

# ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES: A 2018 INTERDISCIPLINARY OBSERVANCE IN SOLFERINO, ITALY

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## ABSTRACT

When I attended the annual memorial in 2018, 159 years had passed since the 1859 Battle of Solferino in a small town (“paese”) of the province Mantua in the northern region of Lombardy. Solferino is so small that Italians from elsewhere in the country

will not recognize the name unless you mention the Battaglia (di Solferino), the last engagement of the Second Italian War of Independence. 300,000 soldiers—deployed from the Austrian Empire, the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Kingdom of Hungary, and the Second French Empire—clashed on June 24th, leaving many nations’ blood on

the Italian hills. With 6,000 soldiers dead and another 40,000 wounded, little did the rulers of that time know the devastating bloodshed at Solferino would inspire one of the largest humanitarian aid programs in the world and bring the once-battling nations harmoniously together (ICRC, 1998). Henry Dunant was struck by the plight of Solferino veterans and in 1859 founded the Red Cross to provide for victims' families and bring nations together in both war and peace. A century and a half later, over 10,000 volunteers from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), representing seventy-six nations, gathered in Solferino to memorialize the battle and celebrate Dunant's recognitions. The importance of anthropology represented here is commemorated by the annual unification of nations from all over the world in a common purpose deeply supported by the history of Solferino. Dunant's impact on Solferino has not only brought cultural awareness to the town but has also brought many nations together in universal humanitarianism through his memoir *A Memory of Solferino*.

## KEYWORDS

*Anthropology, commemoration, IFRC, Solferino.*



## THE HISTORY OF SOLFERINO

The story of how the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) came into existence begins with a chance meeting shortly after the Battle of Solferino. In 1859, Swiss businessman Henry Dunant encountered his first eyewitness to the death and destruction at Solferino. This witness' testimony could have been waived off as just another account of great loss, but Dunant - shocked by the magnitude of suffering caused by what had been one of the bloodiest battles of the age - made it his priority to urgently speak with French Emperor Napoleon III about the need for wartime medical supplies to help these men. However, the French Emperor was preoccupied with helping the Italians push out the Austrians. So, Dunant proceeded without the Emperor, helping wounded soldiers wherever needed with his own time and money. Shortly after publishing his 1862 memoir, *A Memory of Solferino*, Dunant helped establish the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded in 1863, which has since been renamed the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (ICRC, 2016). Dunant's efforts were acknowledged with a Nobel Peace Prize in 1901. The annual commemoration of Dunant's idea brings thousands together to memorialize the Battle of Solferino. These commemorations (hosted by the ICRC) have gained in popularity since May 1992 and are often referred to as *Fiaccolata* or "torchlight procession" - a march that honors Dunant's efforts to assist rescuers who carried the wounded from the battlefield at Solferino.

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Left: A commemorative torchlight procession (*Fiaccolata*) as photographed by the author.



“anziani”). Nearly everyone waved to the women standing on balconies of the homes they had inhabited for the last eighty-ninety years, through Mussolini’s Fascist rule up until today. Mussolini’s legacy continues to resonate in the very walls of the city, across which some of his words have been inscribed: *Noi sogniamo l’Italia Romana, cioè saggia e forte, disciplinata ed imperial* (“We dream of Roman Italy, that is wise and strong, disciplined and imperial”). Although we, citizens, hope to never witness a return of fascismo, many of us do feel honor bound to uphold the quotes’ main principles, especially those of us who adhere to the IFRC’s Seven Fundamental Principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.

### CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN SOLFERINO

Of the seventy-six different nations represented at the 2018 Solferino event, sixty-four (84.2%) came from Red Cross Societies and twelve (15.8%) from Red Crescent Societies (see Fig. 1.) (Mize, 2018b). The commemorated annual walk brings together Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies to adhere to the IFRC principles of unity and universality. Tanya Shawar Abu Ghosh, Head of the International Cooperation Unit at Palestine Red Crescent

### THE INHABITANTS OF TODAY’S SOLFERINO

After the battle in 1859, the people who continue to occupy Solferino have identified themselves as Solferinesi. Now, roughly 1,133 families and 972 housing units are registered inhabitants of the village (Comuni Italiani, 2018). As of 2016, the average age of the Solferinesi was forty-five years old, with 49% female (51% male) and 9% foreigners (or “stranieri”) (Urbistat, 2016). Walking through the town center, known as Piazza Castello (where the Torre Gonzaghesca stands), I quickly recognized the community’s mixed cultural heritage, which includes immigrants from as close as France and as far as Panama. Strolling through the 12 kilometers (or 7.45-miles) of downtown Solferino to the Castiglione delle Stiviere, I observed how respectful local youths are of the elderly (or



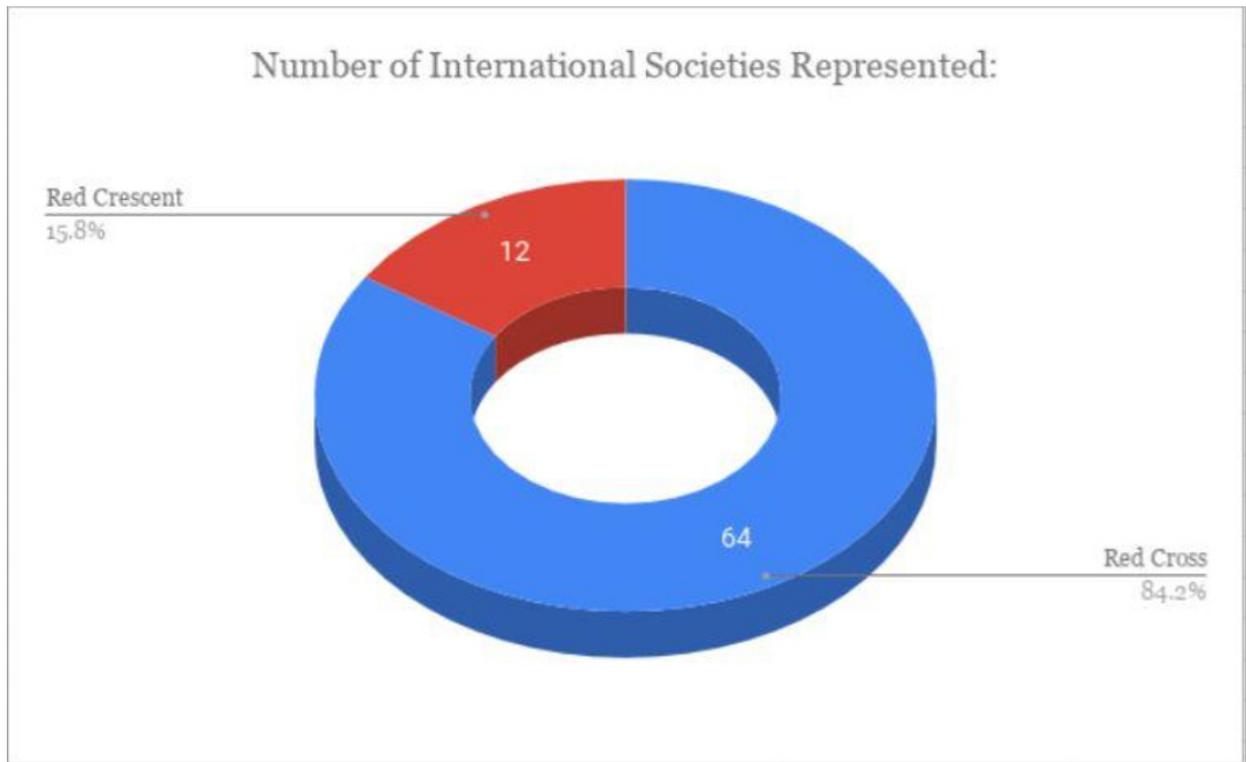
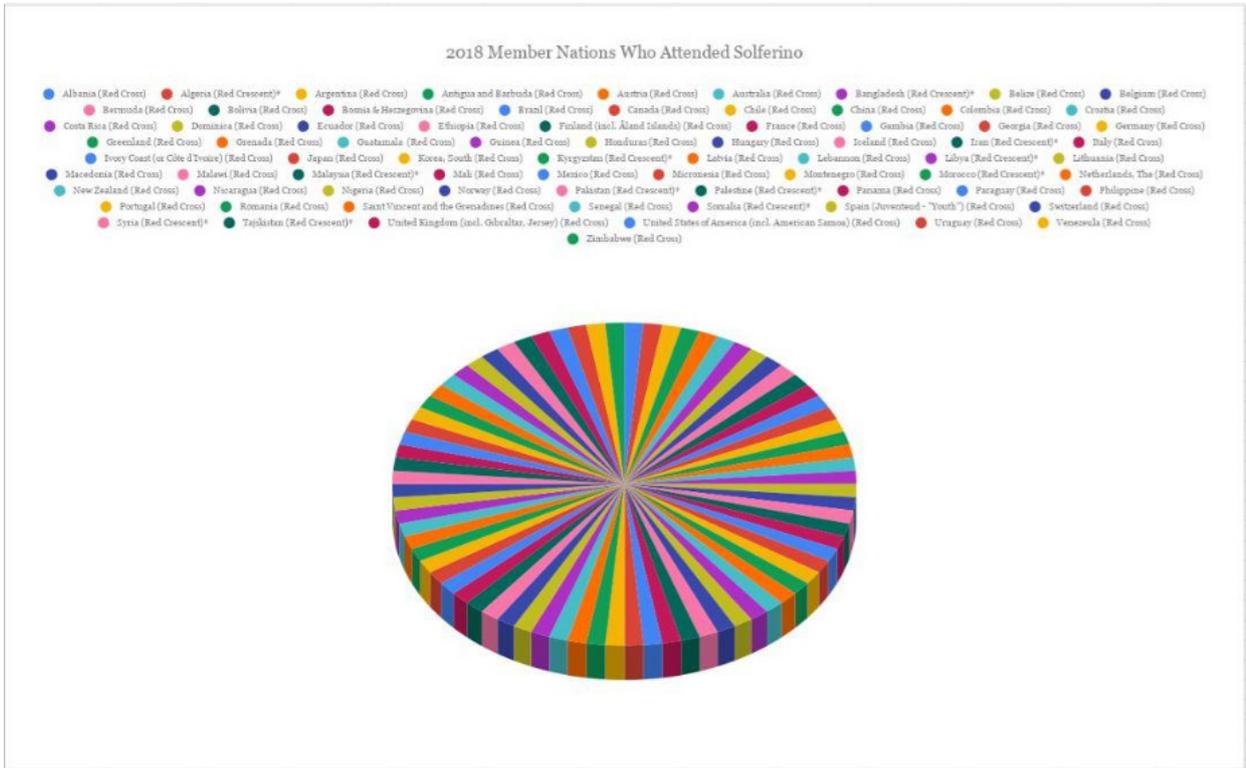


Figure 1:  
Chart of 2018 Member Nations Who Attended Solferino (Mize 2018a).

Figure 2:  
Chart of Number of International Societies Represented (Mize 2018b).

Society, reiterated this idea as she explained the importance of the 2018 event for her office: “This significant event is our first time in person (for me) to attend this ceremony. I find it very special because it gathers the diversification of different volunteers in this important event which is the birth of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Day” (Facebook, 2018).

### LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN SOLFERINO

Although most of the event at Solferino was conducted in Italian, many participants spoke English in addition to their native language(s). As seventy-six nations were represented, it is difficult to catalogue just how many languages were spoken over the course of the annual commemoration which lasts one week every June. Within the region of Lombardy only 3.5 out of 10 million people speak the official Lombard

language (marked as “Definitely endangered” by UNESCO’s Endangered Languages), and the Solferensi are largely native Italian speakers—joining the ranks of the 60 million Italian speakers across the nation (UNESCO, 2016).

### SOLFERINO AND OBSERVING ANTHROPOLOGICAL CULTURAL UNIVERSALS

Since 2017, Italy has had the honor of having their national Red Cross director Francesco Rocca (President of the Croce Rossa Italiana (CRI)) also represent the IFRC as President. Rocca set the 2018 Solferino theme as *Per noi ogni essere umano è importante*, which translates to “For us every human being is important” (Francesco Rocca, 2018). This theme was directed at the countless migrants and refugees moving all across the world, and the event encouraged states and volunteers alike to





engage in humanitarian efforts to protect these people by observing the IFRC's fundamental principles of neutrality and independence.

### **CONCLUSION ON FUTURE VISIONS OF SOLFERINO AND COMING TOGETHER AS IFRC SOCIETIES**

With the knowledge and experience gained as an American Red Cross volunteer, I have come to value events, like the IFRC celebration, which unite all humanity for a common purpose. I hope this paper introduces more people to this institution and its lofty but noble goals. Through voluntary service to the IFRC Societies and respect for others in times of both war and peace, we have the opportunity to create a shared cultural heritage the likes of which Henry Dunant could only dream about a hundred and fifty years ago.

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