

Books and reviews

Nicholas O. Berry, *War and the Red Cross — The unspoken mission*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1997, 159 pp.

Today, as I begin this review, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have announced that they are withdrawing from the Kosovo region in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, after receiving death threats to their expatriate staff. It gives me the sneaking feeling that the author of this book might be right, not so much in his fundamental thesis — that the ICRC has decided upon a new, unspoken mission to abolish war — but rather in his conclusion: that the ICRC's traditional activities are perceived by the players in today's internal conflicts as a threat to their objectives, or, equally, as a means of keeping world media attention focused on their "struggle".

The publishers of *War and the Red Cross — The unspoken mission* sent a copy to our National Society — as it probably did to others — describing it as "the most provocative book about the Red Cross". Immediately afterwards, several of my colleagues certainly seemed to have been provoked (or should I say appeared concerned?), questioning the "unspoken mission" thesis of the book. These were both good reasons at least to read it, and then I was asked by the International Review of the Red Cross to write a review. Clearly trying to deny a hidden agenda, especially as an outsider to the ICRC, is almost a contradiction in terms. This review should therefore be seen as my personal impressions of the book.

In 140 pages, the author — Nicholas O. Berry, Professor of Politics and International Relations at Ursinus College, Pennsylvania, USA — traces recent developments in the field of armed conflict, and repeatedly draws the conclusion that the ICRC has decided upon a new, hidden strategy: behind its traditional assistance and protection operations, the ICRC — Berry argues — is now also trying to "undermine the institution of war, ... by inducing governments and UN agencies to intervene, ... by monitoring instances of brutality, ... by publicizing abuses ... and by influencing the operations of the UN" — to quote but a few examples.

This is certainly provocative! Not so much for anyone who knows that peace — as the opposite of war — is the ultimate goal of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as explained in the first of the Fundamental Principles behind its work (namely, humanity) and in one of its principal mottoes (“*per humanitatem ad pacem*”). But it is like the proverbial red rag to a bull for combatants or other persons involved in armed conflicts who rightly accept the neutral and confidential work of the ICRC. The provocative statement quoted above invites them to reach a mistaken conclusion, along the lines of: “Let the ICRC in, and see what they can do to you!” It is also provocative for the ICRC itself, bearing in mind that “*inter arma caritas*” (the other main Red Cross motto) and the Fundamental Principles of neutrality and independence still constitute the foundation of its work, and have recently been reconfirmed in its own “*Avenir*” study.¹

Before any further comment is made on the author’s argument that the ICRC has a “new mission”, the underlying, optimistic message of the book should be emphasized — that the nature of armed conflict has changed drastically since the end of the Cold War, with third party intervention much more able to limit the suffering of war victims and even to resolve armed conflicts. At a time when conflict prevention and resolution is becoming a top priority for the international community, the ICRC is indeed one of these third parties, but, in my view, able to have only limited, consequential effects on the way wars are fought or resolved.

The book provides a good overview of the nature of armed conflicts today, illustrating a general description with concrete examples. During the Cold War most armed conflicts were either international or contained an international dimension, with the two superpowers backing regional or domestic warring factions. Now, however, international wars have become “dysfunctional” because they are too expensive and are considered a threat to the international economic and democratic system, now multi-polar and integrated in character. As Berry optimistically concludes: “Never before has war been less attractive as a method of settling disputes between states. What is called ‘The Long Peace’ will get longer.”

After the Cold War, conflicts became internal in nature and turned increasingly nasty. With government authority lacking and superpower

¹“The ICRC looks to the future: International Committee of the Red Cross, *Avenir* Study: Strategic content”, Geneva, 12 December 1997, *IRRC*, No. 322, March 1998, pp. 126-136.

involvement now absent, domestic differences exploded into war. Civilians became the prime targets of attack, resulting in “religious purification”, “ethnic cleansing”, a 90% civilian casualty rate and a sharp increase in the number of refugees. Involving civilians and small arms, internal conflicts cost relatively little and thus “remain options to settle domestic disputes”. For some conflicts, where warlords reign and violence has become an end in itself, chaos is the only word that approaches an adequate description.

Berry illustrates the horror of internal conflicts by referring to the examples of the former Yugoslavia (ethnic cleansing), Rwanda (genocide), the Sudan (murder and starvation, with a death toll well over 1 million since 1983), Afghanistan (one million deaths, Kabul a wasteland, the economy primitive and millions of active landmines still producing innumerable casualties), Guatemala (murders, disappearances, ambushes, forced migrations and executions) and Chechnya (40,000 dead and about 400,000 displaced). The author is disappointed in particular by the international community’s neglect of some of these wars, especially in the light of his general argument that third party intervention can alleviate suffering and shorten the conflict.

Arguing that third party intervention can “sabotage” these wars, “upset power relations”, “mute the horrors of combat” and “create the basis for a diplomatic settlement”, the author quotes as examples the prevention of victory in the former Yugoslavia by massive UN and NATO intervention; the vast humanitarian operations by NGOs and UN agencies in the African Great Lakes region; and the involvement of human rights monitors, journalists and UN officials in the resolution of the conflict in Guatemala. At the same time, however, he points out the limits to such intervention. For humanitarian organizations, security and access are the main problems, in view of increasing assaults and threats to humanitarian staff, the blocking of food distribution and access to refugees, and the vast quantities of light weapons used. For powerful political entities, peace-keepers and the media, the key issue is how to get involved at all in a conflict, “to shape the end game and engineer a settlement”.

In Berry’s view, the ICRC not only acts as a humanitarian organization — providing protection and assistance on a neutral and impartial basis — but also lobbies international organizations, NGOs and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies - presumably including my own. Both activities supposedly fuel the “unspoken mission” to undermine and resolve civil wars, the operational work in the field making the war dysfunctional, the lobbying aiming to involve third parties in the conflict.

The ICRC's activities in situations of armed conflict, presented on the basis of the organization's 1995 Annual Report, are explained as having their legal foundation in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1977 Additional Protocols thereto, and are illustrated with reference to the armed conflicts mentioned above. According to Berry, visits to detainees, tracing and reuniting families, deliveries of relief supplies, surgical operations, agricultural projects and dissemination of international humanitarian law all aim not only "to relieve the suffering caused by war, but also to prevent its success as a strategy". Indeed, the more the belligerents target civilians indiscriminately as a strategy of war, the more such a strategy is undermined by assisting and protecting civilians. The more the root causes of war and dependence on the belligerents are attributed to a lack of socio-economic development, the more relief, rehabilitation and development can be seen as removing those causes. Hence the operational work of the ICRC, and of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as a whole, *does* undermine the institution of war, but to my mind this is a consequence of the nature of today's internal conflicts rather than an actual new strategy.²

The same can be said about the lobbying of other third parties. As the author explains, the ICRC has been confronted by "the proliferation of novice NGOs" and a growing UN role in armed conflicts, creating problems of coordination and confusion of mandates. It is my experience that, as a result of this, the ICRC will use any occasion to explain its neutral mandate and its limited mission assisting and protecting victims of war, while pointing out the responsibilities of other third parties. Over and over again, the ICRC has been defending its original mandate and mission, precisely to prevent these internal conflicts from dragging the ICRC into the politics of resolving or continuing them. But the author interprets this as a strategy with a hidden agenda.

On the basis of a detailed analysis of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in disaster relief,³ Berry argues that the ICRC is "guiding the international community" and "the entire Movement", asserting that "the Code has had

²The author touches only briefly on the important role National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies play in this respect, and on the International Federation's mission and strategy to focus on the most vulnerable and strengthen the National Societies as part of civil society. See Resolution 5 of the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (Geneva, 1995), *IRRC*, No. 310, January-February 1996, p. 75, and the International Federation's Strategic Work Plan for the Nineties (unpublished document).

³*IRRC*, No. 310, January-February 1996, p. 119.

war and war relief principally in mind all along". The Code of Conduct was originally conceived with disaster relief as its prime concern and developed and promoted by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and six other international humanitarian organizations. The ICRC was not involved until later, after the first draft had been drawn up. With regard to war, the Code "will be interpreted and applied in conformity with international humanitarian law", thereby immediately limiting its scope, in view of the clear sense of sovereignty contained in that body of law. Better coordination (so far 147 NGOs have endorsed the Code) and greater involvement of international governmental organizations and governments (some donor governments use the Code as a guideline) will certainly improve humanitarian assistance and thereby alleviate the suffering caused by war, but, on examination of the Code of Conduct, the argument that it is the ICRC's main vehicle for guiding the international community appears quite implausible.

The same applies to Berry's views on the ICRC's "lobbying objectives" vis-à-vis the UN. Basing his argument on symposium statements and conference working papers, he claims that the ICRC is, *inter alia*, "formalizing UN commitment to intervention", "energizing the UN to engage in preventive diplomacy", or "engaging the UN process in codifying an expanded body of international humanitarian law". These assertions seem to give too much weight to an ICRC strategy that, far from being a hidden agenda, is simply a consequence of today's armed conflicts. Here too, confronted with a more operational UN (from UN humanitarian agencies to UN peace-keeping operations), the ICRC has used every opportunity both to confirm its specific independent mandate vis-à-vis the UN and to seek to convince the UN and its members of their responsibilities under international humanitarian law, including application thereof by UN troops and the general obligation to respect and ensure respect of humanitarian obligations. To my mind, all the rest is personal interpretation.

War and the Red Cross is a strong appeal for third party intervention in today's non-international armed conflicts, with the optimistic view that the end is imminent for war as an institution. The ICRC indeed plays a role in this, but, as indicated above, this is more a consequence of the nature of these conflicts than the objective of an unspoken mission. The book might be interpreted as giving enormous credit to the ICRC in the field of conflict resolution, but such an interpretation, if removed from the wider context, would be likely to make ICRC delegates even bigger targets for warring factions today than they already are.

Only recently the ICRC finalized its "*Avenir*" project, confirming that "the exclusively humanitarian mission of the ICRC is to protect the lives

and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to forestall the suffering engendered by such situations by taking direct action at the level of the victims, by assuming its role as a neutral and independent institution and intermediary, [and] by influencing the conduct of all actual and potential perpetrators of such violence through dialogue, the establishment of standards of conduct and the dissemination of humanitarian law and of the principles of the Movement.”⁴ This statement entirely confirms the ICRC’s traditional role. Together with the daily work the Red Cross performs on a neutral and independent basis, the conclusions of the “*Avenir*” project should remove any doubts about the ICRC’s “hidden agenda” in situations of armed conflict. There is no such thing as an “unspoken mission”.

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Jiří Toman, *La protection des biens culturels en cas de conflit armé*, Paris, Éditions Unesco, 1994, 490 pages

Jiří Toman, *The Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, Dartmouth Publishing Company, Aldershot / Unesco Publishing, Paris, 1996, 525 pages

Emmanuelle Stavvaki, *La Convention pour la protection des biens culturels en cas de conflit armé*, Athènes, Éditions Ant. N. Sakkoulas, 1996, 306 pages

Jean A. Konopka (ed.), *La Protection des biens culturels en temps de guerre et de paix d’après les conventions internationales (multilatérales)*, Genève, Imprimeries de Versoix, 1997, 163 pages

The extensive damage done to cultural property — ranging from places of worship and monuments to libraries and museums — during the

⁴*Supra* (note 1), p. 130.