

Public History Meets Humanitarian Communication: The Visual Politics and Narratives of Red Cross Museums in Europe and the United States, 1920s to 2010s

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Abstract

Interpreting Red Cross museums as a visual medium, this essay explores the visual politics of Red Cross museums through the twentieth century. The essay puts particular emphasis on the entanglements between the visual politics and humanitarian narratives of Red Cross museums and identifies three major narratives that museums promoted through the times: a heroic narrative, a narrative of civility, and a volunteer's narrative. Last, the essay argues that Red Cross museums may offer a fruitful field to encourage more engagement between (public) historians and humanitarian practitioners.

Keywords: Red Cross museums; visual media; historical communication; humanitarian narratives; public history

Introduction

This essay discusses Red Cross museums as a medium of humanitarian communication. A long-neglected theme in public history and the historiography of humanitarianism, Red Cross museums today are vital agents in the movement's work to communicate the values, missions, and historical achievements of Red Cross societies around the world. Local publics find those museums in the United States, the UK, or Germany – which has more than a dozen Red Cross museums – but also in Russia, Thailand, Italy, and Geneva, Switzerland, home to the much-debated International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum. My goal is, first, to sketch out the long history of those institutions: Where do they come from? What motivations stood behind them? Which historical contexts shaped them? How did those museums communicate Red Cross history towards the general public? Second, this essay argues for a critical dialogue between public historians and humanitarian practitioners. Public history has extended into a burgeoning research field over recent years and examines the ways and means by

which history is and was used and represented to a general public (see Ashton and Trapeznik, 2019; Cauvin, 2016; Dean, 2018; Gardner and Hamilton, 2017; Lücke and Zündorf, 2018). Yet there seems to be little exchange between public historians and the humanitarian sector. Building on recent efforts to improve and deepen collaborations between professional historians and humanitarian institutions (see Borton, 2016; O'Sullivan and Chéilleachair, 2019; Taithe and Borton, 2016), this essay seeks to explore how public historians and their work may enrich and contribute to extending the uses of history among humanitarian practitioners.

In what follows, I depart from the assumption that Red Cross museums, like other humanitarian media, are about seeing. Two particular qualities, however, make them distinct from other visual media: the one is their capability to create three-dimensional visual experiences by arranging films, photos, text panels, and other aesthetic objects across a museum space. The other is their ability to shape multisensory narratives that connect various media with each other. A look at the history of Red Cross museums therefore opens a

promising window on the ways in which those institutions have evolved into important narrative agents of the movement.

Taking a particular interest in the entanglements between visual display and narrative, the following sections argue that Red Cross museums have shaped, changed, and formulated their own humanitarian narratives throughout the twentieth century. The first section starts out by first describing the origins of the institution of Red Cross museums, with a particular focus on the museum of the American Red Cross in Washington DC and the International Red Cross Museum in Castiglione, Italy. The second section explores the history of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva, showing how it resolved challenges and limits of historical representation that the museum in Castiglione could not work around. The third section briefly maps out the 1980s and 1990s museum boom within the German Red Cross movement, before the final section, calling for more cooperation between public historians and practitioners, spells out some of the potentials such cooperation may involve.

The Heroic Narrative: 'Doing History' in the First Red Cross Museums in Washington DC and Castiglione, Italy

Even though most Red Cross museums were founded after 1945, the idea of the Red Cross museum is almost as old as the movement itself. It was first raised at the 1867 International Conference of Societies for the Relief of the War Wounded, taking place in Paris, where it was introduced by a subgroup of the International Committee. Concerns about funding mechanisms and the political ownership of the museum soon derailed the proposal, however, and efforts to revive the issue at conferences in Berlin (1869) and Karlsruhe (1887) failed (Hutchinson, 1996: 82–6; Käser, 2014: 28). By this time, most national Red Cross societies preferred to organize smaller public exhibits that illustrated the newest advances in medical equipment and technology. Some of these displays were sent to world expositions in Vienna (1873), Paris (1878), and Brussels (1897) (Hutchinson, 1996: 165f).

A full Red Cross museum was only realized by the end of World War I – in the United States. Many American Red Cross volunteers had collected significant symbolic gifts during their work in Europe. At the same time, American Red Cross president Henry Davison, teaming up with Broadway actress Eleanor Robson Belmont, looked for a place 'to show the world what had been done by the Red Cross' (Rainey, 1926). In late 1918, Davison set aside a few museum rooms within the new Red Cross

Memorial Building and recruited Red Cross worker Irene Givenwilson as a curator.

Givenwilson gave much thought to concepts of presentation and visual display. In her own view the museum was less a place of health instruction, but a way 'to memorialize the millions of Red Cross workers; to keep a record of work that had been done in this country and in Europe and in Siberia, and to give the public an opportunity of learning the ideals of service of the Red Cross through visualization' (Brigham, 1922). The museum, in other words, was there to showcase stories and examples of Red Cross idealism and heroism; it was not there to provide a critical rethinking of Red Cross work.

The museum's centerpiece were miniature group models that provided idealized allegories of Red Cross work and illustrated key moments in its history. The most notable of these was titled *The Greatest Mother in the World* and showed a mother protecting her two children, girl and boy, within her arms. Other miniature theatres emphasized action scenes. A miniature model titled *The Rolling Kitchen* showed Red Cross workers and their horses straining to move a kitchen carriage across rocky grounds. Another one showcased American Red Cross relief in response to the 1923 Tokyo earthquake. The background, a painted canvas, showed a panorama of the destroyed city while in the foreground the drama of relief was illustrated through a three-dimensional model of the hospitals put up to help the wounded. Reflecting the state of the art in the museum world, the exhibit worked with electrical lights to stage and dramatize objects and used stained glass windows designed by Louis Tiffany of New York. In addition, the museum also impressed through large, portentous paintings, including *The Spirit of the Red Cross* and *The Madonna of the Battlefield*, a large canvas showing the heroism of Red Cross workers on the battlefield. Collections of portrait masks, a Red Cross flag consecrated on the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem, and new acquisitions such as the legendary doll 'Rose Percy' rounded off the museum's exhibit (see Brigham, 1924; Givenwilson-Kilner, 1927; *Washington Post*, 1920).

Professional museum critics frequently registered their enthusiasm for the museum's exhibits. As one critic put it, Givenwilson had made the museum a 'thing of wonder' and told 'a story that is most effective because it appeals to the heart throughout the story-telling picture' (Rainey, 1926). The National Association of American Museums, admitting the museum in 1923, praised it as an 'important link in museum work, because it represented the practical bond between the public and the art exhibition' (Brigham, 1924). Tourists and locals seemed to have a similar impression, driving annual visitor numbers up to something between 70,000 and 80,000 visitors by the year 1923 (Brigham, 1924).

The success of the museum also inspired further museum plans elsewhere. In 1921, the Woman's National Missionary Association of the Universalist Church acquired Clara Barton's North Oxford, Massachusetts, homestead and re-modeled it into the Clara Barton Birthplace Museum (*Washington Post*, 1921). Outside of the United States, too, the idea of a historical Red Cross museum found some followers. In Europe, an individual collector from Salzburg, Austria, curated a museum dedicated to humanitarian rescue missions, in 1929, and in Japan, a Red Cross museum opened its doors some years later. Unlike their American role model, both museums had only a marginal impact, however. The Japanese museum opened only temporarily for the time of the 15th International Conference of the Red Cross, hosted by the Japanese Red Cross in Tokyo, in 1934. The Salzburg museum was destroyed when a bombing raid hit the city in 1944.

On the European museum scene, ideas for a Red Cross museum only resurfaced by the late 1950s. Prompted by the centenary of the Battle of Solferino, Red Cross chapters and individual citizens organized commemorative festivities across many European cities, including the city of Heiden, Switzerland, where citizens commissioned a monument to Henry Dunant.¹ In Castiglione, Italy, meanwhile, local dignitaries revived the idea for a museum to commemorate Dunant's relief activities within the city's streets a hundred years before. Castiglione's International Red Cross Museum opened in June 1959 and established itself as the central Red Cross museum in Europe through the 1960s and 1970s.

The museum's approach to display and exhibiting was sober and straightforward, centering for the most part on a textual presentation. As an early visitor of the museum reported: showcases in Room 1 were packed with examples of works published by Dunant, excerpts of his unpublished works, and 'reproductions of the documents' exchanged around the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize; Room 2 featured more showcases 'containing originals or photocopies of documents connected with the foundation of the Red Cross'; Room 3 contained further 'reproductions of texts' which recalled 'the foundation of the Red Cross and give evidence of the events which preceded and followed the signature', while Room 4, on the first floor, showed documents which testified to the relief efforts of the local citizens of Castiglione some hundred years ago. To be sure, the visitor also registered a painting, two sculptures, a handful of portraits, and two wood panels about the Battle of Solferino in between, but then in Room 5 once again found 'photocopies of still more letters and extracts', this time from the ICRC archives (Lossier, 1962). What the museum did not show were

the more controversial aspects of early Red Cross history: the movement's entanglements with the militant nationalisms of the time, its auxiliary role in making mass warfare acceptable, the bitter infighting within the International Committee.

Further adding to the museum's troubles, by the late 1960s visitors increasingly voiced concerns about the museum's approach to display. As an unnamed author noted in the *International Review of the Red Cross*, even though 'a fairly numerous public' had visited the museum since its founding, it had now 'sunk into semi-oblivion', since it was 'not pretentious enough to call to itself the attention it deserves'. Officials at the Italian Red Cross, the city of Castiglione, the Henry Dunant Institute, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), too, sensed a need for renewal. Joining forces in a new management committee, in 1970 the group commissioned a relaunch to remake the museum into 'a source to which a pilgrimage is well worthwhile' (*International Review*, 1970).

The committee's approach put visuals and multi-sensory presentations back at the center. A temporary exhibit on 'Natural Disasters and the Red Cross', opened in 1972, featured a large sample of 'photographs, graphic designs and texts, with sound effects and examples of equipment for disaster detection and relief' (*International Review*, 1971). Other exhibits staged in the following years followed a similar pattern. An exhibit on the worldwide activities of the Red Cross, opened in 1976, for example featured large panels with pictures, photos, and posters. The same year, the museum also set-up its own photo laboratory and, under its curator Ezio Mutti, remade some of its rooms and the courtyard to improve its presentation of historical objects like the stretchers that were used in carrying wounded soldiers from Solferino to Castiglione (*International Review*, 1976).

The Civility Narrative: Visual Storytelling in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva

Both the relaunch of the museum in Castiglione as well as the international cast of institutions involved in it suggest that by the 1970s, Red Cross institutions had begun to recognize the value of museums in reaching European publics. At the same time, the museum's lack of success in the late 1960s also raised critical questions: What was an appropriate and timely way of representing the history of the Red Cross to a European and international audience? How could the movement professionalize its approach to exhibiting its history? Who was to shape the ways in which such history was being told? And could a small museum in Castiglione be

the right place to convey the historical significance and global importance of the Red Cross movement?

The opening of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva, first pitched as an idea in 1976 and then realized in 1988, showed that, over time, officials at ICRC headquarters drew their own conclusions on those points. As Laurent Marti, the founder and first director of the museum put it in 1981, the new museum responded to a 'need' that had 'long been felt' within the movement and would contribute to renewing the movement's sense of global purpose: Where did it come from, historically? Was 'it still credible today?' Would it 'be tomorrow?' (Marti, 1981: 194).

Planned to house 250 000 visitors a year, the museum marked a spectacular departure from former museum practice. In Marti's words, it was not meant to serve as a 'temple of self-satisfaction' or 'to glorify the Movement', but had to be seen as 'a tool'. It was there to 'arouse enthusiasm in visitors, particularly the young' and was intended to work as a 'tool for motivation' for 'volunteers and delegates'. It also provided Red Cross organizations 'with an exceptional opportunity to become known' and would 'stimulate contributions'. This way, Marti stressed, the institution of the museum worked as a crucial 'instrument favouring motivation, dissemination and fund-raising' (Meurant, 1988: 454).

Marti's ideal was the modern, interactive, engaging media museum. The exhibit's approach, he told editor Jacques Meurant, was to work through audiovisual shows, historical film footage, and 'sophisticated' visual technology to project a message of 'tolerance' and the 'humanitarian impulse'. Viewers should get to see 'striking images of Red Cross activities' throughout the times. He was confident that visitors would not have a single 'dull moment' as they passed through the rooms and stories the museum provided (Meurant, 1988: 454f).

How those stories unfolded had been carefully scripted by Marti and the team of architects around Pierre Zoelly, Georges Haefeli, and Michel Girardet. Approaching the museum from Avenue de la Paix, visitors first had to walk through a trench cut into the hillside and then entered a courtyard where they passed a group of sculptures, blindfolded, with their arms tied up behind their backs. A work of Swiss sculptor Carl Bucher, the sculpture invoked notions of violence and helplessness, and set the stage for an emotionalizing museum exhibit that many observers described as a 'milestone in the history of museology' (Dabbs, 1990: L14). The exhibit itself, organized along a 'Wall of Time', used state of the art technology to create an immersive aesthetic experience. Life-size photographs and documents printed on fabric were arranged in labyrinths that visitors had to walk through. An audiovisual panorama presentation told the story of the Battle of Solferino and,

through visual effects, made the ghost of Dunant wander through the museum's space. Once the presentation was over, the screen parted and opened a view of a sculpture of Dunant writing 'A Memory of Solferino'. In another area the display showcased a six million card-index compiled by the International Prisoners of War Agency (IPWA). There was also a 20-screen video wall that transmitted satellite pictures of current Red Cross work around the world, while slide presentations and computer terminals invited visitors to learn more about the work and history of their national Red Cross societies (see Dabbs, 1990; Hills, 1989).

While the original permanent exhibit still centered much on the mythology of Dunant, its 2013 relaunch reshaped the presentation into a much broader narrative of what John Pinder, borrowing from Etienne Balibar, has described as 'humanitarian civility' (Pinder, 2018). The Dunant sculpture is still there, but the new scenography developed by architects Gringo Cardia, Diébédo Francis Kéré, and Shigeru Ban now puts its main emphasis on showing how the Red Cross movement has worked against, eased, or prevented forms of violence and displacement throughout the last two centuries. Visitors can activate life-size holograms of disaster witnesses by touching their hands and then get to hear their life stories of struggle and survival. In other parts, the tour leads through a curtain of steel chains to create experiences of separation. Within the section on 'Reducing Natural Risks', an interactive game simulation of a hurricane invites visitors to chart out their own strategies of disaster risk reduction.

Significantly, the three main sections on 'Defending Human Dignity', 'Restoring Family Links' and 'Reducing Natural Risks' do not put forward simple success or hero narratives. They stress the ambivalences, struggles, and failures coming along with humanitarian work. The museum, as John Pinder has put it, therewith offers a space 'in which extreme violence is historicized for the purposes of pedagogy and critical reflection', prompting visitors to 'envisage more "civil" alternatives to the cruelties that mark our past and present' (Pinder, 2018: 484f).

Similar to museums in Washington DC and Castiglione, however, Geneva's Red Cross museum – both in its original permanent exhibit and after the relaunch – also has its blind spots and problems. The ICRC's long silence on the Holocaust, subject of a controversial debate between the mid 1990s and 2000s, still only gets mention in a comparatively small section, even if it has now been somewhat extended (Favez, 1999). There is also a striking tension within the museum's use of imagery. In the section on 'Defending Human Dignity' iconic atrocity photographs are projected onto the giant sculpture of a foot, used here for an aesthetic effect that generates its own kind of a 'pornography of pain' (Halttunen, 1995). In terms of historical narrative, the

emphasis on immersive scenography creates the problem that the new exhibit now draws less focused attention to history as such. One learns much on the usual key dates of the movement, but gets comparatively little historical information on Red Cross campaigns and actions over the past decades. Nor does the museum address critical historical themes such as White saviorism, racism, or paternalism that have shaped and challenged Red Cross work from colonial times to today. As a disappointed visitor noted on TripAdvisor, ‘the exhibition is incredibly light on content, happy to prioritise visual video gimmicks rather than the real history. ... We were hoping to learn more about the history and activities of the Red Cross as an organization, and got none of that’ (MikeandHannah, 2017).

The Volunteer’s Narrative: The 1980s ‘Museum Boom’ within the German Red Cross Movement and Its Aftermath

Given the scale of investments it has attracted, its ambition for international leadership, its popularity, and the professional state-of-the-art museology behind it, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva stands out today as the principal center of historical communication and learning within the humanitarian sector. But this should not blind out the fact that there’s a lively museum scene beyond Geneva which has grown steadily over the last thirty, forty years. In the UK, the British Red Cross showed a small exhibit at its headquarters, then in Surrey, already some time before the Geneva museum opened, and hired a professional archivist by the mid 1980s. A few years later, it added a professional curator to the team, and, over time, developed a new public exhibit that it opened after headquarters had moved to Grosvenor Crescent in 2000. Today, it organizes alternating temporary exhibits that point to key moments in British Red Cross history or illuminate special aspects like the Black British experience within the movement.

In (West) Germany, meanwhile, collectors in Pinneberg and Geislingen started out with showing small displays as early as the 1960s. In 1979, a traveling exhibit on Red Cross history opened in Bad Bevensen and then began to tour the country. Four years later, a permanent museum opened in Nurnberg, followed by further museums in Geislingen (1987), Berlin (1990), Essen (1990), and many other places. Today, the Association of the German Red Cross Museums counts over a dozen such museums across Germany (see [Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 2020](#) and [Schlösser, 2016](#) for short overviews of German Red Cross museums).

Four historical contexts shaped the founding of those new institutions: the rise of corporate museums; the

changing nature of museums across Europe’s cultural landscape; the ‘history boom’ of the 1980s; and the local history movement. Corporate museums were not a new thing by the time Red Cross museums opened in Geneva, the UK, and Germany, but they had seen a remarkable upswing since the 1960s and demonstrated that museums could be a useful tool of public outreach for organizations ([Danilov, 1992: 5–10](#)). Changing understandings of museum work and its place in society fed further into such processes of rethinking. Long the embodiment of elite institutions, by the 1970s, US and European museums opened up to broader segments of society, stressed accessibility and the importance of social learning as new principles, professionalized their staff by hiring designers and PR experts, and started to see a record growth in visitor numbers that recast them as influential and popular institutions. The 1980s ‘history boom’, meanwhile, not only promoted a rising output of history films, novels, exhibits, and TV shows, but also created a new popular demand for historical information and narrative. Last, museum pioneers within the Red Cross movement were also emboldened by the local history workshop movement that promoted a return to local history and empowered ordinary citizens to do their own history work.

German Red Cross museums differed from the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva. Unlike the Geneva museum, they were not embedded within a systematic communication strategy. Nor were they run by professional staff. The typical Red Cross museum in Germany was set up and directed by a former Red Cross worker who had started to collect all sorts of objects some years ago, and then, with support by local Red Cross chapters, turned his collections into a museum. Many German Red Cross museums therefore resembled what Angela Jannelli has called ‘wild museums’ ([Jannelli, 2012](#); [Thiemeyer, 2018: 95](#)): They were stuffed with a dizzying wealth of objects, ranging from coins to medical equipment, often presented along pragmatic lines and without regard for newer museum concepts or a contextualizing storyline. Some museums also presented typical sceneries of Red Cross work, for example by showing the life-size doll of a Red Cross nurse in action at a patient’s bed. Others included poster collections or TV screens that showed documentary film footage. In Geislingen, the exhibit also featured computers and a cinema tent, but that was an exception. Given the low budget of most German Red Cross museums, presentations were usually organized around historical objects, not by way of immersive multimedia environments.

The visual politics of German Red Cross museums open an important window on a third variant of humanitarian narratives – the local stories of Red Cross volunteerism.

German Red Cross museums of the 1980s and 1990s were for the most part neighborhood museums: they catered to local audiences and therefore presented objects that related to local experiences. In Nuremberg, for example, the exhibit's main focus was the public display of historical Red Cross ambulances that had been in use around town. In Berlin, collection highlights included historical plastic bags used by the West Berlin Red Cross to collect old clothes. Visitors could also book museum staff for special events where they would turn up in historical Red Cross dresses. Many museums showcased the individual life stories of local Red Cross volunteers or provided a window on grass-roots action, ranging from the local history of Red Cross work on the World War I home front to more contemporary episodes like Red Cross responses to accidents on the local autobahn.

Invoking the values of social commitment and grass-roots activism, the volunteer's narrative of German Red Cross museums served to motivate and mobilize locals by showing the practical humanitarian contributions of local Red Cross chapters. But here as well the narrative often came along with blinders and problems. German Red Cross museums said little about the interconnections between Red Cross activism and German colonialism or the complicities between the Red Cross and Germany's Nazi regime. Nor did they pay much attention to the international work of the German Red Cross from the 1950s onwards. On the whole, themes such as the cross-cultural interactions and troubles of Red Cross workers or the voices and experiences of refugees and other suffering communities within the 'global South' rarely found their way into these institutions.

More recently, however, some museums have started to embed their storytelling in broader international contexts. In Luckenwalde, for example, the museum tour starts off in a room that draws attention to the internationalism of the Red Cross movement. Similarly, the new Red Cross museum in Vogelsang, opened in 2011 and one of the biggest in Europe, offers an international 'journey through the adventure of humanity'² that connects the local and national story of the German Red Cross with the international history of the movement and its principles. The museum now also features a 'Red Cross Humanity Trail' that sends visitors out to enact and recreate the flight experiences of refugees. Like the museum in Luckenwalde, however, the Red Cross museum in Vogelsang has also retained a strong focus on the local and regional history of the Red Cross in the Rhineland, told in a separate exhibit in the 'Haus Nordrhein'.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the work of Red Cross museums may offer a fruitful field to facilitate more

exchange between public historians and humanitarian practitioners. Red Cross museums, this essay has attempted to show, are a key venue for the production of historical narratives that communicate the meanings and purposes of the movement by showcasing shifting narratives of heroism, civility, and local volunteerism. Public historians and their research may provide practitioners with a more thorough understanding of the workings of those narratives, inviting their critical reflection and helping to build more sensibility towards the framings they use, the ethics of representation they involve, and the silences they may produce. Museum practitioners, meanwhile, may wish to draw on the historical expertise and research skills that public historians offer them in researching, handling, and presenting meaningful historical materials, particularly where museums are running on a low budget. On a more conceptual level, they may also see value in the theoretical and methodological input public historians may provide them on modes of visual presentation or newer paradigms such as inclusion and cultural participation (see [Lücke and Zündorf, 2018](#)).

A public history lens, this essay suggests, also shows that, historically, Red Cross museums had their troubles to address the blind spots of humanitarian practice, including the themes of colonialism, race, power, cross-cultural paternalism, or the Holocaust. Public historians may help to identify and address such blind spots: How could Red Cross museums contribute to making visitors aware of the historical ambivalences and dilemmas of humanitarian work to inform a more reflected and self-critical view of humanitarian practice? How could they build the findings and insights of a critical scholarship into their historic presentations? What alternative stories could they tell about the movement? Historical thinking, Bertrand Taithe and John Borton have noted, often challenges the 'memorial practices or established narratives' ([Taithe and Borton, 2016](#): 219) of humanitarian institutions, but those challenges must not necessarily come at the cost of humanitarian institutions. They may also pave the way for a reflected, critical use of the past that enables those institutions to harness the one resource they depend on – the trust of an educated public.

Notes

- 1 The monument was unveiled in 1962. Seven years later there also opened a Dunant museum in Heiden.
- 2 Quoted on the welcome panel of the exhibit.

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