

BOOKS AND REVIEWS

CROIX-ROUGE, LES STRATÈGES DE LA BONNE CONSCIENCE

Anatomy and physiology of the ICRC

“Anatomy and physiology of the International Committee of the Red Cross” could be another title for the book Isabelle Vichniac has just published on the work of the ICRC.¹ But the author, who reports to the French daily *Le Monde* on the international organizations in Geneva, has not gone about her dissection of the ICRC like a dispassionate surgeon wielding a cold, gleaming scalpel. Nor is the tone of her analysis dry and technical. On the contrary, one of the book’s strengths lies in the way Isabelle Vichniac, with the flair of an accomplished journalist, scrutinizes piece by piece the complex mechanisms of the institution’s mandate and activities with all the artistry of a master story-teller. Theory and practice are well balanced and the book is peppered with anecdotes, both tragic and amusing, and keen observations about people and things. We have a lively description of the “inexorable rise” of Henry Dunant, the development of international humanitarian law, the relationship between the law of Geneva and the law of The Hague, the ICRC’s role in armed conflict, etc. In so doing, the author replies to the questions most often raised: No, Henry Dunant was not a pacifist; yes, the ICRC is free to take initiatives not specifically provided for in the Conventions and Protocols to assist political detainees, 500,000 of whom have been visited in 95 countries since 1946.

The book methodically goes over the main tasks of the ICRC and depicts how these are carried out day to day by the services responsible, both at headquarters and in the field. There is the Central Tracing Agency, “the world’s most extensive (acknowledged) file”, which symbolizes the Red Cross for most people. There are the hazards involved in providing assistance, which is sometimes an “open sesame” for protection, often the only hope for survival, but always subject to the whim of governments. She also acquaints us with the ICRC’s Medical Division, the backbone of ICRC medical policy, which has worked steadily to extend a capacity now ranging from disaster relief to orthopaedic centres and sophisticated treatment for war wounds.

¹ Isabelle Vichniac, *Croix-Rouge, les stratèges de la bonne conscience* (Armed with a conscience—The Red Cross in war), Alain Moreau, Paris (*Enquête*), 1988.

How can the ICRC make itself better known in order to be more readily accepted? How can greater respect be fostered for humanitarian law by disseminating knowledge of it? The answers to such vital questions are in a long chapter devoted to information and dissemination. Likewise, a reader curious about the financing of the ICRC will find a complete account in the book and researchers will learn what they have to do to gain access to the archives, that secret and mystery—shrouded sanctuary of which Isabelle Vichniac gives us a tantalizing glimpse.

She does not limit herself to portraying the various services of the ICRC. She takes care to place each of the institution's protection and assistance activities in its political and social context, thus making us better able to follow the ICRC's humanitarian policy as it is confronted with new forms of conflict, the erosion of ideology and the proliferation of humanitarian organizations. Hence the need for the ICRC to regard itself with a constant critical eye, to keep apace with developments in order to be "realistically idealistic", conscious that each humanitarian act contributes to peace.

This is not without difficulty: mistakes are made, setbacks suffered. After briefly relating the ICRC's attitude during the mass murder of the Jews in the Second World War and explaining that "the ICRC did not want to risk sacrificing what had been achieved by attempting the improbable, that is, the assistance which it was providing to millions of prisoners of war placed under its protection", the author dwells on the obstacles encountered by the ICRC in modern conflicts and the problems of negotiating with States which are not always willing to listen, as was the case during its survival campaign in Kampuchea in 1978, or in Ethiopia since 1984. The ICRC is then left, as its only means of persuasion, with the provisions of humanitarian law (when they are applicable) and the dictates of human conscience, its neutrality and whatever credibility and confidence it enjoys. And it also falls to the ICRC, when the international community finds it convenient to ignore repeated violations of humanitarian law, to remind the governments involved of their obligations under that law; this was the case, for example, during the Iran-Iraq war. And how can you preserve your own identity these days when "charity cannot escape its inevitable companion ambiguity", when solidarity gives rise to as much skepticism as it does enthusiasm, when the proliferation of humanitarian associations leads to confusion and even distrust?

To be sure, "the ICRC is not in a position to cope with all the poverty and all the injustice in the world". The institution is nevertheless rightly considered as "the most professional, modern and best equipped organization in the world today; its assistance operations are unsurpassed in their effectiveness and rapidity".

But the ICRC's greatest resource is the people who serve it. The author attaches great importance to those who actually do the work. The figures she depicts, from the President to the archivist, gives the book a very human side while at the same time explaining the internal decision-making machinery and personnel structures. The book's high point is the chapter entitled "La délégitude", possibly a mischievous marriage of the words *délégué* and *servitude*

which will be news to many, even some delegates. She tells us the type of people delegates often are, the recruitment procedure, their training (a real process of initiation), the new delegates' first contact with the field where things are never as they had imagined, the torments of negotiating with the authorities or dissident leaders, "managing" the unpredictable and the sometimes tortuous relationship with headquarters. All of this is told with a wealth of examples and anecdotes. The reader is given insight into the life of the prison-visiting delegate, the relief delegate, the delegate on standby, etc. Their work requires much tenacity, imagination and conviction; and much sacrifice. It becomes easier to understand the pangs of conscience suffered by delegates torn between their pledge of discretion and their revulsion at the horror and unbearable suffering they see. Some, like Andreas Balmer,² have been unable to remain silent.

What has not already been said about the well-known dilemma: the duty to maintain discretion versus the need to tell the world? Some hold that the international press feels denied of its dues by the ICRC spokesmen, who hold their tongues better than they speak. Others think that what the ICRC actually sees would be more interesting to know than what it does.

Possibly, but we should not exaggerate the problem. The author herself recognizes that the situation has changed and that a journalist requiring information can always cull interesting facts if he takes the trouble to read ICRC publications (and also read between the lines) and to meet delegates back from their missions.

In conclusion, Isabelle Vichniac believes that the challenge facing the ICRC in future will be to operate like a multinational corporation, but without losing its soul. It has considerable resources with which to do so: its established policy, which is constantly refined by what it learns from new experiences and the fundamental principles which always guide its work.

Isabelle Vichniac is right to be as frank as she has been in this book. She writes clearly but never over-simplifies; she does not exaggerate either the ICRC's successes or its failures. In short, she is objective.

The result is a very full, compact book which nevertheless combines the grave with the humorous and reads like a novel. It will certainly be useful for those wanting to better understand the rewards and frustrations of humanitarian work in our troubled times.

Jacques Meurant

² Balmer, a former ICRC delegate, wrote a "fictional account" of a mission carried out in a Latin American country for a Geneva-based "humanitarian organization". The publication by an ex-delegate of fact so thinly disguised as fiction was viewed as scandalous, not to say dangerous, in many circles.