

Books and reviews

Isabelle Vonèche Cardia, *L'Octobre hongrois: entre croix rouge et drapeau rouge. L'action du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge en 1956*, Brussels, Éditions Bruylant, 1996, xvi + 183 pp.

The history of the ICRC is well recorded up to the end of the Second World War. The whole period of the Cold War, however, which both impeded the work of the ICRC by placing major or even insurmountable obstacles in its way and provided the framework for an unprecedented expansion of its activities, has not yet been adequately studied. This book by Isabelle Vonèche Cardia, which reviews the operation mounted during the dramatic events that shook Hungary in 1956, is an important contribution to the history of the ICRC during the Cold War. Her account of that operation, which was one of the rare occasions when the ICRC was authorized to intervene directly in the Eastern bloc, reveals the problems that stemmed from the incompatibility of the Red Cross mandate with Communist ideology, from involvement in a highly propagandistic environment and from the difficult relations with the Soviet Union, which was extremely distrustful of anything from the West. The operation was also exceptional in terms of the scale of the assistance provided at a time (from the post-war years to the 1960s) when the ICRC generally had great difficulty in raising funds. The enthusiastic response of donors clearly demonstrates how much was at stake in this particular humanitarian initiative, which was the only way in which the West could support the Hungarian insurgents.

Thanks to painstaking historical research based on contemporary sources and archival material, the book recreates the entire operation so that we relive in vivid detail the problems as they were perceived by the delegates and by members of the Committee (the ICRC's governing board), the choices that arose and the action that was taken. The author begins by setting the scene, describing the constraints imposed on the ICRC by its tense relations with the Soviet Union and the latter's relationship as a Great Power with Hungary. The subsequent account of the operation itself is divided into three periods, according to the form as-

sumed by the ICRC presence in Hungary and the different types of activity undertaken. This approach brings out a basic contradiction: whereas the Kremlin had adopted an attitude of rejection and outright defiance vis-à-vis the Red Cross, it nevertheless accepted its assistance and hence its presence in Hungary. However, its approval remained strictly limited inasmuch as the ICRC was not authorized to carry out its traditional protection activities.

Reacting very swiftly to the appeal launched by the Hungarian Red Cross in the early days of the unrest in Budapest and taking advantage of the immediate influx of relief supplies to Vienna, the ICRC was very rapidly able to channel a substantial amount of aid into Hungary and distribute it there. Although the borders were closed to it after the second Soviet intervention, it was authorized to resume its work once the situation had been brought under control. Attempts by the ICRC to provide protection, which had been difficult from the start owing to the confusion prevailing in the party's decision-making bodies, were stonewalled by the newly installed authorities. However, its approaches met with some success among the insurgents, who allowed the delegates to visit their civilian detainees and welcomed their initiatives. This disparity probably reflects the fundamentally contradictory expectations vis-à-vis the ICRC of the parties involved in that the insurgents needed the very type of legitimization and international support that could be conferred by Western assistance.

Once order had been restored by Soviet tanks (although the country's economic and social situation remained precarious), the ICRC's work focused on responding to the needs of the civilian population. Abiding firmly by its principles, the institution managed to ensure that the strictly humanitarian nature of its operation would be guaranteed. As for its practical implementation, although the author concludes that the Hungarian authorities did not obstruct the ICRC's work (page 54), her analysis tends to leave the reader with the impression of a gradual but irresistible takeover of the institution's activities by the authorities. Once the Hungarian Red Cross had been brought to heel and affiliated to the authorities (by May 1957), and once the ICRC delegation had been reduced (by June 1957) and its means of action curtailed (access by road was closed to it in March 1957 and visas became more difficult to obtain, etc.), the ICRC's role was confined strictly to that of a purveyor of aid, a role moreover that the Hungarians sought to turn to maximum account.

As in the initial phase, the ICRC was thus unable to carry out its protection work during the period from November 1956 to October 1957, either on behalf of political detainees, deportees or former members of

the Hungarian Red Cross and health care personnel (accused of having helped the counter-revolutionaries) or with regard to the highly politicized issue of reuniting displaced persons. Left without information in these respects by the authorities, it abandoned the idea of adopting an overall strategy and opted for a pragmatic approach, seeking to settle cases on an individual basis. The book is to be commended for giving a full account of the criticism voiced by some delegates of this decision to tread carefully. The ICRC cited in self-defence its long-term goal of winning the confidence of the Soviet authorities so that it could continue to operate in the Eastern bloc and be authorized to pursue its mission in the event of a third World War — which was viewed as highly probable at the time. Reminiscent of earlier similar choices, this strategy looked like a repetition of some of the mistakes of the Second World War and laid the ICRC open, as the Committee was aware, to the same reproaches. Although the book does not enlarge on this debate, it shows how a similar attitude adopted in two separate situations can be judged in different ways by the international community.

The last period studied, which begins in June 1957, mainly shows the consistency of the behaviour of all concerned: while the ICRC continued to provide assistance in the hope of maintaining a presence in Hungary at all costs, no progress was made in the area of protection save for a few purely episodic concessions. The author clearly explains the reasons that led the ICRC to persevere against all odds and to remain in Hungary. She suggests that its determination to gain Soviet confidence bore fruit during the Cuba crisis, when the Great Power accepted its services as a neutral mediator. On the other hand, an attempt to elucidate the ambiguous attitude of the Kremlin to the ICRC would have been appreciated. Although the problem of access to archives makes interpretation difficult, it should at least have been possible to move beyond Communist rhetoric and advance a few theories which are intimated in the book itself. For example, it may have been the desire to regain control over the population that prompted the Hungarian authorities to accept the aid offered since, as demonstrated elsewhere and particularly in the case of the Soviet Union,² relief supplies can prove an effective means for a government of recovering a certain measure of legitimacy, rallying the people to its cause and enhancing its control over the population. This theory seems all the more

² During the 1921-1922 famine, the Bolshevik government seems to have realized very quickly the advantages to be gained from receiving large-scale Western assistance over which it exercised strict control. See Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le piège humanitaire*, Paris, Jean-Claude Lattès, 1991, pp. 39-41.

plausible in view of the Soviet leadership's growing awareness of the need to make some allowance, however slight, for the expectations of civil society and to provide it with a certain standard of living, which was one of the ambitions of the "new course", the liberalization policy launched in 1953. This could explain why, after the ICRC was able to step into the breach, as it were, in 1956 because of the prevailing confusion, the new authorities allowed it to continue with its work.

This research, which covers a little known and unfamiliar area of humanitarian assistance, is enlightening on more than one account. The book is well documented, written in a lively style and sets the ICRC's work in its historical context. It also describes an aspect of the institution that usually remains concealed: the decision-making process, the different suggestions made by delegates or Committee members, the various options envisaged, the steps finally taken, etc. It is interesting, for example, to be informed of the many occasionally circuitous means devised and in some cases adopted in an attempt to visit the prisoners at last. To sum up, the book is not only an incisive portrayal of an exceptional operation but also sheds broader light on the activities of the ICRC, and will be of interest to all who wish to know more about its operational procedures.

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Olivier Paye, *Sauve qui veut? Le droit international face aux crises humanitaires*, Collection de droit international No. 31, Éditions Bruylant/Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, Brussels, 1996, 315 pp.

This interesting book of some 300 pages by Olivier Paye, a lecturer at the Social, Political and Economic Sciences Faculty of the Free University of Brussels and the Law Faculty of the Facultés universitaires de Saint-Louis (Brussels) and a member of the academic staff of the International Law Centre of the Free University of Brussels, is devoted to the relationship between contemporary international law and activities whose purpose is to provide humanitarian relief.