Epistolario De Gasperi:
National Edition of De Gasperi's Letters in Digital Format

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Abstract

English. We present an ongoing project aimed at creating the National Edition of Alcide De Gasperi's letters in digital format. Our main goal is to systematically collect and transcribe a large number of private and public letters, present in different archives, written or received by De Gasperi throughout his life, and to shed light into all the critical steps of his biography and of the major events of the time. Thirty-eight transcribers have already acquired and annotated 1,549 letters, using an ad-hoc tool specifically developed for the project. All the transcribed material is available through a constantly updated free access web platform.

Italiano. In questo contributo presentiamo un progetto tuttora in corso volto a creare l'edizione nazionale delle lettere di Alcide De Gasperi in formato digitale. Il nostro obiettivo principale è quello di raccogliere e trascrivere sistematicamente un gran numero di lettere private e pubbliche, presenti in diversi archivi, scritte o ricevute da De Gasperi nel corso della sua vita, e di far luce su tutti i passaggi critici della sua biografia e dei principali eventi del tempo. Trentotto trascrittori hanno già acquisito e annotato 1.549 lettere, utilizzando uno strumento appositamente sviluppato per il progetto. Tutto il materiale trascritto è disponibile attraverso una piattaforma web ad accesso libero constantemente aggiornata.

1 Introduction

Alcide De Gasperi (1881-1954) was one of the most important statesmen in European history, recognized as the father of the Italian Republic and one of the founding fathers of Europe. Despite the rich historiography about him, many aspects of his biography are still waiting to be enlightened. Indeed, up until now, the historical analysis on De Gasperi has been based almost exclusively on institutional sources, on his published works and on his public speeches (De Gasperi, 2006, 2008a,b, 2009), also available in digital format[1] (Sprugnoli et al., 2016). What is still missing is his extraordinary correspondence, which covers all the critical steps of his biography and often offers a different point of view on many events of the time. So far, only very few letters written or received by De Gasperi have been made available through anthological publications, see (De Gasperi, 1955, 1974) among others, or through the publication of the correspondence with specific people, e.g. (Antonazzi, 1999). Nevertheless, a large number of letters has not been published yet. This has paved the way to this ambitious project, coordinated by a scientific committee that brings together all the major scholars of De Gasperi, whose goal is to provide an exhaustive collection of De Gasperi's correspondence in digital format, covering both his public and private life. A preliminary search of the letters to be digitized and edited lists about 5,000 documents written in multiple languages, currently stored in 114 archives all over the world. More than 1,500 of these letters are already available online at the time of writing, all searchable and accessible through an online platform: `https://epistolariodegasperi.it/#/archivio_digitale/lettere`.

The Italian Ministry of Culture supports the project, which has been recognized as a "National Edition". Significantly, this is the first Italian National Edition exclusively conceived through digital tools.

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[1]`http://alcidedigitale.fbk.eu/`

2 Related Work

Editorial projects involving the digitization of documents are always increasing and the standards that characterize them are constantly evolving (Pierazzo, 2014). The literature reports a rich and varied panorama of digital editions of works by writers, intellectuals and historical figures (Franzini et al., 2016). In recent years, also the digitization of letters has received much attention (Hankins, 2015) with projects dedicated to individual characters, such as Darwin[2] and Van Gogh[3], or that aim to reconstruct large epistolary networks (Ravenek et al., 2017; Baillot and Seifert, 2013). A centralized web service to search within the metadata of diverse scholarly editions of letters has been also developed (Dumont, 2016). If we look at the Italian landscape, we can see that the development of digital editions of letters is rather limited and that current initiatives have mostly focused on the collection and digitization of literary documents created in the Late Medieval and modern era, such as in the Progetto Datini[4] and in the digital edition of the letters by Vespasiano da Bisticci (Tomasi, 2012).

In our opinion, the project presented in this paper has at least four significant aspects to be highlighted if compared with other works and that constitute our contribution: (i) the strong interdisciplinary synergy that led to define a rich set of metadata and editorial choices taking into consideration different aspects (i.e., linguistic, historical, philological); (ii) the development of a transcription infrastructure, characterized by three access levels and a graphical interface that is both intuitive and compliant with existing editing standard and that we plan to release for the research community so to be adopted in other projects; (iii) the subject of the edition, that is the exhaustive collection of correspondence related to contemporary history until now closed in archives and difficult to reach; (iv) the attention to different types of final users so that mechanisms have been implemented in order to allow a customization of the reading complexity.

3 Editorial Practice

Several transcribers, mostly history scholars, have been involved in the project to digitally acquire De Gasperi's correspondence. They have been provided with an ad-hoc tool (Moretti et al., 2018), through which they have inserted various metadata for each document, including: sender, recipient, chrono-topical data, type of document (letter, telegram etc.)[5] (Malfatti, 2019). They also specify if the document is an original, a copy or a draft and if the topic is of a personal or institutional nature. Presence of envelope, letterhead, autograph signatures, attachments have to be reported as well. Transcribers must also indicate for each document the number of cards, writing technique (manuscript/typewritten), conservation status, as well as the reference code for the correct identification of the document. Transcriptions must accurately reflect the text and the layout of the document, including possible mistakes, illegible words and cancellations, punctuation and paragraph division, etc. Margin notes have to be reported in a specific field, possibly with the corresponding position and author. Historical (or commentaries) notes clarify and integrate the content of the text. The transcript must also be preceded by an abstract to contextualise and summarize its content.

4 Transcription Tool

For the acquisition of De Gasperi's letters we developed a new infrastructure that allows different transcribers to work in parallel and to smoothly publish the transcribed documents online as soon as they have been revised by a small pool of experts. Specifically, the infrastructure functionalities are the following:

- possibility to work both offline and online, so that the transcriptions can be performed also in archives without an Internet connection;

- use of a wide set of metadata defined by the Scientific Committee and compliant with the Dublin Core standard and the standard for the cataloging of manuscripts in Italian libraries;

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[2]https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/
[3]http://vangoghletters.org/
[4]http://datini.archiviodistato.prato.it/
[5]The editorial guidelines are available online: https://epistolariodegasperi.it/#/risorse

- clear division of roles into three types of contributions: (i) the transcriber, who creates a digital picture of the original document and uploads it in the transcription tool, inserts metadata, transcribes and annotates the text, (ii) the supervisor, who adds the critical apparatus, and (iii) the editor, who is in charge of validating the correctness of the transcription and publishes the letter in the final online platform;

- automatic upload and update of each letter on a central database; (v) easy-to-use transcription interface not requiring explicit knowledge of tag annotation and coding schemes;

- easy-to-use transcription interface not requiring explicit knowledge of tag annotation and coding schemes;

- presence of autocomplete features to reduce the risk of mistakes in the insertion of metadata.

From the technical point of view, the infrastructure includes a MySQL database and three software applications (one for each role) written in Javascript/ECMAScript 6. The interface is implemented using the ReactJS framework.

5 Digital Archive

Currently, the digital archive allows to search by title, sender, recipient, type (i.e., letter, telegram, postcard, note, other), theme (i.e. private life, national politics, international politics, local politics, religion, culture, economy, society, political party), free text. A slider can be used to select a specific time period from 1902 to the year of De Gasperi's death in 1954. The interface responds in real time to what the user types, modifying the list of letters that correspond to the search key. Searches can also be combined: for example, it is possible to search for all the notes sent by Giulio Andreotti after 1950 or for all the postcards containing the word "augurio". When clicking on a letter, all the metadata compiled by the transcriber are displayed together with an abstract written by a historian that summarizes the content of the document. The photograph and the transcription are placed next to each other and the transcription respects the annotation made by the transcribers showing, among others, words that are underlined, erased parts, spelling errors. Footnotes explain content that could be unclear to the reader adding contextualization. In addition, 380 proper names of persons are accompanied by a biographical note written by historians. Given that the aim of the project is to attract both general public and experts, readers can access the National Edition from different perspectives. More specifically, with a simple click the user goes from a complete transcription of the letter containing all the annotations to a simplified one that is more suitable for the general public: in this reader-friendly view of the letter the deleted parts are not displayed, the typos are corrected and the abbreviations are extended.

6 Current State of the Project

The transcription process started in August 2018 and it currently involves 38 transcribers and 10 supervisors. At the moment of writing (September 2019), 1,549 letters from 106 different private and public archives in Italy and abroad have been transcribed, annotated, revised and published online. The number of letters written in each year currently present in the digital archive is shown in Figure 1. As expected, most letters are exchanged between 1945 and 1954, when De Gasperi was a very prominent political figure with key roles in the Italian government. However, we observe an interesting element for the years between 1926 and 1942, which historians describe as De Gasperi's *internal exile*, because he did not cover official roles under fascism: while the archive of public documents of Alcide De Gasperi[6] contains only few documents for that period (Moretti et al., 2016), 132 letters have been found for the same years, and 24 of them have been tagged as being about *Politics*. This shows that, even if De Gasperi did not have any official role, he was still involved in political discussions and was expressing his opinion on the current situation.
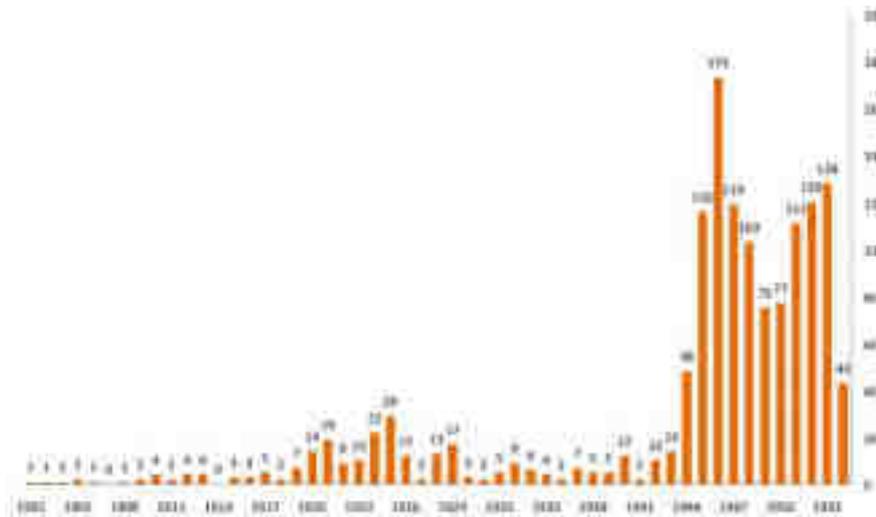
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[6]Available at <http://alcidedigitale.fbk.eu/>

Figure 1: Letter distribution over time

Additional statistics are reported in Table 1, where we list the five senders and receivers that are currently most present in the correspondence. De Gasperi appears in most letters either as sender and as receiver. Only in few examples he is not explicitly mentioned, for instance when the receiver is a collective entity (e.g. 'Governo italiano', 'Soci della Tridentum') where De Gasperi was included. Some persons appear in the table because a version of their correspondence had already been curated and published before, see for example Sturzo (Antonazzi, 1999), so that the Epistolario project could take advantage from already transcribed blocks of letters.

Senders	#	Receivers	#
Alcide De Gasperi	816	Alcide De Gasperi	704
Luigi Sturzo	143	Luigi Sturzo	107
Piero Malvestiti	71	Giulio Delugan	55
Luigi Granello	39	Piero Malvestiti	41
Guido de Gentili	28	Giuseppe Micheli	34
Agostino Gemelli	22	Amintore Fanfani	31

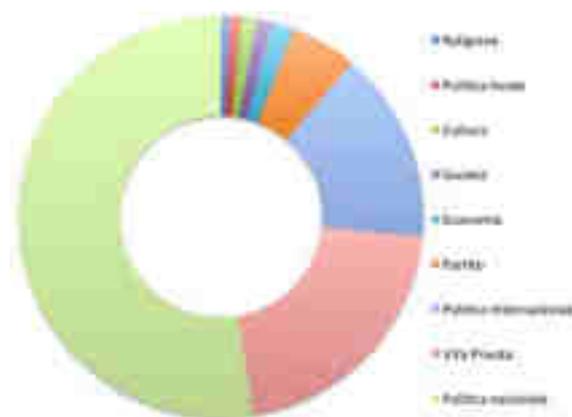Table 1: Top-5 senders (left) and receivers (right) in the digital collection at the moment of writing.

Figure 2: Topic distribution in the letters

Another interesting analysis is related to the topic(s) of the letters. Indeed, each transcriber has to assign one or more topics to each letter chosen among the following categories: Private Life, National Politics, International Politics, Local Politics, Political Party, Economy, Society, Culture, Religion. The choice to allow multiple annotations was guided by domain experts, who identified in each letter multiple

topics and opted not to select only the main one. We report in Figure 2 the distribution of topics in the letters transcribed so far. As expected, national politics is the most present topic. The fact that private life is the second most frequent topic, instead, is rather surprising, since the majority of De Gasperi's letter exchanged with other family members are still kept private by his descendants, and have not been included in the Epistolario. This means that De Gasperi tended to mention personal information and tell about private aspects of his life in letters to members of the christian-democratic party, politicians and other public figures, mixing political, cultural and private topics.

Figure 3: Keyphrases extracted from eighteen English letters sent by/to De Gasperi.

Another intriguing aspect of the collection is the fact that, given the international role played by De Gasperi, especially after WWII, several letters are either in English or in German (resp. 33 and 10 at the moment of writing). Figure 2 shows a preliminary content analysis of the English transcribed letters performed with the keyword extraction tool KD (Moretti et al., 2015). The letters, dated 1945-1948, were exchanged between De Gasperi and important US personalities, such as President Truman and the Secretary of Defense Robert A. Lovett. The focus of these letters is on the international cooperation between the two nations, the treaty after WW2, the necessity of peace for Italy reconstruction and the role of supranational communities.
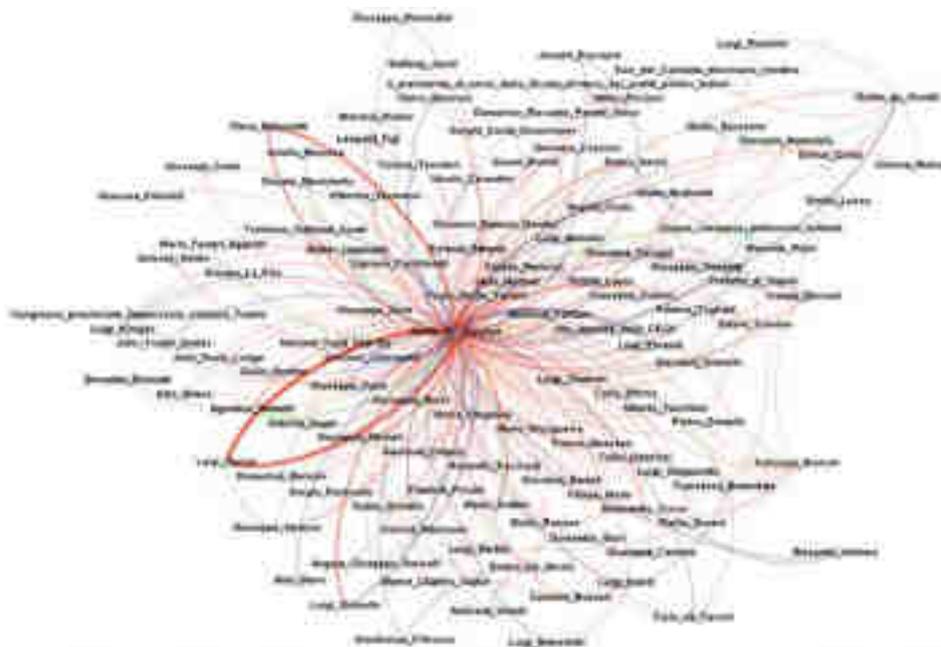

Figure 4: Network of letters

Figure 4 presents the correspondence network of the collection at the time of writing, considering only exchanges of at least two letters. The network is a direct graph in which node and edge size is related to the amount of exchanged letters and edge colour represents different types of document. We can notice

that the strong majority are letters (75%, in red) but there are also telegrams (20%, in blue) and short notes (4%).

7 Conclusion and Future Work

A digital edition presents, with respect to a print edition, new opportunities both for curators and users. First of all, there are virtually no limits to the amount of material that can be included in a digital collection; in addition, archiving on a web platform makes the organisation and management of documentary material more flexible, and provides users with interactive tools that are easier and more attractive for non-experts. At the same time, however, a digital project also requires an interdisciplinary approach. In particular, it is necessary to involve different competences already in the planning phase to create effective synergies between historians, DH experts, computer scientists, archivists and publishers. The National Edition of De Gasperi's letters in digital format is an example of this interdisciplinary approach: all the choices about the documentary editing are the results of discussions among the project members that have guided the choices implemented in the platform, for example the possibility to annotate the letters from different perspectives (linguistic, historical, philological).

The development of the digital archive is still ongoing thus several improvements and additions are planned for the future. Search options will be extended to take advantage of the many metadata provided by the transcribers through the transcription tool: e.g. language used in the letter, presence or absence of headed paper, presence or absence of a handwritten signature. Thematic paths will also be designed to guide the user in discovering the collection of letters, for example by navigating the various biographical phases of De Gasperi's life or the relationship between De Gasperi and his correspondents. Moreover, it will be possible to browse the letters stored in a specific archive or library using an interactive map. Users will also be allowed to download the letters in different format, including pdf and TEI-XML. In addition, we plan to release to the research community the transcription infrastructure with a Creative Commons 4.0 license.

Acknowledgments

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