

Dominique-D. Junod, *The imperiled Red Cross and the Palestine-Eretz-Yisrael conflict 1945-1952: The influence of institutional concerns on a humanitarian operation*, Kegan Paul International, London and New York, 1996, xvi and 344 pages.

Dominique-D. Junod's book on the ICRC's humanitarian activities in the Middle East after the Second World War fills a gap, for the years that witnessed the birth of Israel against the backdrop of the Holocaust in Europe and the expulsion of tens of thousands of Palestinians from their homes certainly merit special attention. Herself an historian, the author gives a vivid description of the events that shook the Middle East between 1945 and 1952. Hence the book's interest for today's reader. For one thing, it recounts the historical facts, the repercussions of which are still being felt to this very day. For another, her critical analysis of a largely unknown chapter of humanitarian endeavour is a major contribution to spreading knowledge of the ICRC and its work.

Mrs Junod worked at the ICRC as an historical researcher. For the purposes of her book she had access to the archives of the International Committee and could make full use of them. The study was first written in French and approved as a doctoral thesis at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva. She has since left the ICRC and now lives in Israel.

Nevertheless, the author did not limit herself to the documents of the ICRC archives. She also obtained firsthand accounts from ICRC delegates and other people who had had personal experience of the period concerned or had been actively involved in the ICRC's work, and drew on other archives, in particular those of Britain and the State of Israel. It is surprising, however, that the author did not consider it useful to round out her view of the facts by also examining the archives of the Arab States concerned. Her explanation — practical difficulties of access to those archives — will not convince anyone who hopes to be assured of an impartial approach, even in a committed historical work. An omission of this kind is especially serious when it comes to research on a conflict

situation, in which it is more crucial than ever to take the position of each of the parties into account.

After a brief introduction of the ICRC, its operating principles and the serious problems in store for it following the Second World War, Mrs Junod describes the start of the ICRC's intervention during the unrest that shook Mandatory Palestine, then a territory under British administration. It was in February 1945 that a Zionist organization first approached the ICRC, requesting it to visit Palestinian Jews deported by the British authorities to Eritrea. At the time, however, the ICRC's energies were still fully tied up in its endeavours to help victims of the Second World War, and the reaction from Geneva shows that the ICRC was not immediately able to meet the challenges from the Middle East. It was only in the autumn of the same year that the ICRC decided to step in — to the displeasure of the London government — on behalf of a certain category of Jews deported from Palestine. And it was not until early 1948 that ICRC delegates set up their headquarters in Jerusalem, following the United Nations vote on the partition of Palestine and a few months before the withdrawal of British forces, a departure that left free rein to hostilities between Arabs and Jews for control of the territory. Mrs Junod recounts the ICRC's activities to assist civilians on both sides, during the war and also after the armistice agreements. It is nonetheless striking that the author shows such small interest in the fate of the Palestinian refugees. Yet the Palestinian civilian population, expelled from their villages and towns and subsequently "parked" in refugee camps that exist to this very day, were beyond doubt the primary victims of the hostilities, which were marked by the intense desire of each side to exclude the other. It should be recalled in this connection that ICRC delegates are still working in the Middle East on the territory that was Mandatory Palestine. The situation has changed, but the humanitarian problems remain basically the same.

The review of Mrs Junod's book could stop there, with a favourable assessment of an interesting book produced at great pains and dealing with a significant chapter in the annals of humanitarian endeavour and of the post-war ICRC — a story that is yet to be written. However, the author decided to take her investigation even further, as indicated by the book's subtitle: *The influence of institutional concerns on a humanitarian operation*. The book's title itself, *The imperiled Red Cross*, recalls the fact that the ICRC's very existence was in the balance at the time. The author attempts to show that a humanitarian initiative, or even a project, may be motivated by considerations totally divorced from the (humanitarian) problems that need to be solved on the ground — in other words, that an organization such as the ICRC was not acting simply out of a desire

to protect and assist persons in distress because of the fighting, but also had other reasons for doing so. She reaches the following conclusion: “*My research in fact demonstrates that it was political interests more than humanitarian convictions that motivated the ICRC's great projects in the Palestine conflict, whether or not they had the result of improving the lot of the victims of that conflict (...)*”; the ICRC had, she felt, taken this action *inter alia* to demonstrate its usefulness, its (moral) right to survive, following its failures during the Second World War and in particular its inability to assist Jewish victims of the Nazi regime.

This approach led the author to examine and present the other major projects pursued by the ICRC alongside its operation in Palestine. There were many of them, the most important of which undoubtedly included the new codification of international humanitarian law that culminated in the adoption of the four Geneva Conventions in 1949. There was also the arduous quest for a new balance within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Legal scholars will observe with satisfaction the links between action in the field and the codification of a new law (for example, with regard to the discussion on safety zones).

What should we make of the hypothesis constantly repeated by the author in the book? Was the ICRC really acting chiefly to make up for the mistakes committed during the Second World War? Was it trying to “clear” its name and prove its worth despite past failures? There is no need to review here the history of the ICRC's action — or inaction — to help civilian victims of Nazi persecution, Jews in particular.¹ The ICRC unquestionably did all it could after the war to prove that it was able to rise to the challenges facing it, that it could successfully accomplish its tasks in Palestine. It is also true that the ICRC was in peril in the immediate post-war years. It came under attack both from within the Movement and at the political level, especially from the USSR and Yugoslavia, which quite simply wanted the elimination of this private, neutral and independent body. Let us not forget that during the period that witnessed civil strife in Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel, the world experienced the extraordinary transition from the Allied victory in 1945 to the Cold War with nuclear warheads on permanent alert. At the same time,

¹ See Jean-Claude Favez, *Une mission impossible? Le CICR, les déportations et les camps de concentration nazis*, Payot, Lausanne, 1988, and Francois Bugnion, *Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des victimes de la guerre*, ICRC, Geneva, 1994, in particular, p. 224 ff.

the colonies' incipient struggle for independent statehood was heralding far-reaching geopolitical changes. What was more natural than for the ICRC to try to find its bearings? And even if it did attempt to vindicate itself in Palestine, why not? This attitude must be considered in parallel with the fact (mentioned in passing by the author) that the ICRC was at the time also engaged in operations as complex as those to alleviate suffering during the civil war in Greece, the conflict in Indochina, the strife on the Indian subcontinent, or the mass displacements in Central Europe resulting directly from the war. Its constant funding problems must also be taken into account.

The ICRC therefore had every reason to do its utmost to succeed in its activities in Palestine. The Geneva-based institution had to confirm its credibility and at the same time re-establish and reinforce its position internationally, especially in the new post-war environment and the Cold War. The author's contention that purely political considerations or concern for its own survival did more to determine the ICRC's actions than humanitarian motives nonetheless remains unconvincing and ultimately highly unlikely. Mrs Junod's book does not, at any rate, furnish proof of this.

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