H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Julia Irwin. *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. xii + 273 pages $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-976640-6.

Reviewed by Winifred Connerton

Published on H-Diplo (August, 2013)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

In *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening,* Julia Irwin connects international humanitarian aid with U.S. political goals and diplomacy through the evolution of American Red Cross (ARC) civilian aid programs. Irwin argues that the ARC's overseas civilian relief efforts developed as part of a calculated campaign by the federal government to demonstrate the benevolent and helpful characteristics of the American people to allies around the world. This well-written book is a useful contribution to the history of U.S. internationalism that highlights the role of humanitarian relief within the armamentarium of U.S. diplomacy.

While the ARC is the lens for this study, this is not an organizational history, but rather a history of the development of U.S. international relationships and diplomacy through emergency assistance and aid. The ARC domestic emergency programs were well known, and provided a training ground for the international humanitarian efforts, but the international programs were much wider in scope and offer a glimpse into what the leaders understood to be uniquely American concerns: health/hygiene, industry/work, and citizenship. Historians interested in the Red Cross will benefit from this contribution to the few organizational histories, and will appreciate Irwin's focus on the international aid programs that larger histories have not been able to address in such detail. Historians of diplomacy will also benefit from Irwin's examination of the ARC's grassroots efforts to promote interest and participation in international humanitarian projects.

Irwin's approach to U.S. international engagement is similar to Ian Tyrrell's in his recent work *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire* (2010), where he identified the power of nongovernmental agencies in promoting the U.S. agenda abroad. What set the ARC apart from other agencies, however, was its status as a quasi-governmental organization, enjoying unprecedented governmental support and direction for its work. The Red Cross movement, begun in 1863 by Henry Dunant, was established to offer aid to combatants regardless of national affilia-

tion during times of war. Under the tenets of the 1864 Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field, individual countries established their own Red Cross societies, united under the ICRC. Clara Barton, famous for her hospital work during the Civil War, lobbied unsuccessfully for the United States to sign on to the Geneva Convention. Rather than wait, she established the ARC as an independent voluntary organization in 1881. The ARC, unlike its European counterparts, had no government connection, and did not limit its focus to aid on the battlefield. Instead, the ARC offered food, clothing, and health care in times of disaster such as earthquakes, fires, and floods. The United States eventually signed the Geneva Convention in 1882, but the government did not immediately create a formal relationship with the ARC.

Irwin begins her study in the nineteenth century and proceeds chronologically through the ARC's founding in 1881, the evolution of international humanitarian projects, and the burgeoning U.S. international engagement. As the national popular interest in international humanitarian work rose, the compensatory benefits of American benevolent aid became increasingly apparent to politicians. Irwin follows the expansion of the ARC from a privately funded voluntary organization that focused on emergency aid for disasters, to an arm of the State Department, using the 1914 U.S. military invasion of Veracruz, Mexico, in which the ARC provided food relief to the local population, as an example. During the years prior to the U.S. entry into WWI the ARC operated relief programs on both sides of the conflict. The federal government promoted ARC programs, encouraged the American population to offer financial donations and volunteer, and ARC advertising directly linked humanitarianism with patriotic duty. When the United States entered WWI, the ARC began its contractual duty to supply nurses and medical practitioners to the military. It also continued to focus on civilian relief, albeit no longer in Germany. The commitment to civilian aid fit within the Wilsonian approach to diplomacy, but set the ARC apart from other Red Cross organizations. The aid to civilian noncombatants was to prove that the American people themselves cared about the people of Europe. Following the war, the ARC sought to export its model of civilian relief to the world through the League of Red Cross Societies (LCRC). Expanding into eastern Europe, but continuing its focus on social reform through humanitarian aid, the ARC and LCRC met many roadblocks as the recipient populations resisted the remodeling of their education and health care delivery. The American population, too, was reluctant to commit to lengthy aid programs in Europe and the ARC's ability to raise funds for their programs dropped precipitously after the war, severely limiting ARC programs abroad.

ARC international civilian aid efforts have rarely been the focus of ARC histories, which attend more to the domestic efforts. ARC international humanitarian aid served American diplomatic needs and justified the close governmental ties, which eventually helped the ARC rise above other aid organizations in scope and power. Irwin pays close attention to the ideologies of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny that infiltrate all of the ARC work. The federal government, particularly under President Woodrow Wilson, recognized the ARC as a useful method to broadcast American fidelity to European populations during WWI. The ARC, however, never limited its international relief to clothing and feeding the displaced; rather, it focused on promoting industry through work training programs; hygiene through physical education and recreation programs for children; health by introducing training programs for nurses; and notions of citizenship through education.

This intimate connection between aid and notions of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism were central to the ARC mission, and undermined the ARC postwar relief programs. Irwin

notes that while the aid programs were welcome during WWI, they were less popular after the war, when European countries sought to reassert control over education and health care in their communities. The ARC focus on civilian aid both during and outside of war set it apart from other Red Cross societies, and sometimes created conflict within the Red Cross community, as when the LRCS announced its agenda to reform international Red Cross societies along the ARC model. Some ARC representatives understood the exceptionalist underpinnings of their approach and tried to lessen the imposition by promoting local leadership and problem solving, but ARC leaders remained tone deaf to these problems, which weakened the positive impact of their work.

Irwin has woven this history using an impressive array of sources from the ARC, the Rockefeller Foundation, the federal government, as well as the personal papers of prominent persons in each of these agencies. In combining these sources Irwin details the interaction among these various agencies, and includes the voices of ARC volunteers who were grassroots participants in American diplomatic efforts. Irwin also addresses the most populous participant group: the American people themselves, and notes that the popular acceptance or rejection of ARC agendas was what finally cemented the success or failure of their endeavors over this period.

Of interest to historians of professions, Irwin highlights the ARC preference for trained experts in the helping fields of medicine, nursing, public health, social work, and education over eager, but untrained, volunteers. ARC programs were organized by adherents to a belief that scientific techniques, when applied correctly, could improve the world. Historians of helping professions will find ample evidence of trained experts putting theory into practice in relief programs Irwin uses as examples. Students will find a skilled example of how meticulous research can come together to expose a complicated relationship across seemingly unrelated arenas.

For the Red Cross-naïve reader this is not a useful introduction to the ARC, and Irwin never suggests it is. Her explanation of the evolution of the ARC itself, the competing domestic and international agendas, and the political wrangling between the ARC and the International Red Cross, however, minimizes the importance of those struggles to the overall ARC mission. Readers seeking basic information on the ARC should look to comprehensive histories such as the classic ***The American Red Cross: A History*** (1950) by Foster R. Dulles, or the hagiographic ***For Humanity's Sake: The Story of the League of Red Cross Societies*** (1964) by Clyde E. Buckingham. Alternately, readers familiar with the ongoing struggles of the ARC may find this account a pleasant respite from the descriptions of bickering and backstabbing so frequently on display in the organization's history.

Irwin focuses on the ARC as the main humanitarian organization with government ties. She does not, however, put the ARC within the larger context of other relief/humanitarian works, either on the domestic or international front. Protestant missions, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the peace organizations, and the settlement house movement all had international connections, and could offer contrasting or supportive examples of the network of humanitarian agency abroad in the world in this period. Irwin does mention other aid providers, but does not address how the ARC worked within the milieu of humanitarian organizations prior to their ascendency during WWI.

Minor critiques aside, Irwin's work gives needed exposure to the complex nature of international diplomacy and humanitarian aid. She notes in her conclusion that international aid is just as important today as in the past, and that understanding the intersection of political gain with humanitarian relief is essential in the evaluation of current international engagement. This book

offers a comprehensive examination of how that intersection affected civilian aid during and after WWI, and the long-term goals those relief efforts were intended to meet.

qualitie

“

”

in

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: Winifred Connerton. Review of Irwin, Julia. *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39017