James Crossland. 2018. *War, Law and Humanity: The Campaign to Control Warfare, 1853–1914*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Pp. xx + 256. £85.00 Hardback £91.80 E-book, ISBN 9781350041219.

Faced with the horrors of war, scholars tell us, reformers have two choices: to make conflict less bloody, or to make it less frequent. Advocates of the first approach see war as a tragic yet unavoidable part of the human condition. They aim to convince belligerents to limit the types of weapons they use and the kinds of people they target. Advocates of the second group see war as unnatural, a horrid and retrograde practice. Through some combination of moralistic sermonizing, the promotion of democratic foreign policies, and the creation of legal mechanisms of dispute resolution they have sought to abolish war altogether.

In his engrossing narrative, *War, Law and Humanity*, James Crossland shows that the divisions between the “humanitarians” and the “peace-seekers” (as he terms the two groups in question) were not so great after all. Examining their “intertwined stories” between the Crimean War and World War I, he contends that a motley group of men and women succeeded in putting the prevention of war and the bracketing of its impacts on the world’s agenda. While these goals remain mostly unfulfilled, their emergence is a story worth telling.

The bulk of this book covers the years 1853 to 1880 and focuses on the humanitarians. As such it constitutes a revisionist account of the origins of the Red Cross. The traditional origin story emphasizes individual voluntarism and quasi-spiritual idealism in focusing on the Swiss Henry Dunant, who founded the Red Cross after stumbling on the bloody aftermath of the 1859 Battle of Solferino. Appalled by the lack of any organized medical service for the wounded, Dunant and four other Swiss reformers organized the 1864 Geneva Convention that provided for the neutrality of medical workers and the treatment of the wounded. As Crossland explains: “After the signing of this epoch-making document, so the story goes, there began a new era of international humanitarianism” (63).

In fact, Crossland shows, humanitarianism emerged from the confluence of modern warfare and mass politics. William Howard Russell, an early war correspondent who followed the British army during the Crimean War, made the horrible treatment of wounded troops a national scandal, thereby forcing London to accept aid from civilian volunteers led by Florence Nightingale. Meanwhile across the Atlantic, the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC) established a model of voluntary humanitarian assistance during the Civil War. Crossland expertly chronicles how humanitarian reformers in Europe, America, and even Japan learned from and occasionally emulated each other.

Relying on meticulous archival research in multiple countries, Crossland portrays storied humanitarians in an often-unflattering light. Nightingale was ignorant of modern germ theory and an unfair critic of other women volunteers; a “battlefield-hungry” Clara Barton basked in adulation from her patients (112). Multiple pages – too many, perhaps – detail the turf battles between competing groups as each grasped for influence, resources, and fame. The USSC, he notes, set up offices in London and Paris, while Red Cross leaders actively dissuaded subsequent peace conferences from taking up humanitarian concerns that might supersede the Geneva Convention. Humanitarians these men and women were, but saints they were not.

Crossland also questions the humanitarians’ achievements and highlights their organizations’ growing pains. During the Franco-Prussian war so many people donned Red Cross insignia that belligerents ignored its supposed protection of neutrality, arresting volunteers and occasionally executing them as spies. Even when many governments embraced the Red Cross toward the end of the century they did so because they thought it would help their militaries: healed soldiers could return to the front. Dunant aside, many humanitarians embraced the institutionalization of the Red Cross. As far back as Nightingale, they had argued that humanitarian work should not be performed by unaffiliated volunteers, but should be integrated into the apparatus of the modern state. Were the humanitarians simply apologists for war?

Enter the “peace-seekers.” Appalled by the Franco-Prussian War and impressed by Britain and America’s successful 1872 arbitration of a dispute stemming from the US Civil War, a group of lawyers and pacifists embraced arbitration as a substitute for war. By developing international law and forming international courts, nations could settle their disputes without violence. Some activists embraced this new agenda while continuing to support humanitarianism, including Gustave Moynier, who continued to head the international Red Cross while also serving actively in the Institute of International Law; Bertha von Suttner whose anti-war writings won her the 1905 Nobel Peace Prize; and Frederic Passy, who founded the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 1889. Yet the peace-seekers too were fractious. For every von Suttner there was a Francis Lieber, whose legal code forbid some military practices while providing loopholes authorizing others. Arbitration meant different things to different people. In any case, actual accomplishments were slight: two Hague Conferences that produced useful rhetoric and a thin model of an international court. Combined with the horrific violence of WWI this seems a rather dispiriting conclusion.

Yet Crossland ends on a surprisingly upbeat note. He points out that the aftermath of WWI in some ways boosted the fortunes of the antiwar movement.

Though their grand plans “[fell] short of their desires,” they had ensured that “voluntary humanitarianism, compassion for victims and the need for limitations in war were notions that survived the First World War” (197).

While Crossland explores the limited ability of his subjects to constrain war, he has less to say about how the broader discourses they advanced might have played a role in expanding violence. Campaigns in the name of humanity can devolve into endless bloodshed when they reject the notion of an honorable enemy and cast opponents as outlaws and barbarians. If Crossland’s admirably transnational research had engaged more with colonial contexts he might also have illuminated more clearly how the rise of the rhetoric of “civilization” could be turned on its head to support imperial conquests – campaigns that many international lawyers supported at the time.

These quibbles aside, Crossland has written a deeply researched, carefully argued, and engaging book, worthy reading for anyone who wants a better understanding of how a determined group of individuals changed how the world thinks about war.

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To listen to an interview with the author of *War, Law and Humanity*, see DOI 10.6084/m9.figshare.10302047