

ITALIAN RED CROSS OPERATIONS DURING WORLD WAR I (THE “GRANDE GUERRA”)

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ABSTRACT

In this article we aim to resume briefly the role of Italian Red Cross during World War I.

We are deeply persuaded that the history of Red Cross is the Red Cross itself, with its characters, dates and facts that have characterized it^(1,2).

The topic will be dealt within seven paragraphs, according to the following order:

- 1) The Organization;*
- 2) Women's role;*
- 3) Collaborations;*
- 4) Military medicine behind the front line;*
- 5) The Red Cross and the camps for prisoners of war;*
- 6) Financing sources;*
- 7) Post-war assistance⁽³⁾.*

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The Organization

Everything started with the action of International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva, which ran from August 21st 1914 until the end of 1923, taking care of the correspondence of the military and civilian prisoners and of missing soldiers.

The Geneva agency opened files on about 7 million missing, and had to create *Bureaux* and *Committees* in several cities of the Confederation that worked to manage the relief and for news acquirement about military and civilians.

The ICRC agency began to operate in Rue de l'Athénée in Geneva, in a little and modest room, that was soon replaced by the Geneva Town Council -due to the impressive proportions of ever increasing work- with the 120 seats hall of the Rath museum.

This was not enough, and so they moved to the headquarters of General Council of Geneva, where over 1200 volunteers worked throughout the war and even later.

In Berne -the capital of the Confederation- the Committee was in 1, rue de l'Arbalète.

The best part of work was managing correspondence. Several offices with same duties were organized in all belligerent and neutral countries.

The first step of information research about soldiers, civilians, prisoners or missing persons always started either from the military unit to which they belong or from the civil number of the last address of the civilian wanted.

A file was opened for each person with precise alphanumeric references, and all the correspondence traveled “*franc de port*”.

Other Agencies: the Copenhagen Prisoner of War Agency was created in a neutral country and

was operational from July 1915 to October 1917. He took care of Russian prisoners in Germany, and German soldiers in Soviet prison camps.

In Copenhagen there was also a Committee of the Muscovite Red Cross, a guest of Denmark.

Sweden also disarmed unilaterally, and the Stockholm Agency was very active for thousands of refugees and missing persons. The agencies of Liège and Brussels collaborated closely with Geneva, making available some hospitals that were frequently visited by the Queen of Belgium, Elisabeth of Bavaria.

Italy: The ICRC created in December 1914 the Italian Commission, that started operating five months later assisting our soldiers. Our commission was urged by the ICRC, that was overworked, to make direct contacts with the Austrian Red Cross.

Austria accepted, and there was always collaboration between the two nations under the Red Cross flag.

The Commission tasks were the transmission of correspondence between families and prisoners, sending money and parcels, the management of relief, the exchange with foreign commissions of the lists of prisoners and the relics of the deceased ones.

Italian prisoners in the Germanic camps were allowed to receive money through the Italian Red Cross from the *Banca Commerciale* Italian Headquarters, with transfer to the Deutsche Bank of Berlin, passing through the neutral zone of the Swiss Italian Bank.

Pre-printed postcards were sent to the prisoners to allow them to communicate to families the arrival of the amount.

The same organization was adopted for food parcels, always passing from Switzerland and with a double postcard.

It was established the "bread service" for soldiers: it was possible to send a maximum of 2 kg of bread in each pack, including a small postcard with a little space for a few personal information.

No more than two bread packets per month could be sent via Italian Red Cross (IRC).

The delivery took place every 40 days and the family members paid a monthly subscription for this service.

The Prisoners of War Commission also took care of the redelivery of the collected relics.

They were delivered to the Mayors of the cities of residence of the families of the dead soldier.

The work of Red Cross Delegates nominated by the International Committee was fundamental.

They managed both in the belligerent and neutral countries every tasks we have spoken about: the typology of hospitals, the general organization, food and medical warehouses, restaurants at the railway stations, the correspondence and the repatriation of the injured and the sick soldiers.

On field the best amount of work was managed by the local Committees, directed by the respective central ones.

In Italy the general organization managing started from the Central Committee of Rome, passing to the regional Committees, then to the provincials and finally to the locals.

They supported also remarkably military health service in a real good way! It should be emphasized that all this service by Italian Red Cross took place without any postal deductible.

Women's role

After initial optimism, the participation of women at war with the replacement of men within the country led to their increasingly heavy involvement, but with great enthusiasm and dedication.

The greatest *substitution* took place in the services and in the internal production, while those of proletarian origins were widely present in agriculture and in the factories.

The aristocrats and the bourgeoisie women engaged in medical fields, several being nurses and some doctors and military doctors.

As Red Cross nurses, they invaded hospitals, then were engaged on the ships, on the hospital trains and at the railway assistance posts.

This presence concerned every belligerent country and the neutral ones.

Their activity also extended to kitchens, cloak-rooms and related organizations.

Starting from about a thousand, the Italian Red Cross nurses at the beginning of the war were already four thousand and at the end they had more than doubled.

Many of them were decorated with military valor, even with silver medals and more than thirty left their lives on the field of honor.

We have also to remember the English citizen Miss Edith Louisa Cavell English, who in 1907 directed the *Ecole d'Infermieres Diplômées* of Bruxelles.

The school was transformed into a hospital and assisted soldiers from all nations. She was blamed of espionage and arrested on 15 August 1915: despite of the involvement of all the "world" diplomacy was sentenced to death by the German court. On October 12th, 1915 she was shot near the *Tir National* shooting range in Brussels. In front of a weeping platoon of execution, her last words were "I cannot feel hatred and resentment towards anyone, I am happy to die for my country".

Collaborations

We have also to remember the role of a very noble and important institution, the Sovereign military Order of Malta (S.M.O.M.).

The S.M.O.M. operated with 8 relief posts, a field hospital, organized warehouses of medical materials behind the front line, a large territorial hospital in Rome and for hospital trains.

Rescue and refreshment stations were also set up at the railway stations of Rome, Bologna, Milan and Padua in collaboration with Red Cross volunteer nurses and Italian doctors. Ladies and knights had a gray-green uniform with a red cross armband and a maltese cross. The king at the end of the war decorated the banner of the S.M.O.M. with a war cross on military valor and a cross of merit war.

The Republic of San Marino: Since the beginning of the war the *Republic of the Titan*, thanks to the association "Pro Fratelli e Combattenti" (brothers and fighters) and together with the Local Committee of Red Cross, in November 1916 organized a war hospital, which began to work in the spring of 1917, assigned to the VII Army Corps.

The hospital was completely destroyed during the retreat of Caporetto: on November 5th 1917 San Marino decided to set up a second 130-bed war hospital with radiology, operating room and ambulance (this one was a gift of the American Red Cross). This structure was supported by the III Army: damaged by the Austrian artillery, was decommissioned on December 24th 1918.

The American Red Cross: The American Red Cross provides large quantities of medicines, several ambulances with nurses and drivers. The Rome department store supplies the Italian Central Committee, even with money (one million Lire was collected in America). The first Americans arrived in 1917, hired by the American Field Service (AFS), above all as drivers. They were young university students. A group of 200 members was con-

stituted and organized in five sections, Bassano del Grappa, Schio, Fanzolo, Roncade and Casale sul Sile. Each section had twenty ambulances (Ford model T or Fiat 15 Ter and 18BL) with 40 drivers. They served also in refreshment posts distributing chocolate (and so they were called "those of chocolate"). The nurses arrived during the spring of 1918, aiming to go to the front, and they were called "those of pity".

The British Red Cross: The first British Red Cross hospital in Italy was in Villa Trento in Dolegnano, that worked from the end of 1915. Thousands of volunteers enrolled in the VAD (voluntary aid detachment), and about six thousand English "ladies" spread everywhere in hospitals, places of comfort, relief etc.

Also the order of St. John of Jerusalem was activated in parallel with the British Red Cross. Hospital knights specialized in first aid wore armlets with white eight-pointed stars on a black background.

The French Red Cross and associated companies: Following the impulse of Henry Dunant, in 1864 the Duke of Montesquieu founded the SSBM (*Societ  Francaise de secours aux Bless  Militaires*). This company was approved by the ICRC. After 1870 the name was changed adding "*des arm es de terre e de mer*" and Volunteers were sent to the front for the Franco-Prussian war. During the First World War the committees in France were 400.

In 1879 the women, tired of being held in the background, broke off thanks to Dr. Duchaussoy, founding the Association de Dames Francaises (ADF) that the ICRC authorized to use the emblem with the red cross.

In 1881 there was another split, that led to the Union of Femmes de France (UFF), under the guidance of Madame de Koechlin, who became president in 1907.

In the same year the three associations created a single central committee, which maintained its original name until 1940, when it became the Croix Rouge Francaise. During the WWI several relief associations led by the CRF or independent were formed in France: they mainly took care of correspondence and of collection of food and clothing for prisoners of war.

Religious assistance: Even religious assistance did not fail in Italy: it had already been present in Libya with the militarized Capuchin friars (with the stars emblem of Italian Army), but General Cadorna

during WW I reconstituted the regimental military chaplains. The choice of the chaplains was made by the Military Bishop (*Vescovo Castrense*) Monsignor Bartolomasi⁽⁴⁾. The Chaplains were 2738: 1350 at the front line -the most famous were father Semeria and don Facibeni who were among the “12 apostles”, those with the highest religious and humanitarian value, 37 in the marine direction, 60 in the hospital trains and the others in the various hospitals⁽⁵⁾. When the intervention of Pope Benedict XV was clearly vain to avert the war, the Vatican activated assistance with Catholic organizations, including the “Opera dei Prigionieri di Guerra” (prisoners of war relief organization), that worked in synergy with the Italian Red Cross, and also for the soldiers at the front.

Military medicine behind the front lines

We have already spoken extensively about military medicine⁽⁶⁾; it should be added that the refreshment and rescue stations also functioned as post offices, and Italian Red Cross operated also with the Università Castrense (Field medicine University)⁽⁷⁾.

To lighten the work of health facilities, the wounded and sick soldiers were sorted into hospital ships and river boat ambulances. The first was the German transatlantic ‘Konig Albert’, seized in the port of Genoa and renamed ‘Ferdinando Palasciano’, with 1000 beds. Hospital Ships and Ambulance Ships (for the transport of the wounded) were often the target of enemy torpedoes, despite the new international protections of 1907 recognized by the Geneva Convention.

Around the Po river and the Lakes of Como and Maggiore there were several lagoon and river ambulances: they had the advantage of not clogging the roads and transporting the wounded without terrible jolts.

They had about 300 beds with 80 support staff. The treated and healed but convalescent soldiers were sent to the Divisional, Armed and Reserve Hospitals, or to the convalescent and war hospitals and Red Cross hospitals for disabled people. The local hospitals were about 220 with 30000 beds and 7320 volunteer nurses⁽⁸⁾. The territorial hospital No. 1 of Italian Red Cross was the one led by Queen Elena with headquarters at the Quirinale.

At the beginning it was used for every kind of wounded, then essentially for the assistance to the maimed and psychiatric rehabilitation. The Queens

Elena and Margherita also transformed Villa Margherita into a hospital, and studied various ways of subsidizing Red Cross with photographs, calendars and various types of postcards. Queen Elena was the first *Crocerossina* of Italy.

The Red Cross and the camps for prisoners of war

The majority of our soldiers were locked up in Mauthausen near Enns, while unreliable civilians were locked up in Katzenau near Linz. Another civil and military mixed camp was Sigmundsherberg, only for Italians, at the gates of Vas.

The Italian command set up 83 prison camps where 10,000 soldiers from the central empires and 5,000 Italian deserters stayed. Public buildings such as schools and barracks and the Asinara island were used.

Before being distributed to the families, our prisoners letters were subjected to a censorship on enemy soil, then went to the ICRC that then sent it to the Italian Red Cross, where was cleared by Italian censors (80 employees of the I.R.C.), and finally was placed in regular Italian mail .

The Italian Command was always opposed to the assistance to prisoners of war, considering them to be cowards or traitors who had not wanted to fight. It was only the Italian Red Cross together with the families that limited the suffering and the deaths⁽⁹⁾.

Financing sources

All the bourgeois and aristocratic ladies “invented” various forms of financing, from postcards to calendars and so on. Also important was the collection of paper and archive waste that were sold to national paper mills. Clothing was also sold to be sent to the front. The Red Cross Ladies organized dances, concerts, charity evenings, performances and exhibitions. Even the lotteries were important and the letterboxes replaced the waxen. Famous the 5 cents Erinnofili closures (from the German *Erinnerungsmarken* = souvenir stamps) that recalled the terrible bombing of Naples by the German Zeppelin L59, which launched several tons of bombs from 3600 meters high against the railway and the Ilva metallurgical plant in Bagnoli, causing 16 dead and 35 injured (March 11th 1918).

Post-war assistance

The consequences of the war were terrible: 643,000 mutilated and large disabled filled during years nursing homes and hospitals for maimed, mainly managed by the Italian Red Cross. The assistance involved also the populations refugees from war zones. The main task of I.R.C. was to help the refugees in their return home operations.

Even the missing research work, always by I.R.C., lasted for long after the end of the war. Special attention with celebrations concerned the return from the front of our victorious soldiers.

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