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Assembling Ruin: Rubble Photography of the 1908 Messina Earthquake

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Abstract:

Photographs of the 1906 San Francisco and 1908 Messina earthquakes can be understood in terms of changing media and modes of reportage. Collections of the disaster photographs have supported the emerging science of seismology, social criticism and forms of popular entertainment. Images of facade-shorn buildings and collapsed houses reproduced and assembled for period newspapers, scientific reports, illustrated journal issues and tourist postcards, ostensibly revealed events as they had happened in *real time* to audiences worldwide. Circulation of the images allowed them to be received as an accurate and harrowing record for public comment, disaster relief and reconstruction planning. However, behind the illusion of objectivity lies a domain of unknown, possibly *unknowable* but suspected facts concerning the nature of earthquakes and about the relative exposure of cities, races and more or less *civilized* nations to likely devastation.

Forming a subset of disaster photography, rubble photography (*Trümmerfotografie*) is a genre commonly composed of images depicting bombed and burned-out cities like Dresden and Cologne. It is cited when theorizing the contribution of such images to the politics of collective memory connected to Germany's reconstruction and eventual reunification after the Second World War. This paper proposes to extend the genealogy of the genre to include photographs of the San Francisco and Messina earthquake. It pays particular attention to images of the latter disaster, all the while emphasizing the genre's contribution to shaping urban imaginaries.

Keywords: Disaster; Rubble photography; Messina Earthquake (1908); San Francisco Earthquake (1906); Urban imaginary

The disaster exceeds all efforts of imagination and the havoc is so vast and universal I scarcely know how [to] begin to describe it. The horror of it all is, indeed, beyond words (Mowbray 71).

The ruin by earthquake and ancillary destruction (fire and tsunami respectively) of two large and important cities like San Francisco and Messina within a short period of time provides an opportunity to examine how the medium of photography conveys the complex material and social aspects of ostensibly natural calamities (Hansen & Condon; Birt; Yablon). The near coincidence of these events in turn allows us to consider how the history of photography has been shaped by disaster and the purposes served by images of ruined buildings and rubble-strewn streets. These include scientific or technical purposes as well as entertainment and propaganda. In particular there is occasion to enlarge understanding of the meanings and collections of rubble photography beyond the genre's common association with post-war Germany, to include additional cases, historical periods and critical perspectives (Hoelscher; Matheson).

[1]

As an opening to this study the essay proposes that when viewed with an eye to either their geo-physical or emotive properties, there is more to the *rubble* in rubble photography than randomly dispersed fragments of ruined building material. For the seismologist or building specialist and conceivably other types of scientists, photographs of the San Francisco and Messina disasters acquire a forensic character. The shorn-away sections of walls and visible texture of rubble reveal details likely to demonstrate the course of destruction in the one city versus the other, as well as additional distinguishing characteristics.

The image of skeletal remains of San Francisco's City Hall, for instance, the subject of numerous photographs following the 1906 earthquake not only confirms popular interest in certain views. Moreover, the frequently reproduced image establishes the widespread introduction of modern steel framing into American architecture by the turn of the century, interpreted by period commentators as a sign of America's forward thinking and progress as a nation. Subverting this reading, the image also reveals the instability of once fashionable, but false stone facades added to these frames. The facades' ornamental and easily detached fragments appear strewn across streets like oversized toy blocks or discarded bits of Victorian memorabilia. In San Francisco's residential districts the availability of timber for construction accounts for photographs of twisted and broken matchstick houses, the material's susceptibility to fire inspiring an additional set of panoramic views of burned out ruin spread across large swathes of the metropolis. Distributed along the city's steeply inclined streets and throughout its Marina District, which was built on landfill prone to seismic liquefaction, images of comically skewed buildings demonstrate the play of seismic forces on local topography.

By comparison, seen in many of the Messina photographs, the background texture of urban rubble is commonly finer, the city's first collapse more complete. Experts tell us that many of Messina's buildings were made from small round stones set in mortar of poor quality (described as "rubble construction" in period commentary) with only minimal, if any, reinforcement and precariously attached floors and roofs (Hobbs 418-19; Perret 327). Consequently, buildings in the photographs appear to have disintegrated, literally shaken to bits by seismic forces working on different geo-physical and social terrain to San Francisco's (figure 1). We learn that much of Messina was built on a coastal plain of loose stones. This is fitting metaphor for near routine commentary emphasizing the fundamental vulnerability of the city, as well as the southern Italian regions and people, to disaster.

Scholarship contributing to the broad field of disaster studies provides insights into the meanings of disaster. However, seldom is the field called upon to describe the visual culture of rubble photography. Before looking at collections of Messina photographs consider two perspectives that are particularly relevant.

Firstly, there is the view espoused by several scholars that all disasters, regardless of what may appear to be their originating cause in natural phenomena, are more accurately studied as social ones (Clarke and Short; Rodriguez & Dynes). They are also commonly urban in character, calling upon representations of *the city* as principal arena for the enactment of forms of human agency and values (Taylor). In one technical report on the Messina earthquake published seven months after the event, the American seismologist William Hobbs mused that if "an army in tents" (409) rather than a city of mostly insubstantial buildings had been established on the site prior on the morning of 28 December 1908 the loss of life and property would have been far less. He concluded that: "This should teach us that though earthquakes may not be prevented, and up to the present have not been definitely forecasted, the destruction which they cause is very largely of man's own making" (409).

The scientist's report includes three photographs of the destruction, one of which is included here (figure 2). The report also included diagrams illustrating the distribution of damage from previous quakes in the region that occurred in 1894, 1905, and 1907. As well as providing evidence of the destruction in villages near Messina, their houses' roofs having collapsed under the weight of heavy tiles, the series of images show the removal of weakened walls and debris and the delivery of relief to survivors. Reports such as this relied on information provided by "skilled observers" according to Hobbs, including "writers not primarily of a scientific character" (412). They also clearly relied on photographers on the scene. Whether these witnesses were amateur or professional photographers is uncertain. Regardless, Hobbs warns his readers interested in "physical phenomena" relating to seismology, not to overlook the "psychology of a great earthquake" (412). His warning alerts us to subsequent themes on the psychoanalysis and imagination of disaster explored by Susan Sontag more than fifty years later. [2] At the time of Hobbs's

writing, this was a domain of suffering explored, opportunistically perhaps, by journalists and photographers who provided images for illustrated magazines and postcard companies worldwide. In these collections, the choice and sequencing and narration of multiple images convey a sense of human drama available for subjective, but also, socially-constructed interpretation.

Secondly, as more than one scholar in disaster studies has observed, reporting today on disastrous events in what was once called dismissively *the third world* commonly rehearses particular storylines (Keys et al). Noteworthy are narratives where a people's vulnerability in the face of disaster and and ill-preparedness arise from historical, socio-economic and political circumstances associated with poor or *developing* nations. There is a history to this kind of biased reasoning.

For instance, editorial commentary in the United States press on collections of San Francisco earthquake photographs, commonly describe an American polity suddenly and unexpectedly exposed to nature's fury. Even though risks to the region had been known for many years, this fact is downplayed. The nation and city are described as ready to rise, Phoenix-like, from the rubble and ashes to build themselves anew in yet more remarkable form. To the contrary, foreign nationalist and racist prejudices helped frame the destruction of Messina as a tragedy waiting to happen, the inevitable fate of a people all too readily vilified as backward by critics in Italy and abroad. [3] Compared to the celebratory rhetoric accompanying the rebuilding of San Francisco, commentary on the aftermath of the Messina earthquake rarely fails to condemn the region's inadequate or improperly conceived building practices. Hobbs wondered "Was the city of Messina wholly ignorant of this fact?" (418-19). An anonymous observer writing in the American science journal *Nature* ("The Messina Earthquake") the year after the quake described "the wretched materials used and a system of construction in complete contradiction to the elementary rules that should govern all building in seismic countries" (204). Critics further condemned the protracted pace of recovery decades after the event, interpreted as a sign of systemic negligence, incompetence or corruption or a combination of these or other factors ("Messina Since the Earthquake" 919-20; Oldham 184). Travelling through Sicily twenty years after the disaster, the English author D. H. Lawrence found the *Messinesi* still living in rows of shanties and squalor. He believed them to have had "a terrible shock, and for whom all life's institutions are really nothing, neither civilization nor purpose" (17). [4] Such observations contributed to what came to be called "The Southern Problem" (Bosworth). Describing how early American "catastrophic" film-making included newsreel footage of the Messina earthquake, Giorigo Bertillini alludes to this problem. He writes that the success of such films outside Sicily, in Italy, Europe and the U.S. "confirmed the idea of an Italian region that remained isolated, underdeveloped, and somewhat ill-fated, and for that reason provided an appropriate setting for realistic melodramas of pathos and much-needed redemption" (66).

A number of European, British and American popular journal issues incorporating images of the Messina earthquake were published in the months after the event, many with scenes of the disaster displayed on their front covers. British journals covering the Messina earthquake included *The Sphere*, *The Graphic* and *The Century* as well as *The London Illustrated News*. Popular American magazines included *Harper's Weekly* and *The National Geographic*, in addition to scores of newspapers with pictorial supplements. European magazines included *Le Petit Journal* and illustrated newspaper *The Daily Malta Chronicle*. Several issues of *La Domenica del Corriere* provided extensive reporting and visual coverage. On the whole, the issues appeared within a remarkably short period after the earthquake, promising readers near *real time* coverage. However, a comparison of magazines incorporating collections of either graphic illustrations (drawn and reproduced from engravings) or photo-lithographic images suggests that while there may have been some measure of correspondence between the multiple series of images and disaster chronologies, there was also considerable room for interpretation owing to opportunities to manipulate images and compose collections for emotive effect.

Public appetite for news and images was encouraged by the growth of the pictorial press by the turn of the century, particularly in Britain and North America. The number of illustrated journals reporting on current events and popular subjects in London alone more than doubled from 1890 to 1899, rising to thirteen by the century's end (Shorter 481). The long-lived British weekly news magazine *The London Illustrated News* covered the earthquake with an issue (3 December 1910) that appeared relatively late in the game. It relied on etchings by artist Frank Brangwyn showing survivors among the ruins, the series representing "Like Dante's Inferno: Life in Death in Earthquake-Stricken Messina" as the banner heading the double-page spread announces. Another popular and competing London weekly *The Graphic*

published two successive issues featuring front cover illustrations drawn in the magazine's hallmark vivid and dramatic style. The first (9 January 1909) cover shows King Victor Emmanuel of Italy heroically scrambling over ruins to save a victim reportedly buried in rubble for three days. (Historical accounts confirm Vittorio Emmanuel was one of the first Italian authorities to arrive on the scene). The second issue of *The Graphic* (23 January 1909) has a cover illustration depicting British sailors attending to the wounded on board the warship HMS Sutelej. *The Graphic's* illustration of British sailors tending the wounded is credited to a sketch by a naval artist and subsequent drawing by Gilbert Holiday. The image reproduced here shows the Italian king expressing his gratitude for the "bravery and resource shown by the British sailors in the work of rescuing the victims of the earthquake" as its caption reveals (figure 3).

Commenting on the future of pictorial journalism in a 1899 review, Shorter (491-92) observed that new modes of mechanical production and falling printing costs, coupled with the considerable expense of employing artists and technicians to prepare wood, copper and steel engravings, accounted for the increasing use of photographs by the media. Nonetheless, as the comparison of the two sets of images (engravings or photo-lithographs) suggests, some scenes attributed to the Messina disaster (accurately or not), unavailable to the photographer owing to their absence or late arrival on the scene, found an audience of viewers thanks to the vivid imagination and skill of the artist and engraver. Missing from the collections of photographs that primarily concern us here are images comparable to *The Graphic's* illustration titled "The Panic in Catania" (9 January 1909) depicting swollen crowds of *Catanesi* and grief-stricken refugees from across the region described as "all praying, crying, and imploring the mercy and intercession of their saint" in caption text that now reads like a caricature of *Sicilian* customs. When human figures appear in the collections, they are few in number. They are mostly portrayed statically, as either victims or heroes – the latter comprising, with remarkable regularity in the overseas press, foreign agents (mostly sailors) undertaking rescue work.

Pictorial magazines featuring photo-lithographic images such as *The Sphere* relied on perceptions of the medium's immediacy and accuracy for its authority, rather than an artist's sketch of events and its subsequent enhancement in the magazine's London or New York offices. However, it is difficult, if not impossible to ascertain the provenance of many images, along with historical details confirming the facts of the disaster and its social and political significance. In one scene from the *Sphere's* four-page spread on the Messina earthquake, a lucky survivor is shown being lowered, head-first, from an upper-floor window, a rescue suggesting the photographer had arrived shortly after the earthquake. However, adjacent photographs are less than clear. Some comprise *generic* scenes of ruined buildings, absent of people and lacking temporal references required to ascertain the stage of recovery. One shows a scene reproduced in a number of magazine issues of rescue workers climbing over ruins in search of the bodies of less fortunate victims, a mission which continued for months after the earthquake. Another photograph shows what appears to be a family of *Messinesi* encamped in front of a shattered apartment building. However, given the extensive toll of death and large-scale evacuation of the city recorded after the disaster, the group could have been posed by the photographer, a deceit possibly accounting for the image of the lucky survivor.

Photographs in the 23 January 1909 issue of the American magazine *Harper's Weekly* resemble those in *The Sphere* issue. However, the choice and sequencing of images in the former compose a more orderly, if equally contrived, chronology. The *Harper's* pictorial story comprises a visual survey of physical destruction, including evidence of extraordinary seismic movements, followed by scenes of evacuation and rescue. Full page and individual image captions, appearing melodramatic and platitudinous to the contemporary reader, underscore the moralising tone of the photographic spread realised by the issue's editors. (figure 4)

The collection of photographs in *Harper's* contains a series of urban image-types. Scenes of the streets of Messina are characterised by their display of ruined piazzas and public spaces. Common are scenes of thoroughfares more or less blocked with rubble. Some are identified by titles such as "Victoria Avenue" (9). Others are unknown, but remain evocative, particularly when underscored by sensational captions. The derelict quayside and non-descript residential districts of the city are photographed to show "What remained of homes in Messina when the earth paused in its trembling" according to the caption (9). The dramatic "upheaval of the earth" (9) and novelty of seismic phenomena are communicated by images showing curious onlookers joining the unknown photographer in common spectatorship. This variety of scene includes the subsidence of the Corso Vittorio Emanuele along the seafront and the disrupted

pavements and near-fallen lamppost along Victoria Avenue. (figures 5 and 6) Churches, palaces and multi-story apartment buildings appear stripped of external walls, revealing once grand public spaces and humble domestic interiors exposed to common view. Such images showing the ruinous “crowded tenement district of Messina where thousands lost their lives” (7) are common (figure 7).

The generic character, and thus potential ambiguity of these images – their appearance and similarity in style or content to images in other period journal issues – subsumes the distinctiveness of specific urban sites and disastrous events within a few iconic representations evocative of any ruinous place. Furthering this effect of aesthetic sublimation is not only the use of characteristic urban images to communicate the course and extremity of disaster. Moreover, there is also the reproduction, in whole or part, of specific images in multiple magazine issues simultaneously. The curious upheaval of the pavement and bizarrely-inclined lamppost visible in the aforementioned image of Victoria Avenue was shot from a different angle on a sunny day by photographer Charles W. Wright while working on the Messina earthquake for an April 1909 issue of *National Geographic* magazine.

Furthermore, there is evidence demonstrating the circulation of images between different media. The topography of disaster portrayed in *Harper's*, *National Geographic* and other magazine issues is mirrored in tourist postcards, just as San Francisco's iconic ruins were reproduced in similar fashion and as stereoscopic cards. In one instance identified so far, the broken pavement and tilting streetlamp along Victoria Avenue on a rainy day appears reproduced as a postcard with French subtitles. The caption identifies the corner street as Via Cavour and the photographer as Leon Bouet. (figure 8).

Despite their ambiguity and uncertain provenance, there is clearly a political aspect to the disaster photographs considered thus far. The front cover of the *Harper's* issue, promising “Photographs of Italy's Calamity” within, presents a large format photograph captioned “Italian Soldiers Searching for Victims in Ruined Messina” (figure 4). The inner cover featuring the weekly's regular banner complements the first image with another full-page photograph showing “The Ruins of the American Consulate in Messina” (3) with a caption further informing readers that the US consul was killed by the building's collapse. The geography and visual topography of destruction conveyed on this and four subsequent page faces (7-10) is complemented by further political detail. The second image in the series is positioned beneath the first and is a panoramic view of Messina from its harbor “showing the shattered buildings afire along the waterfront” (7) according to its caption. Beneath this is another image depicting the Italian king visiting earthquake victims at Reggio. Yet another picture in the series shows “British bluejackets [sailors] aiding the injured” (10). This same image is reproduced in the 16 January issue of *The Sphere* (58) where “the injured” becomes “a Rescued Girl” (figure 9). [5] Fine print at the bottom of the final page of earthquake coverage in the *Harper's* issue (10) relates how: “As soon as the Italian people recovered from the first moments of horror there was a general fight from the shattered cities. In this the warships of several countries gave immediate aid, transporting the refugees to northern cities.”

Conclusion

Viewed with an eye either to their scientific interest or emotive content (ie, their capacity to elicit a range of sentimental responses, including horror, fear, and chauvinism), the *rubble* in rubble photography is far from meaningless. Rather, the photographs of ruin that concern this essay acquire evidential (including empirical and moral) value owing to their circulation within discourses conveying speculation on human agency, race and the variable trajectories of civilizations. They animate the longstanding play of nature and culture as “domains of being” (Hirst & Woolley). On the one hand, the scenes of collapsed buildings and rubble-strewn streets provide a background for a people, the Messinesi and Sicilians. They are treated in some period texts as though they were merely *primitives* going about their business, activities which would appear to include routinely falling prey to natural disasters. Hence, Mowbray gathers into his 1909 account of the earthquake “stories told by eyewitnesses” and embellishes these with “Superb Photographic Views showing heart-rending Scenes in this Appalling Calamity” as one image caption sets the scene. He concludes that: “There is a lesson in all things. But that lesson can convey no rebuke to the hardy peasants who loved the land that their forefathers loved. They took the well-known risk and paid the penalty with their lives” (v). On the other hand, the photographs considered in this essay reproduce scenes of destruction viewed by other writers as testament to endemic ignorance, social neglect and political corruption.

As a medium of entertainment, reproduced for illustrated magazines and postcard companies, the collections of photographs helped cultivate what Anders Ekström has called “transregional imaginaries and cross-temporal connections” (472). They were *aide memoires* of a sort, useful when contemplating the fall of cities and for seeking vicarious thrills in view of the hazardousness of modern life and other people’s misfortunes. In this regard, the photographs complement Victorian era disaster dioramas and re-enactments of disastrous events in turn-of-the century carnival side-shows. As propaganda the photographs engage nationalistic sensibilities in the years leading to world war. Many scenes depict the rescue efforts of rival European, British and American powers that arrive at the Sicilian and Calabria coasts via gunboats and national flag-carrying steamers. [6] The photographs of their respective humanitarian efforts are arguably the counterpart to displays of military prowess at sea.

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Endnotes

1. Among German language accounts of rubble-photography is Jörn Glasenapp’s work, including writing comparing photographs of war destruction in Dresden and Cologne (“Nach dem Brand,” see also Glasenapp *Die deutsche Nachkriegsfotografie*). Addressing similar themes to this essay is Ludger Derenthal’s writing on the propaganda served by photographs of bomb damaged German cities during and after the Second World War.
2. Equally concerned with the imagination and disaster, Maurice Blanchot (7) has written how “the disaster” is “what escapes the very possibility of experience – it is the limit of writing.” Thus, interpreting ruin photography in a similar, existential vein as Blanchot, Cadava (35) believes “the image of the ruin – again, speaking for all images – so often speaks of the death, if not the impossibility of the image. It announces the the inability of the image to tell a story: the story of ruin, for example.” Perhaps this evocative, but rather cryptic, claim means that rubble photography is inherently ambiguous – illustrative of *facts* on the ground but also suggestive of fictions – thereby open to multiple readings.
3. Quasi-scientific interests and representations of the remains of Pompei and Herculaneum following expeditions by antiquarians to the Bay of Naples in the 18th century contributed broad, often moralising lessons derived from this and subsequent disasters, including the Messina earthquake. Regarding the ancient ruined cities and their impact on the urban imaginary and culture, of interest is Ingrid Rowland’s recent book *From Pompei: The Afterlife of a Roman Town*.
4. The opportunity to contrast the two preceding references, the one *scientific* and the second *literary* in character and provenance, raises a third perspective on disaster and the collections of rubble photography. When it comes to the imagination of disaster (Sontag) the conceptual line between the two is oftentimes blurred. Like much science fiction today, which freely mixes truths and half-truths for the purpose of dramatic effect, photographs of the Messina earthquake fulfils psychological tasks such as orchestrating nightmare scenarios.

5. The image also appears in the 23 January 1909 issue of *Scientific American*.
6. Reports on humanitarian missions provide additional collections of photographs. Though beyond the scope of this paper, two informative reports on the 1908 southern Italian earthquakes were prepared two years later by Reginald R. Belknap, Lieutenant-Commander, United States Navy and former Naval Attaché to the American Embassy at Rome, and by Colonel Delmé Radcliffe, Military Attaché to the British Embassy, Rome. Details of these are provided below.

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Figures



Figure 1. Photo-lithographic illustration of rubble construction destroyed by the 1908 Messina Earthquake. Frank A. Perret. "Report on the Messina Earthquake of 28, 1908." *American Journal of Science* 27.4 (1909): 327. Print.



Figure 2. Illustration of destruction caused by the 1908 Messina earthquake. The accompanying caption reads: "Many survivors remain at the scene of their former homes and are supplied with food by relief committees." Plate 2 "Piazza Immacolata at Villa San Giovanni." William Herbert Hobbs. "The Messina Earthquake." *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 41.7 (1909): 413. Print.

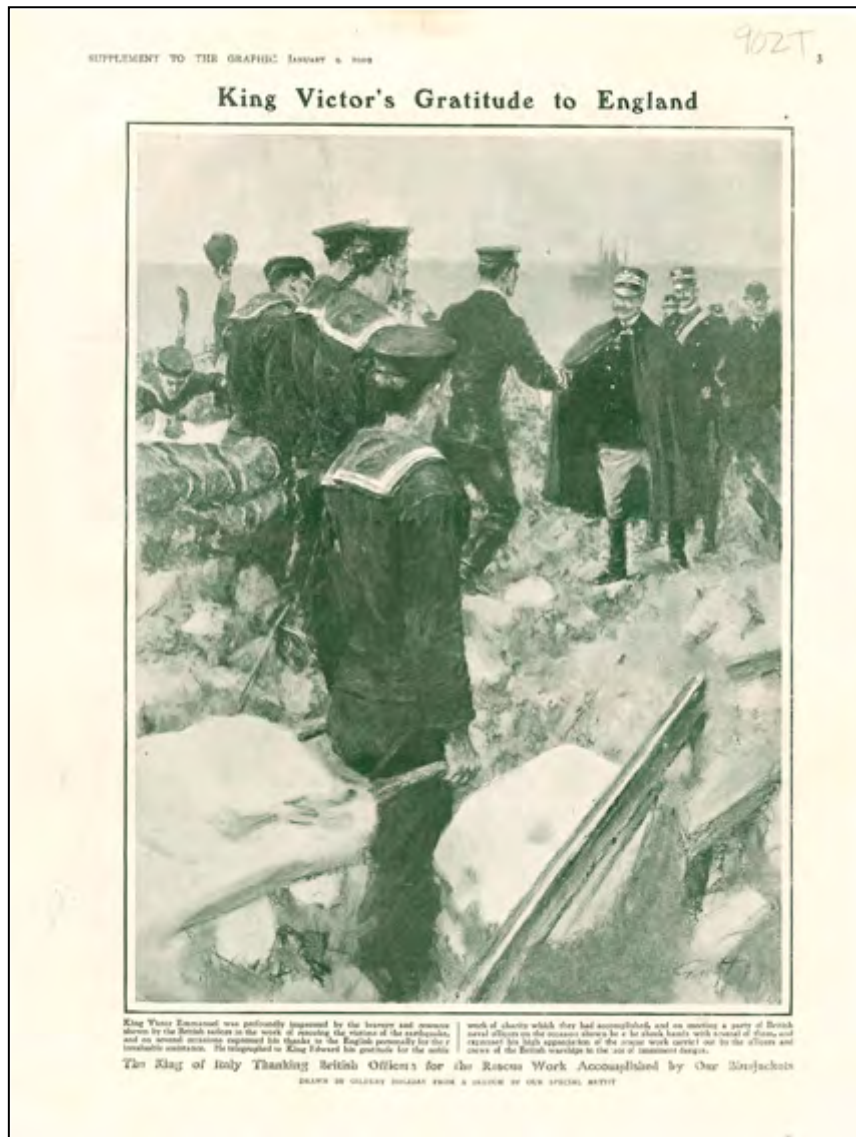


Figure 3. Illustration showing the Italian King Victor Emmanuel expressing “Gratitude to England” for the nation’s assistance following the earthquake. *The Graphic* 9 January 1909: 3. Print.



Figure 4. Magazine front cover illustration of the Messina earthquake. *Harper's Weekly* 23 January 1909. Print.



Figure 5. Scenes of destruction following the Messina earthquake. *Harper's Weekly* 23 January 1909: 9. Print.



Figure 6. Illustration showing seismic movement along Victoria Avenue. *Harper's Weekly* 23 January 1909: 9. Print.



Figure 7. Illustrations showing collapsed buildings in “crowded tenement district of Messina where thousands lost their lives” (caption, left illustration; page title showing below). *Harper's Weekly* 23 January 1909: 7. Print.



Figure 8. Postcard illustration showing corner of Victoria Avenue and Via Cavour, Leon Bouet. Print.



Figure 9. Captioned illustration showing “British Bluejackets from Malta Carrying a Rescued Girl.” *The Sphere* 16 January 1909: 58. Print.