

## BOOKS AND REVIEWS

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### CHILDREN IN WAR

*"Mankind owes to the Child the best that it has to give."*

On show until 1 April 1991 at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum is a travelling exhibition, entitled "Children in War", of about 100 photographs collected and selected by the Museum's Director, Laurent Marti, and its Curator, Jean-Pierre Gaume. The exhibition, which was organized with the support of UNICEF, also includes archive film footage and has attracted widespread attention since it opened on 11 September 1990.

These stark photographs of children caught up in war show them in all sorts of appalling situations: wounded, sick, paralysed, suffering from burns, legless — or as pathetic, emaciated figures with enormous eyes and bloated bellies. They cower in trenches, crouch in holes, or flee by any means possible from situations beyond their understanding.

They are seen wandering alone among ruins or trudging along in columns of refugees; one is wearing an oversized helmet and another is dwarfed by a trailing overcoat. They are regarded with suspicion, searched, interned and imprisoned. We see one waiting by his dying mother, another leading a line of blind people.

The mute appeal of their hopeless, blank or bitter and resolute faces speaks more forcefully than the captions to the photos. As those who mounted the exhibition put it: "These images enable us to sense at a glance a situation that words often fail to describe. These reflections of the dark side of reality are intended to arouse emotion, in order to restore reason and hope".

A book based on the exhibition is now available. It was prepared thanks to a special grant from the ICRC and published to coincide with the World Summit for Children, held on 29 and 30 September 1990 at the United Nations in New York.

The first part of the book reproduces the photographs selected for the exhibition. The second part contains all the most important texts relating to children that have been adopted by the international community from 1900 to the present. The reader can follow the successive stages in the codification of children's rights from the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, whose liberal provisions were adopted by the League of Nations in 1924, up to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. For the first time in the history of international law, the 1989 Convention embodies children's rights in the form of a treaty which will be binding on all States that ratify it. The third part of the book contains a selection of texts and commentaries published by the International Red

Cross and Red Crescent Movement between 1980 and 1990 on the question of children in armed conflicts and emergency situations. These texts cover a range of issues, including the age of combatants, the participation of children in hostilities and the legal protection they need in today's conflicts.

Finally, the fourth part of the book is a collection of comments inspired by outstanding events in the history of protection of children in the course of this century. Apart from their anecdotal interest, these texts bring out the evolution of the problems and of the responses prompted by different situations and changing attitudes. Three major periods may be discerned. From 1918 to 1924, following the First World War that left so many children starving and homeless, the countries of Europe, among others, created the International Union for Child Welfare (IUCW). From 1945 to 1959, in the wake of the Second World War, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and many other non-governmental organizations sought to generate international solidarity on the institutional level to meet the needs of children, particularly the medical and social needs which are so great in developing countries. Finally, since the end of the 1970s, and especially since the International Year of the Child in 1979, the international community has been developing a worldwide strategy to gain recognition for the place and rights of children on an equal footing with adults in society.

As Laurent Marti and Jean-Pierre Gaume state in the introduction to the book: "From the 1924 Declaration to the 1989 Convention, the international community has progressed from general, altruistic principles to rules of law, in order to establish a universal standard for dealing with the situations faced by children, particularly in wartime. By tracing this historical progression, this book serves as a veritable anthology of the way the 20th century has perceived and experienced the place of children in human societies". It is also a useful reference work and will be valuable for purposes of dissemination.\*

Let us hope that leading world figures will never forget the assertion in the 1924 Declaration that "Mankind owes to the Child the best that it has to give"; and that they will promote the humanitarian and ethical values which uphold the dignity of children and protect them where they are most vulnerable.

At this time of international upheaval, let them think on the children of the Middle East!

*Jacques Meurant*

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\* *L'enfant dans la guerre*, (Children in war), published by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, Geneva, 140 pages, 105 illustrations, format 21 × 21 cm, ISBN: 2-88336-002-2. Price: 20 Swiss francs plus postage. Address orders to: International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, 17 Avenue de la Paix, or International Committee of the Red Cross (COM/EDOC), 19 Avenue de la Paix, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland.