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Julia F. Irwin. "Nation Building and Rebuilding: The American Red Cross in Italy during the Great War." *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8.3 (July 2009): 407-439.

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Review by **Mark I. Choate**, Brigham Young University

This article is a welcome study of the American Red Cross (ARC), a unique organization under U.S. and international law, in conjunction with the International Red Cross and the U.S. military. Julia Irwin's research on the ARC in Italy forms part of her dissertation underway at Yale University. Her work can be seen as part of the historiographical effort to "internationalize" U.S. history by studying neglected transnational actors and global relationships.

Irwin builds upon the pioneering work of Daniel T. Rodgers' *Atlantic Crossings*, which expanded the optic of progressive history beyond North America.¹ Rodgers focused upon the North Atlantic, but Irwin highlights Mediterranean ties to the U.S. through immigration, alliance, and progressive reform.

The involvement of the American Red Cross in Italy during the Great War is uniquely famous due to two volunteer ambulance drivers, John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway. Dos Passos noted in his diary that "We will be used in the most conspicuous way possible — we must show Italy that America is behind them.... We are here to help cajole the poor devils of Italians into fighting." (408) In his classic novel *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway likewise portrayed Italy's pathetic military weakness during the Battle of Caporetto in November 1917. Irwin moves well beyond the ambulances at the front, however, to analyze the ARC's much bigger goals of renovating Italian medicine and permanently improving Italian society. American hubris and condescension are thoroughly documented along the way.

When the United States declared war in 1917, the American Red Cross assumed the

¹ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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responsibility of supporting Italy as an ally. U.S. troops and materiel went to the Western Front in France and Belgium, not to the Italian Front. The ARC took seriously its mission to bolster suspect Italian resolve, especially after Caporetto. Irwin uses the memoir of Thomas Nelson Page, U.S. ambassador to Italy during the war; the American Red Cross papers at the National Archives and Records Administration facility at College Park, Maryland; and unpublished archives at Yale University, to document the expanding concerns and missions of the ARC “to bring order to the nation after the Caporetto retreat.” (416) A key part of the American mission was propaganda and publicity, featuring American flags, rallies, flyers, and trinkets across the Italian peninsula, “to assure that all relief, from food aid to cash, had ‘an American character.’” (420)

This article also analyzes the role of gender in the Red Cross campaign. The ARC shed its image as “the Greatest Mother in the World” to adopt a “rational, efficient, and masculine” presence in wartime Italy. (418) Male ARC officials pretended to be U.S. military officers, donning uniforms because, in their words, “the sight of American officers is a revelation to [Italians’] simple minds.” (424) Female leaders with long experience in the ARC were pushed aside. Perhaps as a result, ARC efforts at the end of the war to promote female professional nursing in Italy were unsuccessful.

Irwin brings in transnational concerns for migration, health, culture, and modernization amid the turmoil and upheaval of the Great War and its aftermath. She documents the interest of American reformers in raising levels of public health in Italy, as many Americans assumed that Italian emigration would return to its previous levels after the end of the war. If more of the future Italian Americans were healthy, this would benefit the United States. Irwin should also note, however, that pre-war immigration had shaped the experience of progressives in Chicago, New York, and other cities with large Italian populations. American progressives viewed Italy as a backward land, because so many people left its shores for the United States, and because Italian immigrants struggled for survival while American-born families prospered. Pre-war work with impoverished Italians had conditioned the elitist progressives’ attitudes towards Italians as a whole.

The narrow-mindedness of the American diplomatic and Red Cross officials is striking, colorful, and depressing. Irwin makes excellent use of her unpublished American sources, including the conclusion by E. O. Bartlett, post-war ARC Commission chief, that, “We all know that the Italian people still preserve a love and sympathy for the American people only and entirely because of the American Red Cross.” (439) Since the Italian Red Cross, which would have been a natural comparative element, is not examined here, the article is more an American than an international study.

In some parts, this presentation comes across as two-dimensional, without an Italian perspective. Statements such as “the ARC seized its chance to dismantle Italian public-health and social systems” (428) appear overdrawn, adopting an American view rather than the reality of what was happening in Italy. Irwin’s sketch of Italian politics is also problematic, limiting the article’s international reach. In a footnote on page 414-415 she

blends together Italy's Conservatives and Nationalists: "Many Italian conservatives and nationalists favored intervention," and Prime Minister "Salanda [sic], too, claimed to represent a Liberal faction, [but] he was a staunch nationalist in practice." This formulation is problematic, because that the "nationalists" of Italy's earlier history had been made obsolete by the growing radicalization of extremist politics. Organized in 1896, the Italian Nationalist Association hoped to overthrow the Liberal parliamentary regime in Italy, and build a new form of government based upon Catholic religion, organic corporatism, and devotion to the King. The Nationalists had their own membership, newspaper, and congresses; Antonio Salandra was not a member and did not play the part of a "staunch nationalist." Later merged with the postwar Fascist Party, Italy's Nationalists represented a destabilizing challenge to constitutional rule in Italy. The outbreak of world war in 1914, and Italy's entrance into war in 1915, added pressure to the realignment of political parties in Italy, and this undoubtedly contributed to America's fears of Italian instability. The party names and labels matter, and lumping them together confuses rather than clarifies. One would not refer indiscriminately to "democrats and republicans" in the United States, for example, and it does not make sense to reference Italian politics without referencing the established parties.

The article's conclusion is one of its most interesting contributions. Even though the ARC had intended to create permanent educational, housing, and cultural institutions for Italy, these collapsed after the war. Italians refused to take over and continue what the Americans had contemptuously created for them. President Woodrow Wilson's treatment of the Italian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, particularly his award of the city of Fiume to Yugoslavia, quickly unraveled all the supposed goodwill that the ARC imagined it had amassed. The radical implications of the ARC's long-term failure are not fully incorporated into the rest of the article, as in the earlier statement, "The desire for modern public health, as much as the desire for American consumer goods and democratic government, would uphold the expansion of America's informal empire after World War I." (430) This observation is more true after World War II, but the temporary teamwork evident during the Great War was followed by a deep fissure in U.S.-Italian relations following the disappointments of 1919.

This article's merits outweigh its faults, and more studies of this type should be encouraged. The difficulties of international history should not dissuade entry into the field. While less informative on Italy, this article reveals much about American cultural diplomacy and U.S. foreign relations. The historical lessons of imposing arrogance and resulting resentment stand out clearly here, and are a good example for comparisons with U.S. foreign policy in other eras.

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