

FOCUS ON HUMANITY
A CENTURY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The ICRC Archives

The Skira publishing house has just brought out an intensely moving book on the role of photography in humanitarian action.* Nicolas Bouvier selected the pictures for this magnificent volume with great sensitivity to their moral impact, Michèle Mercier wrote the engrossing narrative and François Bugnion contributed an admirable preface. With the help of Isabelle Engammare, the authors delved deep into the “storehouses of sorrow”, as Nicolas Bouvier calls their main source, the photo archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

This book in all its harsh beauty shows as none has ever done before how photography, in its privileged and sometimes ambiguous relationship with war, can capture the “human gesture of compassion”. “Beauty” is used here in the special sense given to it by the philosopher Simone Weil in the epigraph to François Bugnion’s preface, which traces the parallel between the history of photography and that of humanitarian action: “A just and loving spirit sheds the radiance of beauty upon misfortune, and this alone allows us to see and reproduce it as it is.”

Humanitarian law is built on suffering, and while it is true that the Geneva Conventions cannot be “photographed”, suffering can. Yet if this book successfully avoids the “aesthetics of drama”, in accordance with Nicolas Bouvier’s wishes, it is because the authors chose photographs in which life itself seems to be called into question, and the question is directed at us. Indeed, these faces (Cyprus, 1974) appeal to us, the readers; it is towards us that these arms (Zambia, 1978) reach out. And when we look at the harrowing photograph of Armenian

* Nicolas Bouvier, Michèle Mercier and François Bugnion, *Focus on humanity. A century of photography. Archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross*, Skira, Geneva, 1995.

prisoners in Azerbaijan (Baku, 1993) we are uncomfortably aware that history can hunt us down and trap us too.

Thanks to the intrinsic power of these photographs and the sure hand with which they were chosen, the ultimate aim of the Geneva Conventions, summarized, explained and put into historical perspective by Michèle Mercier, becomes self-evident and will certainly be a revelation to the lay reader. Moreover, the texts which accompany the pictures — extracts from family messages, from prisoners' letters and from reports and notes written by ICRC delegates — illustrate better than any treatise the real psychological and physical impact of international humanitarian law. *Focus on humanity* embodies moral principles which concern each and everyone of us. It brings home to us the fragility of our flesh and of our dignity as individuals in the face of man's destructive violence. But it is also a tribute to all the men and women whose unflagging work in the field is carried out with the energy of those who never feel resignation or give in to despair.

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