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Gentlemen (and bandits) to professionals. A social, cultural and ideological portrait of the Italian military élite from the Risorgimento to the Great War.

The army, and the military who controlled it, were an essential part of the Italian national élite during the second half of the XIX century. Military, the Italian ones, that came from different experiences, and afforded a deep change in their self-representation, social origin and, above all, in their professional nature.

Starting from 1867, the Italian army officers, and specifically the general staff ones, attended university-level military academies where social sciences were taught along with general history, human geography and foreign languages. They traveled the world and confronted themselves with fellow officers from different social, political and cultural contexts. They took part in politics and local administration, as well as in economical enterprises. They were well aware of the role the army was supposed to hold in the institutional and symbolic panorama of unified Italy and pre-war Europe. And they wrote about all of this.

The research project is grounded on two main sources. On one hand, the quantitative analysis of the careers and the biographies of more than 300 general staff officers who attained specific roles of great responsibility and relative autonomy from 1861 to 1915. On the other hand, correspondence, diaries, unpublished memoirs found in several private and family archives – in other words, those unofficial, unseen writings that we think could be more telling than the formal ones in revealing the military personal beliefs and cultural affiliations and influences. Crossing the quantitative and qualitative outputs, we can explore in depth the transformation of the officer corp from an amateurish and part-time occupation into an highly professionalized group of laborers, in a case study, the Italian one, that is either peculiar and well integrated in the wider European context.