

NOTE

From the *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix Rouge* to the *International Review of the Red Cross*: The Great War as a revelator

Annette Becker

Dr Annette Becker is a Professor of Contemporary History at the Université Paris-Nanterre and a specialist in wars and genocides. She is also a member of the Editorial Board of the *International Review of the Red Cross*.

Abstract

During the Great War, the Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix Rouge covered the immense work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies). This article focuses on one particular angle of that work: the tensions and even contradictions between the ICRC's duty of neutrality and impartiality, on the one hand, and the national and sometimes nationalistic commitments of National Societies, which were naturally opposed to each other in wartime, on the other. While some of the Bulletin's articles revealed real advances in thought on war and the protection of victims, others reflected the inertia caused by this fundamental contradiction.

Keywords: First World War, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix Rouge*, prisoners, civilians, National Societies, victims.



The year 1914 had been planned as a memorable one for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and its main publication. Indeed, issue 179 of the *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix Rouge, Publié par le Comité International Fondateur de cette Institution (International Bulletin of Red Cross Societies, Published by the International Committee, Founder of this Institution)*, which came out in July, celebrated both the 45th anniversary of the publication and the 50th anniversary of the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field of 22 August 1864. The articles featured in that issue focused on different aspects of the Convention, and for the first time the *Bulletin*, which was usually parsimoniously illustrated with grainy black and white photos, made use of colour in an image depicting a magnificent tree of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) standing right on the banks of Lake Geneva at the foot of the Alps (see Fig. 1). The caption reads “1863–1913: The work of the Red Cross since its foundation, published by the International Committee on the occasion of the Swiss National Exhibition of 1914”.¹ The trunk – bearing the motto “*Inter Arma Caritas*” in red lettering, as it appeared on the white cover of all issues of the *Bulletin* – divides into three long, stout branches stretching proudly skywards. The central branch is labelled “The work of the International Committee” and is flanked by “Governments party to the Geneva Convention” on the left and “National Red Cross Societies” on the right. The branches are covered in flags, as multicoloured as they are diverse, arranged from bottom to top in chronological order of their respective countries’ accession to the Convention and formation of National Societies. Since the start of the century, accessions to the Convention had grown significantly in number, and the Red Cross seemed set for an ever more effective future in the service of peace and, in the event of war, in the service of those rendered lawfully *hors de combat* – neutral in the true sense of the word, being no longer able to continue fighting for their side – as a result of being wounded or captured.

Yet the flags, unlike the red cross on a white background, also (perhaps primarily?) represented governments, patriotism and even nationalism. Even at the moment that the July 1914 issue came off the press, the Sarajevo assassination, a spiralling succession of declarations and warnings and the interplay of alliances and colonial empires had drawn Europe and the world into war, utterly dashing the hopes raised by the Convention: on 22 August 1914, the toll of the dead and wounded and the numbers of prisoners were already mounting as other disasters unfolded, not least the atrocities committed against civilians during the invasions.²

Issue 180 of the *Bulletin*, which came out in October 1914, was the first issue published during the war. The writers and editors of the *Bulletin* strove to ensure that this issue came out on time, and they continued their endeavours

1 *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 45, No. 179, 1914, p. 173.

2 Annette Becker, “The Great War: World War, Total War”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 900, 2016.

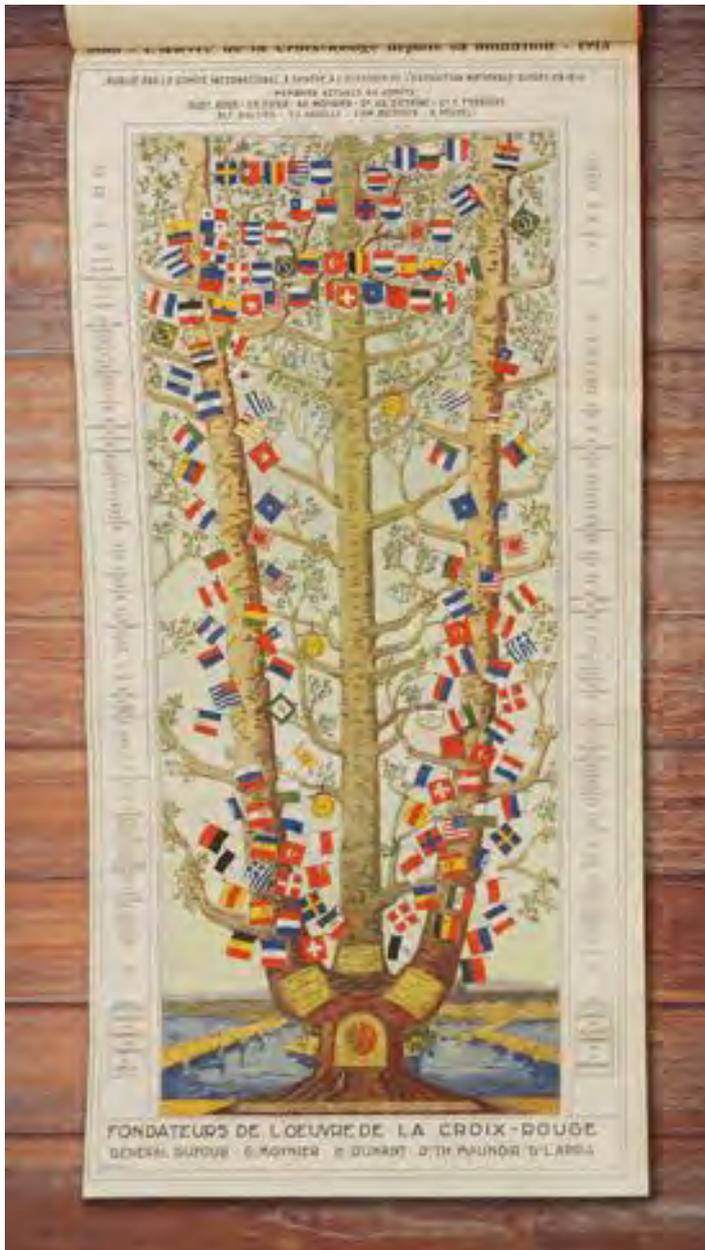


Figure 1. Image published by the ICRC on the occasion of the 1914 Swiss National Exposition. *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 45, No. 179, 1914.

throughout the war at a rate of four issues a year – in January, April, July and October – right through to issue 197, published in October 1918. The war, in full swing from August 1914, inevitably filled the *Bulletin*'s pages, although this did not prevent previously planned articles from also being published, regardless of various technical delays. Such delays were clearly less important than the intellectual and political sluggishness and general tardiness in assessing new situations which affected not only the National Societies, as reflected in their *Bulletin*, but the whole world, now inextricably locked in the grip of a World War. In 1940, the historian and “oldest captain in the French army”, Marc Bloch, would posit that “we were thinking too slowly” to describe the reason for the defeat of his country. This delay was particularly apparent in decisions taken with a First World War mentality in the midst of the Second World War.³

This observation could equally be applied to the *Bulletin*, a reflection of the Red Cross and its National Societies, and to their anachronistic approach manifesting at times as inertia in the face of the shocking violence of the Great War. Nevertheless, there were also articles that revealed real advances in thought on war and the protection of its victims. There was hesitation and procrastination, but also declarations and articles of substance. The *Bulletin* provides an insight into just how firmly the ICRC clung, with the energy of despair, both to the Conventions of which it was the guardian and to its moral authority, fearing that they too would end up being violated and abolished.⁴ An approach based almost exclusively on law to solve problems, at a time when so many lives were at stake, may appear not only limited but also ethically untenable. It is important, however, to understand the logic underpinning the ICRC's reasoning and situate it in the correct historical and intellectual context. The ICRC drew its legitimacy solely from the Conventions that had already been ratified, its fifty years of history, the resolutions adopted, and the reciprocity between the signatories that had become enemy belligerents. The mandates governed humanitarian action, even if the moral authority that had, to some extent, been heeded in the Russo-Japanese War and subsequently in the Balkan Wars was sometimes sufficient to compel belligerents to show restraint or engage in negotiations. Although neutrality, humanity and compassion appeared to oppose, term for term, engagement, brutality and reprisals, there were many contradictions. Humanitarian organizations, the ICRC in particular, found themselves faced with a narrow choice between action on the ground and bearing witness by publicly denouncing violations. The options were to take action and bear witness, to take action without bearing witness, or to bear witness and not take action: there are countless traces of these three positions in the *Bulletin*, which is a public reflection of the cascading effects of contamination of and by the war.⁵

3 Marc Bloch, “L'Étrange défaite”, in *L'Histoire, la Guerre, la Résistance*, Quarto Gallimard, Paris, 2006.

4 See Lindsey Cameron, “The ICRC in the First World War: Unwavering Belief in the Power of Law?”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 900, 2016.

5 Irène Herrmann, *L'humanitaire en questions: Réflexions autour de l'histoire du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2018.

In spite of the war, the general structure and presentation of the *Bulletin* remained unchanged. Each one began under the heading “International Committee”, with a list of “New and Received Works” and “Bibliographical Summary”. This was followed by circulars addressed to members and statements by the president. For example, the October 1914 issue included the 158th circular reminding central committees of “[t]he international duties of National Red Cross Societies in the European war”. This was followed by a text by ICRC president Gustave Ador dated 15 August: “There will be enormous needs, but the International Committee is fully confident that the charitable zeal of all our Societies will be able to rise to the challenge.”⁶ The wartime issues did, of course, contain an extra regular section on the “European war”, which began by listing the activities of the ICRC. The first issue featured the following:

- I - Red Cross Societies of neutral countries;
- II - Observations on the Geneva Convention;
- III - Protests.⁷

The ever-thicker section devoted to the International Prisoners of War Agency, which was established in August 1914, clearly showed that the Red Cross’s main concern was prisoners and the wounded. Resolution 6, adopted at the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1912, had proposed the creation of such an agency, although it could not have been anticipated at that time how crucial it would become by 1914. Soon the Agency section became one of the longest in the *Bulletin*, sometimes even longer than the Committee’s section.⁸

Next on the table of contents came the voices of the National Societies from both those States that were party to the conflict and those that were not, in alphabetical order. Right from the summary, the inevitable tensions arising from the contradiction between the neutral universality of the Red Cross and the aggressive nationalism of each of the belligerents leaps from the page. While some National Societies were satisfied with reporting fairly banal news, those of belligerent States used their space as a platform from which to attack their enemies. Each one firmly believed that it always complied with the Conventions and humanitarian principles but that those on the other side did not.

Reviews of publications as a sign of contradiction

Setbacks and advances can often be measured by the journal’s reviews of other publications, which were written either in Geneva or by the various National Societies. In the April 1915 issue, the French National Society contributed a piece

6 Gustave Ador, “Devoirs internationaux des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge dans la guerre européenne”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 45, No. 180, 1914, p. 226.

7 “La guerre européenne”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 45, No. 180, 1914.

8 This is something that is clearly shown in the latest commemorative book by François Bugnion, *Confronting the Hell of the Trenches: The International Committee of the Red Cross and the First World War*, ICRC, Geneva, 2018.

entitled “The Investigation of the Carnegie Commission in the Balkans”,⁹ which commented on a report on the Balkan Wars published in April 1914. These were two horrific conflicts waged in 1912 and 1913 which were as short-lived as they were violent – three weeks in 1912 and six in 1913. These wars could have been a textbook example of violence, and the members of the International Commission of Inquiry (known as the Carnegie Commission) were in no doubt about what could be learned from it:

We know what we must think about the results of European abstention. It is the fear of compromise, the fear of displeasing one or another of the nations, the terror, in short, of intervening reasonably and in time, which has brought about a crisis, the gravity of which is not only of yesterday and today, but also of tomorrow.¹⁰

These international experts saw that the atrocities had been met with “silence” and “abstention”, and they wanted to tell the “truth” with complete “independence”. Convinced of the worthiness of their mission, they believed – a dark irony indeed – that their words had been heeded:

[T]oday the Great Powers are manifestly unwilling to make war. Each one of them, Germany, England, France and the United States, to name a few, has discovered the obvious truth that the richest country has the most to lose by war, and each country wishes for peace above all things.¹¹

Just a few months later, the Sarajevo assassination took place and the powder keg exploded; the 1914 war broke out like a third Balkan war, but this time the rest of Europe was drawn in, with far-reaching consequences. Peace had been lost, and there was no time to dwell on the conclusions of the Carnegie Commission: “The real culprits in this long list of executions, assassinations, drownings, burnings, massacres and atrocities furnished by our report, are not, we repeat, the Balkan peoples. Here pity must conquer indignation. Do not let us condemn the victims.”¹²

It was no coincidence that the authors of the note that appeared in the April 1915 *Bulletin* chose to comment on the Carnegie report; they were keen to recall the importance of both the law of The Hague and the law of Geneva at a time when the

9 “L’enquête de la Commission Carnegie dans les Balkans”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 46, No. 182, 1915.

10 Baron d’Estournelles de Constant, “Introduction”, in Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars*, Publication No. 4, Washington, D.C., 1914, p. 4. Expected at the end of 1913, this report’s publication was delayed, and it eventually came out in April 1914. The Carnegie Endowment was set up in 1910 by American millionaire Andrew Carnegie with a view to promoting peace and studying what might jeopardize it. Almost immediately, the Balkan Wars and the Great War would put it to a challenging test. Yet it continued its intellectual promotion of peace with a generally very American vision in keeping with its origins; during the Great War, its president was Nicholas Murray-Butler, who was also president of Columbia University, New York. See Nadine Akhund and Stéphane Tison (eds), *En guerre pour la paix: Correspondance Paul d’Estournelles de Constant et Nicholas Murray-Butler, 1914–1919*, Alma Éditions, Paris, 2018.

11 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, above note 10, p. 17.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 19. See Annette Becker, “Les victimes, entre ‘innocence’, oubli et mémoire”, *Revue Suisse d’Histoire*, Special Issue on “Victimes”, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2007.

ICRC and National Societies were once again in such great demand.¹³ This critique should be read as a *mise en abyme* of this period of wars that were so similar and yet so different between 1912 and 1914–15:

The provisions concerning prisoners are being violated. In general, apart from some exceptions who are entitled to protection, belligerents are allowed unlimited freedom to do harm. The inquiry conducted by the Commission revealed numerous cases in which the rules on respecting the sick and wounded and protecting hospitals and medical facilities were not respected. ... This leads to the lamentable conclusion that all the efforts to humanize war have faded and cease to exist now that this horrific war has unleashed human bestiality, giving it free rein, when such excesses are not encouraged by leaders or at least not officially tolerated.¹⁴

This “human bestiality”, strongly emphasized in the French National Society’s section in 1915, was obviously not considered to be universal: was it not the enemies of France in this World War, Germany in particular, that were the warmongers responsible not just for stirring up war but also for inciting untold violence?

The pages of the *Bulletin* particularly highlighted the extreme reciprocal aggression between France and Germany. The findings of the commissions investigating the atrocities committed in 1914 during the invasion of Belgian and French territory were rejected by the German National Society:

Refutation of the accusations made by the French government. ... These accusations are lies; the German army’s command has, on the contrary, succeeded in maintaining discipline in every respect and ensuring strict compliance with the rules of the law of war in all areas of combat. ... The German government alleges that the French people themselves are responsible for the acts of pillage that the Germans have been wrongfully accused of. It lays the blame on the French soldiers for killing the wounded and committing brutal atrocities against defenceless enemies.¹⁵

13 See the remarkable book by Maartje Abbenhuis, *The Hague Conference and International Politics, 1898–1915*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2019.

14 “Les dispositions relatives aux prisonniers sont violées. En général, et à part des exceptions qui font honneur à ceux à qui elles sont dues, la liberté de nuire, laissée aux belligérants, est illimitée. L’enquête de la Commission révèle bien des cas où le respect des malades et blessés, la protection due aux hôpitaux et installations sanitaires ne furent pas observées. ... Il en ressort la constatation lamentable que tous les efforts pour humaniser la guerre s’évanouissent et n’existent plus dès que la guerre atroce a réveillé la bestialité humaine en lui lâchant la bride, quand encore ce débordement n’est pas encouragé par les chefs ou tout au moins officiellement tolérée.” “L’enquête de la Commission Carnegie dans les Balkans (*Bibliographie*)”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 46, No. 182, 1915, pp. 229–230.

15 “Réfutations des accusations formulées par le gouvernement français ... Ces accusations sont des mensonges, le commandement de l’armée allemande a su au contraire maintenir, par tous les moyens, la discipline, et faire observer, strictement, sur tous les lieux de combat, les règles du droit de la guerre. ... Le Gouvernement allemand impute à la population française elle-même, les actes de pillage dont les Allemands sont à tort accusés. Il reproche aux soldats français d’avoir achevé des blessés et commis des cruautés atroces sur leurs ennemis sans défense.” “Réfutation des accusations formulées par le Gouvernement français (*Bibliographie*)”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix Rouge*, Vol. 46, No. 183, 1915, p. 353.

Everywhere, it seemed, social Darwinism, a product of nineteenth-century thinking, was at work. Once war was declared, racism and ethnic and social contempt poisoned the systems of representation, whether this was deliberate or not, particularly in the period of anomie at the time of the invasions. As Pierre-André Taguieff remarked on the subject of anti-German sentiment between 1914 and 1918, “either one is a man or one is German – a formula of universalist exclusion”.¹⁶ If “good” is a human universal, “evil” must be rejected as inhuman or even “ahuman”, hence the dehumanization of the enemy, who is first banished from civilization to become a “savage” or a “barbarian” and then, in some cases, relegated to the level of an animal, a pest to be eradicated. Even in the National Society contributions published in the *Bulletin*, the belligerents showed themselves to be quintessentially anti-humanitarian.

What could the ICRC, which was fighting for the universal human, do in this context? The wisest course of action was to avoid publishing in the *Bulletin* any arguments that, while widespread, were far removed from the precepts of the Red Cross. This is undoubtedly why the atrocities committed during the invasions and those committed under the guise of war in the Russian Empire (namely, the pogroms and forced displacement of the population), as well as the extermination of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, did not find their way into the *Bulletin*, while the Red Cross archives in Geneva contained reams of information on them. It was as if sweeping these atrocities under the carpet, lying by omission, might really make them go away. And when it came to abuses within the Russian and Ottoman Empires, the Russian and Turkish National Societies were obviously not going to publish anything to denounce them. In fact, there were denunciations scattered throughout the *Bulletin*, slipped into remarks on the attitude of this or that particular country – for example, when the German occupation authorities wanted to dissolve the Belgian Red Cross, the German atrocities were brought up again and compared with the massacre of the Armenians – but there was never a full article devoted to such issues. In all respects, the primary aim, which was to ease the plight of the wounded and, above all, prisoners, took precedence over everything else.¹⁷

The International Prisoners of War Agency, the work of the National Societies, and the *Bulletin*

A look at one of the tables of contents of the *Bulletin*, which are all very similar, reveals the weight of the International Prisoners of War Agency. The following is from issue 186, published in April 1916:

16 Pierre-André Taguieff, *The Force of Prejudice: On Racism and Its Doubles*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2001, p. 102.

17 Annette Becker, “The Dilemmas of Protecting Civilians in Occupied Territory: The Precursory Example of World War I”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 94, No. 885, 2012.

International Prisoners-of-War Agency:

- I - Introduction
- II - Orders and general information on prisoners held by belligerents
- III - Application of the Geneva Convention
- IV - Activities in Copenhagen, Vienna, Rome, Petrograd, Constantinople and Sofia
- V - Work in Geneva
- VI - Civilians
- VII - Sanitary facilities
- VIII - The seriously injured and sick
- IX - Treasury and donations
- X - Statistics and results¹⁸

The quality and quantity of actions by the International Prisoners of War Agency, in fulfilment of the ICRC's main mission and duty during this war, should not be underestimated: the *Bulletin* devoted hundreds of pages to the plight of the wounded and prisoners, including, significantly, civilian prisoners, particularly those in occupied territories, on whose behalf the ICRC did not have freedom of movement or action, in spite of the Hague Conventions. Although the question of civilians had been raised at the various meetings in The Hague, as Gustave Ador rightly observed in 1917, it had never been envisaged that there would be such large numbers of civilian prisoners.¹⁹

The Great War was a turning point for the ICRC; the organization was able to put itself completely at the service of the wounded and prisoners, to provide information on prisoners of war, to protect them under past agreements, and to improve conditions for them in a present that was more horrific than anything that could have been imagined in the previous half-century.

The *Bulletin* focused on the three core strands of the difficult task assigned to the Agency: finding the names, drawing up lists, centralizing the information in Geneva and collating it in a file by country and then by place and regiment. This was a mammoth task carried out by 1,200 volunteers, most of them women, who appeared in a full-page photo taken in front of the Rath Museum and published in the *Bulletin* in 1915 (see Fig. 2). Making enquiries, centralizing information, contacting families – every issue of the *Bulletin* highlighted this unprecedented role and sometimes published the full reports on the visits of delegates to prisoner-of-war camps. There are plenty more reports in the archives on the

18 “Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre: I- Introduction. II- Ordonnances et renseignements généraux concernant les prisonniers chez les belligérants. III- De l'application de la Convention de Genève. IV- L'Activité à Copenhague, Vienne, Rome Petrograd, Constantinople et Sofia. V- Le travail à Genève. VI- Les civils. VII- Les sanitaires. VIII- Les grands blessés et malades. IX-Trésorerie et dons. X-Statistiques et résultats.”

19 Speech at the International Conference of the Red Cross on the issue of civilian prisoners: “Introduction sommaire à la question concernant les civils”, September 1917, p. 1, ICRC Archives, 411/10. And see A. Becker, above note 2.



Figure 2. Image of volunteers of the International Prisoners of War Agency in front of the Rath Museum, which was closed from 1916 to 1919 to host the Agency. *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 46, No. 181, 1915.

activities carried out, and a look at the contents of the *Bulletin* clearly confirms the extent of these efforts, which were by no means a secondary endeavour.²⁰

The first reports were published in 1917, with an update in 1918. The numbers were staggering. Millions of letters, reply cards, packages and money orders were exchanged thanks to the Agency. Donations and expenditures were calculated to astronomical sums. It might be wondered, however, whether there is not something trivial about all these figures. None of the contemporary actors – belligerents, non-belligerents or, first and foremost, the ICRC – had yet conceived, for obvious reasons, the message that Arthur Koestler developed in the Second World War: “Statistics don’t bleed; it is the detail which counts.”²¹ At that time, unfortunately, they were too easily satisfied with the sheer weight of the statistics showing the thousands of letters and packages sent, the volunteers working at the Agency and the numerous visits to prisoner-of-war camps by delegates, and so on, while the extreme suffering visited on human beings, their perceptions, their emotions – the detail – were not really described. In this respect, the French National Society certainly took the prize for humanitarian intelligence in 1914 when it published an extract from a professional nursing

20 See Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre: Humanitaire et culture de guerre, populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre*, Noësis, Paris, 1998; and more recently, Cédric Cotter, *(S’)Aider pour survivre: Action humanitaire et neutralité suisse pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Georg Éditeur, Chêne-Bourg, 2018.

21 Arthur Koestler, *Arrival and Departure*, Macmillan, New York, 1943.

bulletin (the *Bulletin Professionnel des Infirmières et Gardes Maladies*) which contained statistics (based on what?) showing that 54% of those wounded had been cured and could therefore return to the front, while only 3.5% had died. The journal must have failed to take into account the carnage that took place in August and September 1914, given that it concluded: “Such a low mortality rate was unheard of in previous wars.”²²

Rethinking humanitarian work, from soldiers to civilians

Beyond the figures, the ambiguities inherent in the Red Cross’s struggle to fulfil its mission, reflected in the *Bulletin*, largely arose from the inability of the belligerents to internalize neutrality and impartiality: if they treated the prisoners they took well, what would the evil enemy do? In January 1915, the Red Cross of Montenegro complained that while Austro-Hungarian prisoners were being well treated in Montenegro, Montenegrin prisoners were, by contrast, being abused by the dual monarchy, as they were not allowed to communicate with their families or receive packages.²³ The Austrians, however, considered that they were behaving correctly, a view substantiated by a favourable report from the Spanish ambassador.²⁴

How could the Red Cross, in the name of humanitarian neutrality, require a nation to do something that it was blatantly clear the other side would not? Neutrality and impartiality were not conceivable; they were inconceivable. There is no question that the ICRC’s narrow legalistic approach (reflected to some extent in the *Bulletin*), its stubborn determination to work only within the bounds of ratified conventions because of the risk of being prohibited from doing anything by the belligerents, sometimes undermined its efforts – for example, when it felt obliged to turn a blind eye to a particular national decision because it hoped to be able to take action in another area. The ICRC could accept on the one hand what it could clearly condemn on the other, for fear of jeopardizing all repatriation and relief efforts. Numerous ambulances, hospitals and hospital ships were bombed or torpedoed, but the protests were bound to fall on deaf ears in a world where each belligerent did what it wanted in the firm belief that it was only the other side that acted badly and violated minimum humanitarian standards.

Nevertheless, as is often said today by the excellent jurists who tirelessly reflect on international humanitarian law, one needs to know how to see the

22 “Un taux de mortalité aussi bas était inconnu dans les guerres précédentes.” “La statistique des blessures de guerre”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 45, No. 182, 1915, p. 230. Also see Jean-Michel Steg, *Le jour le plus meurtrier de l’histoire de France: 22 août 1914*, Fayard, Paris, 2014.

23 “La guerre européenne”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix Rouge*, Vol. 46, No. 181, 1915, p. 21.

24 “Réponse du Comité central de Vienne à notre 163^e circulaire concernant l’égalité de traitement des prisonniers”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 46, No. 182, 1915; “Réponse à notre 163^{me} circulaire sur l’égalité de traitement des prisonniers”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 46, No. 182, 1915.

glass as both half-empty and half-full. For example, in the case of civilians exposed to extreme suffering precisely because they had not been included in the Conventions, the *Bulletin* promptly reported on their particular plight and on the constant efforts undertaken, more or less successfully, to assist them. In January 1916, a lengthy article by Dr Frédéric Ferrière, who headed the civilian section of the International Prisoners of War Agency at that time, clearly set out the various issues involved, particularly the question of equal treatment for military and civilian prisoners of war. He was aware that in occupied areas, isolated families in particular were subjected to double and even triple hardship: they were in occupied territory and therefore prisoners in their own region, they had no news of their military prisoners because the men had gone off to war before the enemy invasion and occupation, and some, particularly after 1915, were deported.

The civilian section of the Agency had become involved in a task that was much bigger than originally anticipated, although it had no intention of abandoning it if it could help to alleviate the suffering of these people who, in some respects, faced an even crueller fate than combatants, because they were often completely helpless when confronted with the horrors of war.²⁵

Henceforth, each issue of the *Bulletin* included developments related to civilian internees, which revealed the same commitment to assist them by all possible means. However, in the cross-cutting dichotomy of war, manoeuvring by the belligerents is again evident, with the National Societies always towing the party line. The following extract from Austria on civilian prisoners is one example:

At home, foreigners under suspicion – those not under suspicion can move around freely – are either held in special camps, in which case they are treated as prisoners of war, or simply confined to a certain area. ... According to reports we have received, it seems that these internees have been treated in a barbaric way in other States. We have learned from a trusted source in France that they are held in several concentration camps²⁶ and treated in the most appalling way; they are made to do the most demeaning work and exposed to the most intolerable iniquities. Reports from Russia are even more lamentable. The nationals of enemy countries are sent to remote regions and abandoned there to their fate, without care from the

25 “La section civile de l’Agence a donc été entraînée à une tâche bien plus étendue que ce n’était à prévoir au début, mais elle ne songe pas à s’y soustraire si elle peut contribuer à soulager des souffrances parfois plus cruelles, si possible, que celles des combattants, puisqu’il s’agit le plus souvent de victimes absolument désarmées en face des horreurs de la guerre.” “L’agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre (Sixième article)”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 47, No. 185, 1916, p. 70.

26 Concentration camps were invented in the nineteenth century, used by the Spanish in Cuba and, later, by the British during the Boer War. See Annette Becker, “A Great War Too Long Forgotten: Civilians as Targets”, in Kai Evers and David Pan (eds), *Europe and the World: World War I as Crisis of Universalism*, Telos Press, Candor, NY, 2018.

authorities. We have a well-founded reason to fear that a good many of our citizens in Russia have been left to freeze or starve to death.²⁷

Each nation was adamant that the rules of humanitarian law were being observed “at home”, while in other States, by contrast, barbarism was rampant. The Germans, with their siege mentality, went even further, accusing the Russians,²⁸ in particular, of ill-treating their nationals, especially children, and of de-Germanizing them, which constituted an attack on their cultural and national integrity:

To all the refugee children from East Prussia were combined those who flowed out of the civilian concentration camps in Russia in great numbers, via Sweden or Romania. These were perhaps even more wretched. Furthermore, it wasn't only the simple matter of keeping them in their country, but of giving them a new homeland, and all their education was to focus on this.²⁹

This doubtless refers to refugees of German origin whose families had, in some cases, been in Russia for two centuries or more. Children are victims of war, of that there is no doubt, and the ICRC did everything in its power to protect them. The German National Society, however, seized the opportunity to push its hyper-nationalism, the effects of which would be felt well into the 1930s and 1940s.

Conclusion

As observed above, since the belligerents engaged in the Great War regarded neutrality as essentially impossible, the ICRC could draw but one conclusion (as had another charitable transnational power, the Pope): there had to be peace. It therefore found itself, like so many other humanitarian organizations, out of step

27 “Chez nous les étrangers suspects – les non suspects peuvent circuler librement- sont, ou bien retenus captifs dans des camps spéciaux, auquel cas ils sont traités comme des prisonniers de guerre, ou bien simplement confinés dans un certain territoire... D'après les nouvelles que nous avons reçues, ces internés paraissent avoir été traités de façon barbare dans les autres Etats. Nous avons appris de source sûre de France, que les internés civils sont dans plusieurs camps de concentration, traités de la façon la plus misérable, qu'ils doivent remplir les fonctions les plus basses et sont exposés aux iniquités les plus intolérables. Les nouvelles venues de Russie sont encore plus lamentables : les ressortissants de pays ennemis sont déportés dans des contrées très éloignées et simplement abandonnés à leur malheureux sort, sans que les autorités s'inquiètent d'eux. Nous nourrissons les craintes les plus fondées qu'un grand nombre de nos concitoyens en Russie aient été anéantis par le froid et la faim.” “Réponse du Comité central de Vienne à notre 163^e circulaire concernant l'égalité de traitement des prisonniers”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 46, No. 182, 1915, p. 204.

28 To the Germans, the Russians were the barbarians of all barbarians, but this was yet another war invention; it was a well-known fact that progress had been made on the Russians' humanitarian issues, something that was clarified in The Hague with the Russian jurist Martens.

29 “A tous ces enfants réfugiés de la Prusse orientale vinrent s'ajouter ceux que déversaient en grand nombre, par la Suède ou la Roumanie, les camps de concentration de civils en Russie. Ceux-ci étaient plus misérables peut-être encore. En outre, il ne s'agissait pas seulement de les conserver à leur patrie, mais de leur en redonner une, et toute leur formation était à faire dans ce domaine.” “Allemagne: Les secours de la Croix Rouge aux enfants de réfugiés”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 47, No. 187, 1916, p. 315.

with the belligerents on two counts, advocating neutrality and peace in the storm of war where both were impossible. It did, however, remain coherent, albeit with a degree of bitterness, as illustrated by this insight offered by Frédéric Ferrière, who was, in particular, strongly opposed to reprisals:

All too often, a preoccupation with the harm you hope to inflict on the enemy outweighs any thoughts about the good you could do yourself; that is the war mentality. You reconsider it later, sometimes when it is already too late.³⁰

Written in the margins of his own copy of this issue of the *Review*, now held in the ICRC Archives, Ferrière continues this thought:

Even in ordinary times, telling the truth is no easy task ... but how much more difficult it becomes in these critical times, when passions are stirred by war and/or people are blinded by hate. A neutral person who judged matters of war from the point of view of a belligerent would no longer be neutral ... Yet let those who are neutral say this humble prayer, that they be trusted, for without this their work would be in vain and useless.³¹

Had the work of the ICRC during these four years been “in vain and useless”? Quite the opposite. In the end, it was the balance of suffering, perhaps what Henry Dunant referred to as the neutrality of the victim, that enabled advances to be made during the conflict, such as transferring the seriously wounded and prisoners, the little-understood fight to stop the use of “poisonous gases” and the torpedoing of hospital ships, not taking military or civilian hostages, and the medical recognition of “barbed-wire disease”, which affected so many prisoners.

In 1917, the ICRC was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In its January 1918 issue, the *Bulletin* was proud to announce this fact and to publish a photo of the medal (see Fig. 3). It was recalled that Henry Dunant had received the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901 and that his successors were continuing his work “for the relief of suffering humanity”:³²

The ICRC sees this reward for its work and this appraisal of its efforts as a powerful incentive to persevere in the task assigned to it in international agreements, which is to undertake constant and effective efforts to improve

30 “La préoccupation du mal qu’on espère faire à l’ennemi prime trop souvent la pensée du bien qu’on pourrait se faire à soi-même; c’est la mentalité de la guerre, on en revient ... après; parfois quand il est trop tard!” “Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre (Treizième article)”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 48, No. 192, 1917, p. 413.

31 “En temps ordinaire ce n’est déjà pas une tâche aisée de dire la vérité ... Mais combien cette tâche est-elle rendue plus difficile dans ces temps critiques où la guerre a surexcité les passions et où la haine aveugle les peuples. Un neutre qui jugerait les choses de la guerre du point de vue d’un belligérant, ne serait plus un neutre ... Pourtant qu’il soit permis au neutre de faire cette humble prière, qu’on ait confiance en lui, sans quoi son travail serait vain et inutile.” Dr Frédéric Ferrière, handwritten in his personal copy of the *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 48, No. 192, 1917, p. 413. Available for consultation at the ICRC Archives in Geneva.

32 “[A]u profit de l’humanité souffrante”. “Le Prix Nobel de la Paix au Comité International”, *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 49, No. 193, 1918, p. 17.



Figure 3. Image of the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the ICRC on 11 December 1917. *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 49, No. 194, 1918.

the plight of the wounded, the sick and prisoners in a spirit of absolute neutrality and impartiality according to its motto *Inter Arma Caritas*.³³

It was no surprise that the opposite page featured a portrait of Florence Nightingale; the United Kingdom was also keen to provide evidence, with this picture of the

33 “Le Comité International voit dans cette récompense de son travail et cette appréciation de ses efforts, un puissant encouragement à persévérer dans la tâche qui lui a été indiquée dans les accords internationaux, à savoir celle d’une constante et agissante préoccupation de l’amélioration du sort des blessés, des malades et des prisonniers, dans un esprit de neutralité et d’impartialité absolues, conformément à sa devise, *Inter Arma Caritas*.” *Ibid.*, p. 18.

heroine of the Crimean War, of its humanitarian achievements, at a time when the world, the ICRC included, was reeling from the Russian Revolution and shocked by the woes of the Russian National Society.

On 15 January 1919, the publication, now over fifty years old, was renamed the *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge* (*International Review of the Red Cross*), although it still included the *Bulletin*. It was now two publications in one and came out monthly; it had taken four years of war and paradoxes for the division between the ICRC and the National Societies, readily apparent from the content, to become institutional, although the fact that they remained physically united in the same volume prolonged the ambiguities discussed above. The founding editorial in the first issue of the *Review* was signed by a triumvirate from the *Bulletin* – Paul Des Gouttes, Etienne Clouzot for the Entente Powers Service of the International Prisoners of War Agency, and K. de Watteville for the Central Powers Service. In it, they stated:

Rather than just bandaging wounds, the Red Cross wants to remedy the ills arising from war; it will focus all its efforts on solving the big problems that have received scant attention as yet, such as rehabilitation for the injured and the fight against tuberculosis, and in a broader context it will constantly pursue its mission to alleviate human suffering.³⁴

The *Bulletin* kept its own numbering, so that the January 1919 issue was No. 197, and it maintained the same editorial line, with a view to

giving greater publicity to reports on charitable activities. ... Alongside the official part, which will feature news from each Red Cross Society, space will also be given to signed articles on matters of general interest relating to assistance activities in which authors can freely express their point of view, denounce injustices and appeal for support.³⁵

With the end of the war, the *Review* made its feelings known in very clear terms:

The Great War is over! ... The joy with which the International Committee embraces this great and happy event is evident, an event whose suddenness took it, like so many others, by surprise, but which it, and everyone, has longed for in the name of suffering humanity.³⁶

34 “Au lieu de panser seulement les blessures, la Croix Rouge veut remédier aux maux entraînés par la guerre ; elle appliquera toutes ses forces à résoudre les grands problèmes à peine abordés de la rééducation des mutilés, de la lutte contre la tuberculose, et, dans une acception plus large, elle aura désormais pour visée constante l’atténuation des misères humaines.” “Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge et Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1919, p. 1.

35 “[D]onner une publicité plus large aux compte rendus de l’activité charitable. ... A côté de la partie officielle où seront toujours insérées les nouvelles de chaque Croix Rouge, il fera place à des articles signés sur toute question d’assistance d’intérêt général où chacun pourra librement exposer son point de vue, dénoncer l’injustice, appeler à l’aide.” *Ibid.*, p. 2.

36 “Elle est finie la Grande Guerre! ... On devine la joie avec laquelle le Comité International s’est associé à ce grand et heureux événement, dont la soudaineté l’a surpris comme tant d’autres, mais après lequel, au nom de l’humanité souffrante, il soupirait comme tout le monde.” “Comité International”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1919, p. 69.

The question now was, what next? This was a time of joy and relief, but also time to take stock of the suffering, violence, “barbed-wire disease” and graves³⁷ that the war had inflicted upon humanity. And then there was the most pressing legacy of the war: the hundreds of thousands of refugees pouring out of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, the famine that engulfed all of Central and Eastern Europe and the reconstruction work needed.³⁸ The now monthly publication would scarcely suffice for the ICRC and the National Societies to highlight their work and reflect on what would enable them – even if it was wishful thinking – to enhance their potential interventions against reprisals or for the protection of civilians, while at the same time ensuring a return to the fundamental principles at their core. The first issue of the *Review*, published in January 1919, is typical: the article “Situation of Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees since the Conclusion of the Armistices”³⁹ was followed by one entitled “Appeal by the Evangelical Society of Geneva in 1859 for those Wounded in Solferino”.⁴⁰ The *Review* and the *Bulletin* had changed, but the work of the Red Cross remained Protestant and Genevan, whatever its involvement in the First World War had been.⁴¹

37 See “Les tombes” and review of *Die Stacheldraht-Krankheit, Beiträge zur Psychologie des Kriegsgefangenen* in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1919.

38 Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014.

39 “Chronique sur la situation des prisonniers de guerre et des internés civils depuis la conclusion des armistices”.

40 “L’appel de la Société évangélique de Genève en 1859 en faveur des blessés de Solferino”.

41 See the article by Daniel Palmieri this issue of the *Review*.

