

*The Red Cross's Public Health Turn:  
The Cannes Medical Conference of 1919  
and the Origins of the League of Red Cross Societies*

Romain Fathi  
(London: Anthem Press, 2025)  
[ISBN 9781839994340]

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In the opening pages, the author, Romain Fathi, cautions readers that this ‘small book’ forms part of a larger research project still in progress. Readers should therefore bear in mind the deliberately suggestive character of the work whenever ideas, arguments, or assertions appear without extended elaboration. At 76 pages, including footnotes, and composed of five chapters plus an introduction and conclusion, the book is a slim and accessible volume that traces the birth of the League of Red Cross Societies at the Cannes Medical Conference. The author aligns himself with existing scholarship in arguing that the League represented a decisive ‘public health turn’ in the Red Cross world, and he presents his principal contribution as foregrounding the Cannes Medical Conference of April 1–11, 1919, as the League’s true birthplace.

The central argument is that the Red Cross’s public health turn in 1919 was historically inevitable, given the devastation of the First World War, the global postwar health emergency, and the fact that several national Red Cross societies had already engaged with public health issues prior to the war. At the same time, the book asks whether this shift was a natural evolution within the Red Cross movement or an American-led initiative. Initially, it is not entirely clear why these possibilities must be treated as mutually exclusive. Fathi resolves this tension by emphasising the remarkable speed and concentrated leadership with which the Cannes Medical Conference was convened and the League inaugurated. He persuasively argues that the League of Red Cross Societies marked an evolution rather than a revolution within the movement, even as it reflected an American-led vision—initiated by Woodrow Wilson and negotiated, organized, envisioned, and implemented by the American banker Henry Pomeroy Davison.

By centring the Cannes Medical Conference, the book necessarily adopts a ‘Great Man’ approach to history, positioning Henry Pomeroy Davison as the principal architect behind the League’s organisation, negotiation, and creation. Following what the author

describes as a ‘tectonic shift’ beneath the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, and after the tensions, scepticism, and negotiations between ICRC members and Davison in February, the narrative offers little discussion of disagreement or strained dynamics among the conference delegates themselves. Indeed, Fathi notes—somewhat surprisingly—that the delegates shared Davison’s enthusiasm and that there was ‘virtually no disagreement among them’. He attributes this harmony to Davison’s unilateral tactics: excluding politicians, carefully selecting delegates, imposing his organisational vision, and limiting their role to the provision of medical expertise aimed at drafting ‘...written measures that would provide scientifically approved actionable items to the yet-to-be-established League of Red Cross Societies’. One hopes that the larger project will create more space to explore intra-conference dynamics and adopt a more critical approach to the delegates’ profiles and positions.

The book draws on rich archival material, particularly from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). While it does not present a sustained critique of the imperialist underpinnings of the League of Red Cross Societies, it leaves little doubt that the League’s establishment signalled the emergence of the United States as a new global superpower. Throughout, the author situates the funding, organisation, and broader context of the Cannes Medical Conference within a world shaped by ‘large, powerful, imperialist economic powerhouses’. The volume would make an excellent assignment for students studying the history of international humanitarian organisations.