, feeling at liberty to say that he was at least sixteen and as such account for his relatively youthful appearance. Too much speculation into this matter should be avoided however, and even seems unnecessary when considering the other more obvious absence in the captain's report. That is, the captain does not dwell on the legal consequences of Giovanni's minor age at all. Instead, he seeks explanation for Pietro-Giovanni's desertion in the psychological features of his minor age, and as such adopts a reasoning much akin to that of Giovanni's father.

Like Giuseppe Martinelli, the captain distinguished the qualities of a man ('*l'uomo*') from those of the inexperienced youngster ('*giovane di poca esperienza*'). Even more strongly than father Giuseppe, however, he argued that Giovanni's lacks are innate to him. Pietro-Giovanni did not premeditate his desertion, he says, but deserted because of the youngster's lack of courage to return to the company without his weaponry. It is interesting to notice how therefore, and in contrast to the idea of military volunteering as a rite of passage to manhood, in the views of a Garibaldian officer a young person in the military remained conditioned by a lack of experience and a lack of adult qualities.

Giovanni was acquitted of desertion on 18 August and was most likely sent back to his home in Brescia. What eventually led to Giovanni's case being dropped after a month of imprisonment? The court file ends abruptly without listing a concrete reason - a common problem of court martial case files at this time - but a likely explanation can be distilled from the family and court correspondence. Although the volunteer military may have shown occasional laxity with the legal enlistment age of recruits while in service, it soon returned to form when procedure demanded it. Weeks into the investigation into Giovanni's real identity, the court martial dropped its charges after a direct order from the headquarters where Garibaldi himself was seated. Although Giuseppe Martinelli's letter to Garibaldi never reached the court martial file, a copy of it was sent to Colonel Giovanni Cadolini to make sure that Giovanni would be discharged from the regiment. The following note from the legal counsel (*avvocato fiscale consulente*) of the high command was attached to the copy, detailing his own views on Giovanni's 'immature age':

Mentre si rinviamo a questo Comando Generale gli atti conniventi il volontario in margine descritto si mi venne ordinato la scaricazione con foglio N106 in stata d'ieri, lo scrivente crede dover far osservare a questo Comando Generale che l'età immatura del Volontario Martinelli dà diritto alla famiglia di richiamarlo presso di se e di ottenere l'immediata sua liberazione dal militare servizio.<sup>40</sup>

As such, it seems that the headquarters' involvement, and perhaps even that of Garibaldi himself, formed the decisive action for the court martial to let Giovanni go. Although it remains unclear whether the volunteer command would have welcomed Giovanni back amongst the ranks, it is certain that, even for the military, the right of

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<sup>39</sup> ACS, TMCVI, b. 2, fasc. 3006, Giovanni Martinelli. Lettera del 4. Reggimento, c. 19.

<sup>40</sup> MCRR, 463/10 (7a). Avvocato Fiscale Consulente to the Comando Generale dei Volontari Italiani in Brescia, 19 August 1866. A small note on the letter details that a copy was sent to the fourth regiment of volunteers 'per esecuzione', explaining how the letter ended up in Cadolini's archive.

the family to reclaim their underage sons always took precedence over that of the army.

### Conclusion

I started my article with the 1909 film *Il piccolo garibaldino*, featuring a young volunteer that joined his father and died during the expedition to Sicily in 1860. Its militarist images were typical for its time, yet also find curious resonance in the aforementioned commemorative plaque erected for Giuseppe Marchetti as late as 2024. Drawing from the well-documented case of fourteen-year-old Giovanni Martinelli, the article has explored how underage volunteers could actually enter the army, how their participation was viewed by both relatives and the military, and to what extent the military institution was complicit in their presence. In doing so, I have attempted to provide much-needed historical context to the phenomenon of underage Risorgimento volunteering, seeking to complicate ongoing visions of youthful patriotism in our Risorgimento commemoration.

The available evidence indeed suggests that the phenomenon of underage Risorgimento volunteering was quite ubiquitous, even if we lack reliable enlistment numbers that can concretely attest to its scale. Despite its ubiquity, however, and contrary to the support of parents in contemporary propagandic works, underage volunteering was far from unproblematic in family circles. Several parents wrote letters to the volunteer command not only asking for enlistments to be cancelled, but also stating that their young age and inexperience made their sons unsuited for military life. From the letters of Giuseppe Martinelli in particular, we can also conclude that he made a strong conceptual separation between the characteristics of boyhood, and those of adulthood. According to father Martinelli, inexperience was a quality largely inherent to young Giovanni's age. Even though Giovanni remained responsible for his desertion, his youthful inexperience was in and of itself a valid reason to have him discharged.

The role of the military in facilitating underage enlistment remains ambiguous, and it is this question that new research should specifically attend to. Even though the military command discharged underage volunteers when parents or the procedure asked for it, the report from Giovanni's company commander shows us that their presence was not a priori rejected. In fact, underage soldiers seem to have been tolerated in certain contexts. The captain of Giovanni's company referred to Giovanni's hypothetical age of sixteen without reflecting on its legal consequences, even if he *did* consider his young age a mitigating fact in condemning Giovanni's desertion. Future research should point out whether the volunteer army itself turned a blind eye to its own procedures on a more structural level, and, if so, what tasks and responsibilities they would have attributed to those below the age of seventeen.

In any case, the biography of Giovanni Martinelli complicates the ongoing celebration of Risorgimento child soldier figures, showing that their military experience was a lot more arduous than any statue of Giuseppe Marchetti may give the impression of. Any future discourse on the phenomenon of the *piccolo garibaldino* would do well to consider this historical context, and wonder to what extent child or adolescent soldiering in the nineteenth century would really differ from its twentieth-century or subsequent equivalent.