

From the end of the Second World War  
to the dawn of the third millennium

The activities of the International Committee  
of the Red Cross during the Cold War  
and its aftermath: 1945-1995

by François Bugnion

**A field of ruins**

8 May 1945: *Victory Day!* An exhausted Europe emerged with relief from six years of oppression and carnage.

And yet there was no sign of the profound, immediate and spontaneous joy which had followed that earlier victory on 11 November 1918. The continuing war in Asia, combined with the deep rifts left behind by collaboration, the discovery of mass graves and the horror of the concentration camps, the immensity of the mourning and the destruction, and widespread concern for the future all held the people back from yielding freely to the headiness of restored peace.

Moreover, illusions had been lost: the armistice signed at Rethondes had been hailed as the victory of right over force, of the will to peace over the violence of war. The new system of international relations within the framework of the future League of Nations was to exclude forever any return to the endless slaughter from which the world had just emerged.

But there was none of that in May 1945: everyone understood the fragility of the Grand Alliance which had vanquished the Nazi hydra. As soon as Hitler was dead, the variances between the victors reappeared.

The Red Cross was less able than any other institution to succumb to euphoria. It had been in contact with too much suffering not to rejoice

at the return of peace. But even though the Red Cross had managed to build up its activities to a spectacular extent throughout the six years of war, and despite its undoubted successes, it had come too close to the victims not to be aware of its own setbacks.

Everywhere in the world, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies had been at the forefront of the struggle against suffering: they effectively supported the armed forces' health services; they organized health care behind the lines; they assisted convalescents and helped the families of soldiers killed in action; in many countries, they supported, and sometimes even replaced as best they could social services disrupted by war. Even in occupied Europe, the National Societies had managed to continue their relief work within the narrow limits imposed on their activities by the occupation authorities.

Throughout the conflict, the International Committee of the Red Cross was the linchpin of relief action for prisoners of war. The Central Agency for Prisoners of War, with the help of the services of over 3,000 volunteers, was able to restore a vital link between prisoners and their families; ICRC delegates travelled the world over to assist prisoners and to monitor the conditions in which they were held captive; from its headquarters in Geneva, the ICRC set up such a vast relief operation that it became the largest civil transport undertaking during that period. Its relief work in Greece with the support of the Swedish government was decisive in helping to save the country's population from starvation. And yet, despite these unprecedented achievements, despite the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to it for the second time in December 1944, the ICRC came under attack as soon as the fighting ceased. It was held responsible for the tragic fate of the Soviet prisoners of war, over half of whom died in captivity; it was also blamed for not denouncing racial persecutions and the hell of the concentration camps, the full horror of which the world discovered after the collapse of Nazi Germany.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> On the ICRC's work in the Second World War, see: *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on its Activities during the Second World War*, 1 September 1939 - 30 June 1947, Geneva, ICRC, 1948, 3 volumes + annexes.

On the ICRC's activity on behalf of the victims of Nazi persecutions, see: *The work of the ICRC for Civilian Detainees in German Concentration Camps from 1939-1945*, ICRC, Geneva, 1975; Jean-Claude Favez, *Une mission impossible? Le CICR, les déportations et les camps de concentration nazis*, Editions Payot, Lausanne, 1988; Arieh Ben Tov, *Facing the Holocaust in Budapest, The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Jews in Hungary, 1943-1945*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1988; Jacques Meurant, "The International Committee of the Red Cross: Nazi persecutions and the concentration camps", *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 271, July-August 1989, pp. 375-393.

## Reconstruction

From the Atlantic to the Volga, Europe was laid waste by the movements of armed forces, by the bombing and by the destruction. Massacres were innumerable; crops and food stocks were destroyed, so hunger was rife everywhere, but especially in Germany, in Eastern Europe and in the Balkans.

Nevertheless, the victors did not wait until the end of the war to prepare for the post-war period and to plan reconstruction. In 1943, the Allies set up an ad hoc body, UNRRA, for the purpose of organizing and coordinating huge relief programmes for the stricken populations. From 1947 on, the Marshall Plan gave a fresh impetus to reconstruction work, enabling Europe — or at least Western Europe — to emerge from depression much more quickly than had been expected.

The National Societies played an active part in this vast relief and reconstruction operation. They looked after returning former prisoners of war, deportees and refugees, and helped with the resettlement of war disabled. Several of them, and especially the American Red Cross, undertook magnificent relief programmes for populations which had suffered most from war and occupation, notably in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Yugoslavia and Greece.

The International Committee, in accordance with its mandate, did its best to help the victims of the aftermath of war, giving priority to those who could expect little help from the relief organizations set up by the Allies, because they were on the side of the defeated: German prisoners of war, whose ranks were dramatically swollen as a result of the unconditional surrender, people of German origin uprooted in large numbers from countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and the German population which had come in its turn to taste the bitterness of defeat and the rigours of occupation.

Although the ICRC's efforts to help the defeated were undoubtedly in keeping with the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross, which require it to provide assistance impartially and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress, it was not understood. At a time when the world was realizing the sheer monstrosity of the persecutions which had been perpetrated under the Hitler regime and at a time when the populations of other countries were finally emerging from the nightmare of occupation, how could the ICRC's desire to bring assistance to German prisoners of war, who were held collectively responsible for the crimes committed by Nazi Germany and the most blameworthy of whom were about to be

prosecuted as war criminals, be considered admissible? Accusations swiftly followed and some, like the Soviet government, went as far as demanding the outright abolition of the ICRC.

But not only governments were pointing an accusing finger: within the Movement itself the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR, backed by the Yugoslav Red Cross, advocated doing away with the International Committee and transferring its functions to the League of Red Cross Societies. Count Bernadotte, Chairman of the Swedish Red Cross, proposed modifying the composition of the ICRC to bring in representatives of all the National Societies. Others suggested attributing executive tasks to the Standing Commission elected by the International Conference of the Red Cross, which would then be placed above both the ICRC and the League.

Faced with these accusations, the International Committee tried to regain its position in three ways.

In the operational field first of all, the ICRC not only continued to provide assistance to the victims of the Second World War, but it also came to the help of the victims of the new conflicts breaking out around the world, such as the civil war in Greece, the Indonesian conflict, the Indochina war, the first conflict between India and Pakistan, or the first between Israel and the Arabs. Whereas the ICRC was able only to conduct very limited activities in Greece, Indonesia, Indochina and Kashmir, its work in Palestine developed considerably, enabling it to fulfil its traditional role as a neutral intermediary between belligerents. The ICRC made sure to give as much publicity as possible to the activities of its delegates and the results obtained, especially for the protection of hospitals, the creation of security zones, the exchange of family news, the protection of prisoners and assistance to refugees. In this way, the ICRC wanted to highlight the type of services it could render in its capacity as a neutral intermediary, thereby pointing out the consequences which would be bound to follow for war victims if it ceased to exist.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the ICRC was working on the revision of the Geneva Conventions of 27 July 1929, the shortcomings of which had been all too clearly shown up by the war. In fact, it did not wait for the end of hostilities to make known its intention of embarking on this task; in a memorandum

---

<sup>2</sup> 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 (to be published shortly).

dated 15 February 1945, it had announced that it was starting consultations to that effect.

In undertaking this revision, the ICRC had three main objectives:

- to extend the protection of the Geneva Conventions to civilians who fall in the power of the enemy;
- to protect the victims of civil wars;
- to add to the new Conventions a monitoring mechanism in which it would itself take part.

The ICRC convened the National Red Cross Societies in 1946, and then a meeting of government experts in 1947. On the basis of those discussions, it prepared four draft conventions, which were approved by the Seventeenth International Conference of the Red Cross, meeting in Stockholm in August 1948, then by a Diplomatic Conference, which met in Geneva at the invitation of the Swiss government from April to August 1949.

On 12 August 1949, the Diplomatic Conference adopted four Geneva Conventions for the protection of:

- the wounded and sick in armed forces in the field;
- the wounded, sick and shipwrecked members of armed forces at sea;
- prisoners of war;
- civilian persons.

These four Conventions contained a common article concerning the protection of victims of armed conflicts not of an international character and instituted supervisory mechanisms by specifying the role of Protecting Powers responsible for safeguarding the interests of the Parties to the conflict. In addition, special provisions recognized the role of the ICRC and confirmed its right of initiative.

For the ICRC, this was a considerable success in that, at a time when the world was deeply divided by the Cold War and the Berlin blockade brought the USSR and the West into open confrontation, the international community had consented to come together to adopt a new humanitarian order.

There remained the problem of re-establishing the unity of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which had been strongly affected by the divisions of the Cold War, and to restore the ICRC's position within the Movement which it had founded.

As mentioned above, despite the very great services it had rendered throughout the war, the International Committee became the target of accusations as soon as the fighting abated. Its first concern was therefore to postpone any decision on its composition and its future until the new Geneva Conventions had been adopted. By confirming the mandate entrusted to it by the international community, the Conventions in fact also strengthened its position within the Movement, as the National Societies and the League quickly realized that they could not, without discrediting themselves, oppose the existence and the independence of the ICRC, which had just been endorsed by the new Geneva Conventions as an impartial humanitarian organization. Attacking the ICRC's position was tantamount to casting doubts on the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's role in the implementation of humanitarian law, which would have been suicidal.

As for the plans for changing the composition of the ICRC to bring in representatives of the National Societies, it was soon so obvious that a multinational ICRC would inevitably reflect the fault lines of the Cold War and would be paralyzed by divisions within itself that they came to be opposed by the very people who had proposed them in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the ICRC and the League shared a same desire to avoid being placed under the authority of the Standing Commission of the International Red Cross.

They therefore started the task of revising the Statutes of the International Red Cross, which had been adopted by the Thirteenth International Conference of the Red Cross, meeting in The Hague in 1928.

A joint commission of the ICRC and the League prepared a new draft, which essentially preserved the basic structure of the 1928 Statutes and the division of tasks between the two institutions: the League, as the federation of National Societies, kept the main responsibility for the development of member Societies and for coordinating their relief work in peacetime; the ICRC on the other hand remained the guardian of the Movement's Fundamental Principles; it retained responsibility for bringing protection and assistance to the victims of war, civil wars and internal

---

<sup>3</sup> *"My proposal resulted in lengthy and lively discussions. A special committee was formed which met frequently. In the course of these meetings I greatly revised my original attitude towards the problem [...]. In short, I have become convinced that the International Committee ought to continue in its present form and retain its present composition..."*. Folke Bernadotte, *Instead of Arms*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1949, pp. 129-131 and 163-166, *ad p.* 130.

disturbances and was confirmed in its role as a neutral intermediary; it remained in charge of coordinating the international activities of National Societies in times of conflict. In order to carry out these tasks, the ICRC's composition and mode of recruitment by cooption from among Swiss citizens were also confirmed.

Thanks to the new draft Statutes, a split in the Movement was avoided, while the ICRC itself, which was responsible for coordinating Red Cross relief work in the event of armed conflict, maintained a mode of recruitment which ensured that the divisions of the Cold War were not reflected in its composition.

There still remained the hurdle of having these draft Statutes approved by the Eighteenth International Conference of the Red Cross, meeting in Toronto in 1952. On that occasion, however, the ICRC came under strong attack by the governments and National Societies of the Communist countries, which reproached it both for the part it had played during the Second World War and for its activities in Korea, which had been restricted to areas controlled by the United Nations forces as the government of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea had rejected its offers of services.

Finally, the revised Statutes were adopted by 70 votes to 17. The unity of the Movement was preserved, although to a large extent the cracks had only been papered over, as subsequent events were to confirm.

## **From the Korean war to the fall of the Berlin wall**

The Grand Alliance, which was to crush Nazism, was the product of Hitler just as much as that of the Allies themselves. The deep divisions between the USSR and its Anglo-Saxon allies were fully revealed at the Potsdam Conference, which was held amid the smoking ruins of the Third Reich's former capital.

In his famous Fulton speech on 5 March 1946, Winston Churchill noted that "*from Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent*".<sup>4</sup> This was to stay in place until the fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 1946, p. 7771.

In a world which was deeply split into two opposing blocs, what courses of action were open to the ICRC?

These varied considerably from one conflict to another. While all the conflicts in this period bore some marks of the Cold War, they were not all affected to the same extent. Some conflicts were a direct consequence of the Cold War, such as the Korean war, which resulted from the division of the peninsula into two occupation zones after Japan's defeat, and to a large extent the wars of Indochina and Viet Nam. Other conflicts were mainly triggered by other endogenous causes, but still reflected Cold War alignments, with one camp looking for support from the West and the other from the USSR and its allies, as in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflicts of 1956, 1967 and 1973. In fact, most of the conflicts of that period reflected such alignments in varying degrees. In a few cases, the belligerents managed to keep clear of the Cold War, as in the conflicts of 1965 and 1971 between India and Pakistan, or the Falkland-Malvinas Islands war in 1982.

The possibilities open to the International Committee largely depended on these different situations. Although they were party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the Soviet Union and its allies never really accepted the ICRC's mandate, and even less the fundamental principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality which it upheld. In the essentially Manichean philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, there is no room for neutrality or impartiality, and there is no question of placing the victims on an equal footing. Between Communism and Capitalism, between "progressive forces" and "reactionaries", the relationship can only be one of opposition, leaving no room for any neutral intermediary.

Regardless of the International Committee's efforts to dissociate itself from the Atlantic bloc — especially on the basic question of banning nuclear weapons — the USSR and its allies always looked upon it as belonging to the bourgeois, capitalistic bloc, in other words, to the enemy.

In those circumstances it was hardly surprising that the ICRC was unable to act as a neutral intermediary either in the Indochina war, or in the Korean war, or in the Viet Nam war, as its offers of services were rejected both by Hanoi and by Pyongyang.

Paradoxically, it was at the time of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict of February 1979 — between two Communist States — that the ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary was again recognized. The ICRC was given access both to Vietnamese prisoners detained by China and to Chinese

prisoners captured by Vietnamese forces, and it helped with their repatriation from both sides.

But it was mainly the relief work in Cambodia which helped to restore the ICRC's image of impartiality within the Communist world.

It may be remembered that the Vietnamese intervention in January 1979 led to the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime and to the establishment in Phnom Penh of a pro-Vietnamese government, which was recognized only by the USSR and its allies. Cambodia was in fact in such a devastated condition that the government of Hanoi soon realized that it would be unable to ensure its protégé's recovery. With a great deal of reluctance, Hanoi and Phnom Penh accepted the ICRC's and UNICEF's offers of services. The two institutions set up one of the most extensive relief operations ever carried out, thus decisively contributing to the country's revival. There is no doubt that the ICRC on that occasion managed to overcome the divisions of the Cold War and to fulfil its role as a neutral intermediary between the West - which supplied 99% of the resources needed for the relief work - and the Marxist regime in Phnom Penh.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the Cold War gave rise for the ICRC to a series of setbacks: it was unable to bring assistance either to French prisoners captured during the Indochina war, or to prisoners of the United Nations forces captured in Korea, or to American prisoners held by the Vietnamese forces. It was not able either to help the civilian populations cruelly affected by war and bombings. For over thirty years, its role as a neutral intermediary and the principles underlying its work were rejected by all the countries of the Communist bloc. Moreover, the ICRC itself never managed to dissociate itself clearly enough from the West on some highly critical issues, such as American bombing in Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia.

More generally speaking, it has to be admitted that humanitarian law was not much respected during those conflicts, as each of the parties maintained it was waging a just war which relieved it of the need to observe humanitarian rules in dealing with its enemies.

In the same period, other conflicts were not affected by the Cold War to the same degree. That was particularly the case of the various Arab-Israeli conflicts (1948-49, 1956, 1967 and 1973) or the conflicts

---

<sup>5</sup> William Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy, Cambodia, Holocaust and Modern Conscience*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1984.

between India and Pakistan (1947, 1965 and 1971). During these conflicts, the ICRC's position and its role as a neutral intermediary were generally recognized. It was able to transmit the lists of prisoners captured on both sides or to register them itself; its delegates were able to meet prisoners of war and civilian detainees at their places of detention and to talk in private with prisoners of their choosing; they were asked to assist with the repatriation of war-wounded during the hostilities, and with the general repatriation of prisoners at the end of active hostilities. The Central Tracing Agency set up family message services for relatives separated by war and organized countless family reunifications. Lastly, the ICRC set up extensive operations to provide food and medical care for war casualties, prisoners and civilian populations, while coordinating the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' international relief activities for war victims.

It did so in particular during the Hungarian uprising (1956) and the Suez conflict (1956-57), the civil war in the former Belgian Congo (now Zaire) after its accession to independence (1960), the civil war in Yemen (1962-1970), the civil war in Nigeria (1967-1970), the Six-Day War (1967), the civil war in Jordan (September 1970), the third India-Pakistan conflict (December 1971), the Arab-Israel conflict of October 1973, the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990), the conflicts in Nicaragua (1978-1989) and El Salvador (1979-1990) and many others.

In all these conflicts, the International Committee received the backing of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Over and above its specific tasks arising from its role as a neutral intermediary, the ICRC coordinated the relief work of the National Societies. The League took an active part in a number of those operations, while letting the ICRC assume the general direction of international Red Cross and Red Crescent action, in accordance with existing rules.

But new forms of conflict had already appeared, seeking to hasten the demise of the colonial empires. In most cases, the national liberation movements fighting to regain the independence of colonial peoples were not strong enough to oppose the armed forces of the metropolis openly and had to merge with the civilian population to use guerrilla methods.

These new forms of conflict threatened to undermine the very foundations of humanitarian law — and first of all the principle that a distinction must be drawn between combatants and the civilian population — while rendering the ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary problematic since the adversaries employed completely different methods of fighting. Furthermore, the colonial powers long considered the conflicts occurring

in one or other of their colonial territories as purely internal affairs exclusively within their own national jurisdiction.

On the basis of Article 3 common to the four 1949 Geneva Conventions, the ICRC nevertheless offered its services to the parties in conflict. In many cases, for instance during the Algerian war (1954-1962), the war of independence in Kenya (1956) and in the struggles afflicting the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, as well as in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, it was able to initiate some major operations, particularly in favour of members of liberation movements captured by the armed forces of the colonial powers.

Beyond the conduct of the ICRC's operational activities, however, these conflicts raised the question of the extent to which international humanitarian law was duly adapted to wars of national liberation and guerrilla warfare. This led to a further revision of humanitarian law.

## From the 1949 Conventions to the Additional Protocols

From the time that the new Geneva Conventions were adopted, the ICRC was fully aware of the gap between the "law of Geneva", which had been completely redrafted in 1949, and the rules governing the conduct of hostilities, or "law of The Hague", which had remained unchanged since the Second International Peace Conference in The Hague in 1907.

The question of the protection of civilian populations against the effects of hostilities, for instance, was a particularly burning issue; most of the major cities of Europe and Asia still bore the scars of the bombs dropped throughout the Second World War, and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was an ominous indication of what might lie ahead.

The ICRC therefore decided to hold new consultations with experts, after which it drew up a set of Draft Rules, designed to limit the dangers incurred by the civilian population in wartime.

The draft was particularly ambitious and is probably one of the most detailed texts ever proposed for the protection of civilian populations. Article 14 of the draft prohibited any use whatsoever of weapons "*whose harmful effects — resulting in particular from the dissemination of incendiary, chemical, bacteriological, radioactive or other agents — could spread to an unforeseen degree or escape, either in space or in time, from the control of those who employ them, thus endangering the civilian population*".<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> *Draft Rules for the Limitation of the Dangers incurred by the Civilian Population in Time of War*, ICRC, Geneva, September 1956, p. 12.

That amounted to a total ban on the use of atomic weapons. It also led to the failure of the draft rules, for when the draft was submitted to the Nineteenth International Conference of the Red Cross, which met in New Delhi in November 1957, Article 14 was attacked from all sides. The Soviet Union and its allies considered that the ICRC's draft was too timid, because it did not include an overall condemnation of nuclear weapons, whereas the West thought that a ban which was not backed up with any supervisory machinery would be illusory. As the Conference could not, without losing all credibility, summarily dismiss a regulatory draft of obvious humanitarian significance, it adopted a resolution inviting the ICRC to submit its draft to the governments. In fact, the project was scuppered.

That failure was to paralyse any ICRC attempt to develop humanitarian law for many years to come.

A fresh impetus came from elsewhere. Countries which had gained their independence after 1949 resented being bound by humanitarian rules which they had had no part in preparing. Moreover, many held that the Geneva Conventions and, more specifically, the rules relating to the conduct of hostilities, were poorly adapted to the new forms of conflict such as wars of national liberation and guerrilla warfare.

This dual claim for renewed consideration found strong expression within the United Nations, especially at the International Conference on Human Rights, which met in Teheran in 1968.

Fearing that its own responsibility — and that of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement — for the development of international humanitarian law might slip into the hands of a political organization, namely the United Nations, the ICRC took up the task once again and announced that it would initiate a new revision of humanitarian law.

In 1971 and 1972, the International Committee convened two conferences of Red Cross experts and two conferences of governmental experts to that effect.

It was immediately evident that it would be unwise to start hammering at the 1949 Conventions, since it was by no means sure that the international community would be able to agree on new provisions. In fact, the Conventions themselves were not a problem. It was more a question of making good their shortcomings. The natural solution therefore lay in adopting Additional Protocols to them.

The drafts prepared by the ICRC after the consultations of 1971 and 1972 were submitted to the Diplomatic Conference on the Reaffirmation

and Development of International Humanitarian Law applicable in Armed Conflicts, which was convened by the Swiss government as the depositary of the Geneva Conventions. The Conference held four sessions from 1974 to 1977 and adopted two Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949: Protocol I to improve the protection of the victims of international armed conflicts, and Protocol II to improve the protection of the victims of non-international armed conflicts.

The main achievement of the Additional Protocols was to codify rules relating to the protection of the civilian population against the effects of hostilities.

The "gap" in the 1949 Conventions, which had been so sharply criticized by the Soviet delegation, was thus filled.

By the kind of paradox which often occurs in history, the provision which had given rise to the most heated discussions and which equated wars of national liberation with international armed conflicts has to this day never been put into practical application.

## **From the Eighteenth to the Twenty-Fifth International Conference of the Red Cross (1952-1986)**

Despite the political neutrality which it recognized as one of its fundamental principles, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was unable to remain unaffected by the divisions and disputes of the Cold War.

That was already apparent at the Eighteenth International Conference of the Red Cross, meeting in Toronto in 1952, where the debates were dominated by the passions unleashed by the Korean war. The following conference, which met in New Delhi in 1957, split shamefully over a purely political question, that of Chinese representation.

Despite the new Statutes of the International Red Cross, adopted in Toronto, the International Red Cross was on the verge of breaking up.

Those divisions made it clear that there was an urgent need to agree on the formulation of a few universally accepted fundamental principles, setting out the main guidelines of the Movement and thus complementing the Statutes, the main purpose of which is to define the relations between its component institutions.

The ICRC and the League therefore set up a Joint Commission, which, making valuable use of the distinguished work of Max Huber and Jean

Pictet, succeeded in drawing up seven Fundamental Principles. These were adopted by consensus by the Council of Delegates, meeting in Prague in 1961, then by the Twentieth International Conference of the Red Cross, meeting in Vienna in 1965.

These Principles really constitute the basic charter of the Movement. Their mandatory nature is recognized by all the Red Cross and Red Crescent institutions and there has never really been any question of revising them. In fact, does not the moral authority of the Fundamental Principles also derive from the recognition they have been granted over a growing period of time?

This basic charter was all the more necessary in that the unity of the Movement continued to be threatened by the divisions of the Cold War.

Strangely enough, it was on the issue of peace that the Red Cross nearly broke apart. Following the line adopted by the Soviet government, the National Societies of the Socialist countries tried to turn the Red Cross into a forum for the denunciation of aggression, for which, by definition, only the "capitalist States" could be responsible. While the Red Cross cannot but condemn a war of aggression, it is equally clear that the Movement cannot label any specific government as the aggressor without creating a rift in its own ranks and without denying its Fundamental Principles. It was also clear, moreover, that the Red Cross could not give an opinion on the origin of armed conflicts without jeopardizing its possibilities of bringing help to the victims.

These initiatives threatened both the League and the ICRC. However, as the League Secretariat could not take sides in a dispute between two groups of member Societies, it was mainly the ICRC, as guardian of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which endeavoured with the help of a few National Societies to restore the unity of the Movement. It managed to do this by demonstrating that in order to achieve the necessary credibility, any resolution concerning peace had to be adopted by consensus. The unity of the Movement was thus preserved, and the initiatives were brought back to a common denominator acceptable to all.

The Statutes of the International Red Cross, as revised in 1952 by the Toronto Conference, have successfully passed the test of time and the National Societies of the Socialist countries, which had voted against their adoption because of the role the Statutes assigned to the ICRC, finally gave it their support. In April 1982, however, the League's Board of Governors called for a further revision of the Statutes of the International

Red Cross. The proposed changes were essentially terminological, since the expression “International Red Cross” was replaced by “International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement”, which appeared to be more in line with the principle of the National Societies’ equality. On the other hand, the basic structure of the Statutes and the division of tasks among the Movement’s components were left unchanged. The revised Statutes were adopted by consensus by the Twenty-Fifth International Red Cross Conference, meeting in Geneva in October 1986.

## **The International Committee of the Red Cross and the preservation of peace**

The Cold War was the result of an ideological confrontation between two economic and political systems which were opposed in every respect. It was reflected in a series of localized conflicts occurring along all the dividing lines between the two blocs, such as in Korea, Indochina, the Near East and southern Africa.

But it was also a continuing rivalry between two military powers — the United States and the USSR — whose nuclear arsenals guaranteed them a superiority that the other States were unable to contest and which possessed ample means of destroying each other and dragging the whole of mankind with them in their mutual annihilation.

For over forty years, the world lived under the constant threat of this collective suicide; gigantic material resources and a wealth of human intelligence were devoted to perfecting those arsenals and to preserving the balance of terror on which the maintenance of peace and the future of mankind depended.

Although the threat of nuclear annihilation was brandished only on rare occasions, such as the Suez conflict and the Yom Kippur war, it was nonetheless a constant factor in the reckoning of strategists and statesmen.

It was during the Cuba crisis in October 1962, however, that the world was really brought to the brink of a third world war when President Kennedy decided to oppose, if necessary by force, the installation in Cuba of Soviet missiles which would have upset the strategic balance between the two blocs and would have constituted a serious threat to American cities. To begin with, the United States President blockaded the island and ordered United States naval forces to intercept Soviet ships heading for Cuba, which were suspected of transporting strategic missiles. This the Soviet Union considered unacceptable and described as a “*casus belli*”.

The world held its breath as it charted the advance of Russian and American ships across the sea.

Finally, the United Nations Secretary-General, U Thant, managed to resolve the crisis by proposing that neutral inspectors, agreed by both parties, would inspect the Soviet ships sailing across the Atlantic in order to certify that they carried neither rockets nor atomic bombs.

By successive eliminations, it was the ICRC in the end which was designated to carry out the inspection.

Although the task went well beyond the framework of its traditional mandate, the International Committee felt that it could not step aside when the future of mankind was at risk. It therefore agreed to appoint neutral inspectors, on condition that the three States directly concerned, the United States, the USSR and Cuba, would give their consent.

It had started to recruit the inspectors when the news broke that the Soviet ships had turned back.<sup>7</sup>

The crisis was over. The fact nevertheless remained that at a time when the Cold War was threatening to degenerate into nuclear disaster, it was the ICRC which was called upon as the only institution whose neutrality and impartiality were recognized by both Washington and Moscow.

## **From the fall of the Berlin wall to civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

The bipolar system produced by the Second World War collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall, followed by the break-up of the USSR.

Unfortunately, the end of the Cold War did not bring with it the general appeasement which had been hoped for.

The occupation of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War seriously threatened world stability. But even more so, the end of the Cold War unleashed a series of conflicts, which could not have occurred at the time when the two major powers kept control of their empires. In Yugoslavia, in the Caucasus and in Central Asia, long-repressed antagonisms broke out in a surge of hatred and violence.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Annual Report*, ICRC, Geneva, 1962, pp. 31-35.

Many older conflicts, such as wars of religion and ethnic confrontations, flared anew as the ideological varnish cracked, revealing endogenous causes which had previously been glossed over. Having lost the support of external backers, the belligerents tried to finance their wars by holding the populations to ransom and by joining forces with common-law criminals in major crime and drug trafficking operations.

Moreover, the Cold War had imposed a bipolar approach, regardless of the real causes of conflicts, since each of the opposing parties sought the support of one of the blocs. That external pressure has now disappeared, leading to a proliferation of parties and factions.

In some instances, structures of government have collapsed altogether. The breakdown of public services and the disintegration of the law enforcement authorities have given free rein to a myriad of clans and factions, while common crime has taken the place of political action. In these situations of total anarchy, humanitarian institutions seeking to help the needy population are ultimately held hostage to the self-seeking purposes of marauding groups.

As a result, the International Committee finds itself in a paradoxical situation: whereas it is much more widely accepted than ever before, it is faced with operational difficulties which all too often paralyse its efforts. Political leaders appeal to its services, but cannot guarantee the safety of its delegates or its convoys.

Despite these difficulties, ICRC operations have continued to grow, to an altogether unprecedented extent. The ICRC is engaged in more theatres of operation, is represented by more delegates and has distributed more relief than at any other time, even during the Second World War. The professional approach of its delegates is very widely respected and its diplomatic credibility is rated highly, as shown by the permanent observer status granted to it by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 October 1990. Its competence in the development of humanitarian law has also been fully recognized.

Paradoxically again, however, at the very time when the operational capacity and international credibility of the ICRC are stronger than ever, it is running into opposition within the Movement, as it did after the First World War and even more so after the Second. Long-shelved plans are being revived, such as placing the International Committee and the League under the tutelage of a National Societies Commission, or merging the ICRC and the Federation, or even simply doing away with the ICRC altogether. The division of duties and responsibilities, as confirmed by the

revised Statutes of 1986, is no longer respected. It is being proclaimed that the usefulness of the ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary has ceased, now that the Cold War has ended.

It would be naive to attribute these attacks entirely to envy, although that is clearly one of the factors involved.

The historian feels bound to point out that the ICRC's mandate, which is an outcome of history, has always been brought into question in times of upheaval. That happened in 1919 and even more so in 1945. We are now probably going through a further period of upheaval due to the end of the Cold War and the search for a new world equilibrium. History also shows that such attacks against the ICRC have seriously jeopardized the unity of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

On the other hand, the current situation differs from former crises in one essential point, namely the fact that at the end of both the First and the Second World Wars, the Red Cross was without doubt the foremost international humanitarian organization: it was even practically the only one.

This is no longer so today and the Movement should understand that it cannot afford to indulge in domestic quarrels without undermining its international position. Other institutions have acquired a standard of professionalism and competence which would enable them to take over from a divided Movement, not to mention that intergovernmental organizations and many States are planning to conduct their own humanitarian operations.

It is therefore high time for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to recover its unity by respecting the complementary nature of the mandates of its component bodies, and to turn its attention resolutely towards dealing with the challenges of the future. This is something the world is all too sure to need.

**François Bugnion**, Arts graduate and Doctor of Political Science, entered the service of the ICRC in 1970. He served the institution in Israel and the occupied territories (1970-1972), in Bangladesh (1973-1974) and more briefly in Turkey and Cyprus (1974), Chad (1978), Viet Nam and Cambodia (1979). Since 1989, he has been Deputy Director of the ICRC Department for Principles, Law and Relations with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. He is the author of: *Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des victimes de la guerre* (ICRC, Geneva, 1994).