

# The role of experience and the place of history in the writings of ICRC presidents

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## Abstract

*Presidents of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) occupy a special position: they are not only direct witnesses to the march of history, but they also participate in it given their prominent role in the humanitarian sphere. This dual status becomes particularly salient when they write about the organization they run. By reviewing the published writings of ICRC presidents, this article analyzes how these individuals combine their personal experience with the organization’s history, and the role this history plays in their writing.*

**Keywords:** history, memory, ICRC, Second World War, ICRC presidents.

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\* The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

## Introduction

History, memory, politics and power have always been closely interlinked. The practice of attempting to suggest or establish a specific reading of history through one's personal writing is undoubtedly as old as writing itself. Thousands of books and memoirs have been written to defend their authors' achievements, offer up an interpretation of historical facts or impose a particular point of view. Some writers seek to amplify their successes, while others attempt to play down their failures; some defend political ideas with arguments drawn from the annals of history, while others reach opposite conclusions with the support of other historical episodes. This practice, far from being limited to the political sphere, is employed by everyone who aspires to safeguard their legacy. Henry Dunant himself, when he was old, poverty-stricken and largely forgotten, made a considerable effort to ensure that his role in the creation of the Red Cross and the first Geneva Convention would finally be duly recognized. He succeeded: he was awarded the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901.<sup>1</sup>

This practice is also characteristic of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and its leadership. The president of the ICRC – perhaps the most prestigious position to which a Swiss citizen can aspire – plays an eminently political role. ICRC presidents, thanks to their detailed knowledge of the ICRC's operations, their diplomatic responsibilities and their numerous field visits, become true experts on the world around them. Their experience is unique. At the same time, they are required to pilot an organization that has acquired unparalleled historical depth. This raises a number of questions. Do ICRC presidents draw on this experience in their published writings? Do they ground their arguments in their own unique expertise? Does this expertise give them standing to go beyond their usual scope of work in order to write about the ICRC's history in its wider context? How and why do ICRC presidents refer to the organization's history? In this article, we will look at the writings of ICRC presidents in an attempt to understand how they draw on both their own experience and the organization's history to make their arguments and promote the ICRC's work.

The ICRC has been led by fourteen presidents, starting in 1863: Guillaume-Henri Dufour (1863–64),<sup>2</sup> Gustave Moynier (1864–1910), Gustave Ador (1910–28), Max Huber (1928–44), Carl Burckhardt (1944–48), Paul Ruegger (1948–55), Léopold Boissier (1955–64), Samuel Gonard (1964–69), Marcel A. Naville (1969–73), Eric Martin (1973–76), Alexandre Hay (1977–87), Cornelio Sommaruga (1987–99), Jakob Kellenberger (2000–12) and Peter Maurer (July 2012–present). They have taken two different approaches to writing about history: as active and

1 André Durant, "Le premier Prix Nobel de la Paix (1901): Candidatures d'Henry Dunant, de Gustave Moynier et du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 83, No. 842, 2001.

2 The years of the presidencies are shown in parentheses. This information was found on the website of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, available at: [www.redcross.int/FR/HISTORY/not\\_pres\\_icrc.asp](http://www.redcross.int/FR/HISTORY/not_pres_icrc.asp) (all internet references were accessed in May 2019).

direct participants, and as chroniclers. ICRC presidents have published a wide variety of texts in their own names: speeches, circulars, monographs, memoirs, articles and prefaces for works of a more general nature, collections of articles, interviews and interview collections, and of course, articles for the *International Review of the Red Cross*.

ICRC presidents figure prominently in the *Review*, yet the bulk of their writings consists not of articles but rather of circulars, announcements and official documents that reflect the position of the entire Committee rather than that of one single man. The presidents' actual contribution to these texts is therefore uncertain; the situation is particularly hazy when it comes to Gustave Moynier, given his dual role as ICRC president and editor of the *Bulletin International des Sociétés de Secours aux Militaires Blessés* (the *Review's* predecessor).<sup>3</sup> With this in mind, for the purposes of this article we focus on writings that were published outside the ICRC's official channels, although at times we do refer to texts that appeared in the *Review*. This choice will allow us to explore our questions through texts that necessarily give the ICRC presidents greater leeway in expressing their own – rather than the organization's official – views. The corpus of texts selected for this study is therefore, by definition, incomplete; we also strove to include writings from all periods of the ICRC's history and from all of its presidents. The sample size for each president is unequal, as some presidents were much more prolific than others. Gustave Ador, Samuel Gonard, Marcel Naville and Eric Martin left behind few published traces of their tenures as president, especially if we only consider writings that bear their names. Others, however, wrote extensively during or after their presidency; Gustave Moynier, Max Huber and Cornelio Sommaruga fall within this cohort. This imbalance may preclude an exhaustive analysis, but we draw on enough sources to discern a number of common trends and practices.

In order to answer the questions set out above, we will begin by analyzing two features that are typical of the writings of ICRC presidents: a tendency to examine the present, and recurring references to the organization's history. We will then focus more closely on the president's unique role as practitioner and chronicler. This will be followed by a shorter section in which we analyze the strategies that ICRC presidents use to lend objectivity to their views on both the present and the past. In the final section of the article, we consider the relationship between the ICRC's presidents and the history of the organization they run. The article concludes by speculating on how this relationship may change in the future.

## Examining the present

In their published writings, ICRC presidents aim primarily to inform readers of the ICRC's ongoing work and defend decisions taken during a given president's term of

3 For more on this, see Daniel Palmieri, "To inform or govern? 150 years of the International Review of the Red Cross", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 100, No. 907, 908, 990.

office. By virtue of their position and, in many cases, their background, the presidents have an informed view of the contemporary world and of the role of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) within it – and they do not hesitate to share their experiences. For example, Gustave Ador described Switzerland’s charitable work during the First World War,<sup>4</sup> while Max Huber related the dark hours of the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> Léopold Boissier chronicled the ICRC’s operations in Guatemala,<sup>6</sup> and Alexandre Hay analyzed contemporary issues in his speech “The ICRC in Today’s World”.<sup>7</sup> The ICRC’s current president, Peter Maurer, aired the ICRC’s views of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict at a conference before publishing them in an academic journal.<sup>8</sup> The president most apt to cite examples from his time as president may have been Cornelio Sommaruga. He often and widely discussed a number of areas of particular interest for the ICRC, such as Somalia, the Gulf War, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the effort to ban anti-personnel mines.

The presidents also bring in their own expertise to elucidate more specific topics of concern. For example, Gustave Moynier looked at philanthropy in armies, Léopold Boissier focused on the assistance provided to political detainees, Max Huber penned a series of articles on various aspects of the Red Cross, Cornelio Sommaruga analyzed peacekeeping operations, and Jakob Kellenberger wrote about internally displaced people. These topics evince these men’s personal interests and reflect key concerns of their time. Most ICRC presidents also publish articles on international humanitarian law (IHL). In some cases they do not write about – or only about – the Red Cross; in some of his writings, Moynier showed a proclivity for long philosophical digressions into charity and compassion.<sup>9</sup> Many of the texts analyzed in the scope of this article are geared toward the present. They address contemporary issues and, in many cases, relate the ICRC and the Movement’s “news”.

## Turning to history

The pages penned by ICRC presidents are not limited to current events – far from it. The ICRC is ever cognizant of the importance of its own history, and has published extensively on this topic on its website<sup>10</sup> and in books,<sup>11</sup> as well as in the *Review*,

4 Gustave Ador, “La Suisse et son action charitable pendant la Guerre”, *Foi et Vie*, No. 11, 16 June 1916.

5 Max Huber, *La pensée et l’action de la Croix-Rouge*, ICRC, Geneva, 1954.

6 Léopold Boissier, “La Croix-Rouge et l’assistance aux détenus politiques”, *Politique Étrangère*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1958, pp. 16–17.

7 Alexandre Hay, “The ICRC and the World Today: Address by Mr. Alexandre Hay, President of the ICRC, at the Opening Meeting of the Twenty-Fourth International Red Cross Conference”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 22, No. 226, 1982 (*Review*’s translation).

8 Peter Maurer, “The ICRC and Its Mission: Past and Future”, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2017.

9 Gustave Moynier, *Les causes du succès de la Croix-Rouge*, Alphonse Picard, Paris, 1888.

10 ICRC, “Histoire”, available at: [www.icrc.org/fr/qui-nous-sommes/histoire](http://www.icrc.org/fr/qui-nous-sommes/histoire).

11 See the various volumes of the *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*: Pierre Boissier, *From Solferino to Tsushima*, Plon, Paris, 1963; André Durand, *From Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, Institut

whose archives are replete with historical articles.<sup>12</sup> The ICRC often looks to its past.

The ICRC's presidents have spilled large amounts of ink on this topic. The past is ubiquitous in published texts of all sorts, where references to the Red Cross's history and that of IHL amount to a *sine qua non*. Many IHL-related writings of the presidents contain a section looking back at the various Geneva Conventions. Most other pieces published by them include at least a mention of – and sometimes a discourse on – the history of the ICRC and of the Red Cross in general. The Red Cross cannot be considered in isolation from its past: “and that’s why we felt it necessary to examine it in its historical context”.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, most ICRC presidents, at one time or another, have framed their discussion of their organization’s past in this way. The history discussed in their writing seems objective and self-evident – Gustave Moynier took a historian’s approach as he searched history for the origins of the Red Cross. We will return to this topic below.

Max Huber, who trained as a lawyer, traced the long legal history of “human and individual rights”.<sup>14</sup> The Red Cross ideal rests on solid historical foundations that provide the Movement with an underlying framework: “We do not see the need or advantage, legal or otherwise, in undermining the Red Cross’s historical bases.”<sup>15</sup> Ten years before becoming president of the ICRC, Léopold Boissier was a “witness”<sup>16</sup> to the events of the Second World War and, in order to buttress his perspective on the world with historical knowledge, he “turned to the past before looking to the future”.<sup>17</sup>

Carl Burckhardt, who had studied history, may well have been interested in writing a history of the Red Cross. He would certainly have been the most qualified for this task, on paper at least, yet that did not happen – the focus of his writings lies elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> One example, before he became president of the ICRC, is his report on his mission to Danzig for the High Commissioner on behalf of the League of Nations.<sup>19</sup> Apart from that, Burckhardt wrote only one short monograph on the ICRC’s work during the Second World War.<sup>20</sup> That piece was written shortly after he assumed the presidency, and it begins, as could be expected, with a section on the origins of the Red Cross ideal that adheres to the official history

Henry Dunant, Geneva, 1978; Catherine Rey-Schyr, *From Yalta to Dien Bien Phu*, Georg, Geneva, 2007; Françoise Perret, *From Budapest to Saigon*, Georg, Geneva, 2009; Jean-Luc Blondel, *From Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City*, ICRC, Geneva, 2016.

12 For example, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 94, No. 888, 2012; and Vol. 100, Nos 907, 908, 909, 2018.

13 Max Huber, “La Croix-Rouge et l’évolution du droit international”, in M. Huber, above note 5, p. 34 (*Review’s* translation).

14 Max Huber, “Le droit des gens et la personne humaine”, in M. Huber, above note 5, pp. 269–294 (*Review’s* translation).

15 *Ibid.* (*Review’s* translation).

16 Léopold Boissier, *Nouveaux regards vers la paix*, Ed. de la Baconnière, Neuchâtel, 1944, p. 3 (*Review’s* translation).

17 *Ibid.*, p. 1 (*Review’s* translation).

18 See his bibliography in the *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse*, under “Carl J. Burckhardt”, available at: [www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/f/F11624.php](http://www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/f/F11624.php).

19 Carl Jacob Burckhardt, *Meine Danziger Mission: 1937–1939*, Georg D. W. Callwey, Munich, 1961.

20 Carl Jacob Burckhardt, *Das Kriegswerk des Internationalen Komitee vom Roten Kreuz*, AG. Gebr. Leemann & Co., Zurich, 1945.

without offering any new insights. When he moved on to the Second World War, Burckhardt was clearly writing as the ICRC's president rather than as a historian. This was an opportunity for him to describe the ICRC's activities and to share some personal impressions, such as those gathered on a mission to London.<sup>21</sup> Apart from that, despite his training, Burckhardt spent no time writing about the history of the Red Cross, preferring to train his historical lens on other objects of study.

Jakob Kellenberger sometimes touched on events related to his prior career in the Swiss diplomatic corps.<sup>22</sup> In a book of interviews with a journalist from a television station in German-speaking Switzerland, an entire chapter is devoted to Switzerland's relationship with the European Union, even though the title of the book presents Kellenberger as the president of the ICRC.<sup>23</sup> In one excerpt dedicated to the ways in which he engages with interlocutors on delicate issues, the experience of the former diplomat commingles with the thoughts of the president.<sup>24</sup> Kellenberger, a Swiss diplomat turned ICRC president, carried on a long tradition: the close links between the ICRC and Switzerland's foreign policy establishment date back to the founding of the Red Cross and are embodied in the figure of the president.<sup>25</sup> The most perfect example of this alignment is surely that of Ador, who, starting in 1917, was in charge of both the ICRC and Switzerland's diplomatic corps.<sup>26</sup>

## The ICRC's mythical origin

The ICRC presidents' writings about the organization's history often betrayed a similar structure and similar content: the founding of the ICRC, the first Geneva Convention, the early years and creation of the Movement, the expansion into field operations, the Central Tracing Agency in Basel during the Franco-Prussian War, and the impact of the First World War on the ICRC. As time passed, successive presidents would add to this list: the creation of the League of Red

21 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

22 Jakob Kellenberger, "Europa um uns, Europa in uns: Referat anlässlich seines Besuchs beim Europa Institut an der Universität Zürich am 30. Mai 2006", in *60 Jahre Churchill-Rede in Zürich: Europa in der Globalisierung*, Schulthess, Zürich, 2006; Jakob Kellenberger, *Humanitäre Tätigkeit in Konfliktsituationen: Alte und neue Herausforderungen*, Hans Erni-Stiftung, Lucerne, 2008.

23 Hansjörg Erny, *Jakob Kellenberger, Diplomat und IKRK-Präsident im Gespräch mit Hansjörg Erny*, Zytglogge Verlag, Oberhofen am Thunersee, 2006.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

25 Thomas Brückner, *Hilfe schenken: Die Beziehungen zwischen dem IKRK und der Schweiz 1919–1939*, NZZ-Libro, Zürich, 2017; Isabelle Vonèche Cardia, *Neutralité et engagement: Les relations entre le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge (CICR) et le gouvernement suisse 1938–1945*, Société d'Histoire de la Suisse Romande, Lausanne, 2012, pp. 41–43.

26 Cédric Cotter, (*s*) *Aider pour survivre: Action humanitaire et neutralité suisse pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Georg, Chêne-Bourg, 2017, pp. 211–251; Cédric Cotter, "Notre grande force consiste dans notre indépendance absolue de tout pouvoir politique: Les liens troubles entre le CICR et la Confédération", in *Action humanitaire et quête de la paix: Autour du centenaire de l'attribution du prix Nobel de la paix au Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, forthcoming, pp. 210–227; Irène Herrmann, "Gustave Ador", in *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, 9 July 2015, available at: [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/ador\\_gustave](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/ador_gustave).

Cross Societies (now the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies), the extension of assistance to civilians, the Second World War, the Biafra War, and so on.<sup>27</sup> History from the perspective of different ICRC presidents often consists of an ever-expanding series of watershed events.

More than one president has been inspired by Henry Dunant's traumatic experience at the Battle of Solferino, the Red Cross's founding moment.<sup>28</sup> The narrative of the young businessman who, having been brought face to face with the horrors of war, dreams up a utopian project takes on a romantic and mythical allure. The founders, particularly General Guillaume-Henri Dufour and Henry Dunant, now sit on a pedestal, while Gustave Moynier has been largely forgotten. Max Huber, for one, appears to have been deeply affected by Dunant, whom he mentioned quite regularly.<sup>29</sup> More broadly, ICRC presidents offer only positive comments on their predecessors' tenure. This seems to be a reflection of a robust organization that enjoys operational and institutional continuity over time. Indeed, although the role of ICRC president can be likened to that of a political leader, given the power and tasks devolved upon the person, it is clearly distinct from the latter owing to a sense of continuity in which ICRC presidents seek to do their bit without denying or downplaying their predecessors' work. The Red Cross vocation transcends personal ambition.

## Confronting errors of the past

ICRC presidents have always worked in the shadow of their predecessors. They respect and admire those who came before them, not least because they understand better than anyone the challenges that their predecessors ran up against and overcame. Cornelio Sommaruga acknowledges this willingly: "Quite honestly, I'm not so sure that I could now judge and criticize my predecessors."<sup>30</sup> Passing judgement is a painful prospect when it comes to the Second World War and the ICRC's failure to speak out against the horrors of the Nazi regime,

27 The following published writings contain paragraphs or entire sections about the ICRC's history: L. Boissier, above note 6; Alexandre Hay, "Le CICR et la Commission indépendante sur les questions humanitaires internationales: Séance inaugurale. Le CICR et les questions humanitaires internationales", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 66, No. 745, 1984; Max Huber, *Red Cross and Neutrality*, ICRC, Geneva, 1936; M. Huber, above note 5; Max Huber, *Das internationale Rote Kreuz: Idee und Wirklichkeit*, Max Niehans, Zürich, 1951; Max Huber, "L'idée de la Croix-Rouge", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 35, No. 413, 1953; Jakob Kellenberger, "Sixty Years of the Geneva Conventions: Learning from the Past to Better Face the Future: Ceremony to Celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, Geneva, 12 August 2009", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 91, No. 875, 2009; Paul Ruegger, "L'organisation de la Croix-Rouge internationale sous ses aspects juridiques", in *Recueil des cours de l'Académie de droit international 1953*, 1953; Cornelio Sommaruga, "Le Droit de Genève: Défi permanent de protéger et respecter", in *La souveraineté au XXIe siècle*, Editions Interuniversitaires Suisses, Fribourg, 2004.

28 M. Huber, above note 5; P. Ruegger, above note 27; Cornelio Sommaruga, "Foreword", in Jonathan Moore (ed.), *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York, 1998.

29 See the publications by Max Huber cited in note 27.

30 Massimo Lorenzi, *Entretiens avec Cornelio Sommaruga, président du CICR*, Editions Favre, Lausanne, 1998, p. 107 (Review's translation).



especially the Holocaust: “I don’t want to justify their silence, but since I’m living in the present I want to learn lessons so as to inform our work in the present.”<sup>31</sup> It is indeed very difficult to properly analyze the ICRC’s failure through the lens of the period in which the events occurred without falling victim to anachronism and historical teleology. Yet ICRC presidents must acknowledge this failure without offering justification or excuses. The study of history thus raises awareness of past mistakes just as it provides guidelines on how to avoid these same errors in the future.

The ICRC and the Movement have had their share of missteps and challenging times. The failures have generally been acknowledged in the published writings of various ICRC presidents, but in many cases the authors consider these difficulties exogenous and not directly imputable to the ICRC: the laws are full of gaps and behind the times (a situation sometimes blamed on States for not acting on the ICRC’s innovative proposals), world wars have unforeseeable and disproportionate effects, and so on. However, in the texts analyzed for this study, only a few events have elicited clear criticism – or regret – from ICRC presidents. Examples include the Movement’s 1952 conference in Toronto, where Paul Ruegger criticized, at a later stage, the political declarations of several National Societies, without saying much more about the topic.<sup>32</sup> Jakob Kellenberger mentions a number of events where his efforts did not lead to the desired outcome.<sup>33</sup>

The main area in which the ICRC’s failures cannot be ignored is the Second World War. No other president was forced to face up to the ICRC’s actions during this dark time as often as Cornelio Sommaruga.<sup>34</sup>

## ICRC presidents: Humanitarian practitioners and writers

### The person or the organization?

Two distinct approaches to describing the ICRC and its history have emerged. The first approach is one of restraint. According to this approach, the president is a member of a committee and defends an ideal; he plays down his own personality next to the importance of the Red Cross and its work. Max Huber clearly falls into this category in his writings. In the appropriately titled article “Au service du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge” (“Serving the International Committee of the Red Cross”),<sup>35</sup> he strongly supported the idea of a collective effort towards an overarching goal. Interestingly, he generally used the subject pronoun “we” rather than “I”. When writing about the ICRC, he did it in a self-effacing way:

31 *Ibid.*, p. 119 (*Review’s* translation).

32 P. Ruegger, above note 27, p. 405.

33 H. Erny, above note 23, p. 87.

34 For more specific examples, see notes 98 to 101.

35 Max Huber, “Au service du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 25, No. 294, 1943.



“Without deluding ourselves about the paucity of our resources in the face of all the misfortune wrought by war, we do not have the right to lose heart, for the values defended by the Red Cross are infinitely grand.”<sup>36</sup> And rather than taking credit for the Red Cross’s merits and victories, he preferred to highlight its work and those who serve it: “We are a community.”<sup>37</sup> Huber plays an insignificant part in his own texts, with very few exceptions. This self-effacement is “required by the idea of the Red Cross, the idea of service in its purest form”.<sup>38</sup>

When they wrote about the ICRC in their respective eras, Léopold Boissier, Paul Ruegger, Alexandre Hay and Jakob Kellenberger followed the same logic. They were expressing the views of the ICRC, and they saved the use of “I” mainly for their speeches. Yet even these presidents’ personal opinions give the impression of being overshadowed by those of the organization. For example, Kellenberger, who expressed his pride in being a part of the ICRC,<sup>39</sup> commonly used phrases like “the ICRC thinks”, “the ICRC proposes” and “the ICRC does”, especially when the text was to be published by the ICRC.

The second approach to describing the ICRC’s history is one in which the writers feature more prominently in their own texts. Gustave Moynier is emblematic in this regard. Appointed “president for life” in 1904,<sup>40</sup> Moynier experienced and helped shape the Red Cross for half a century, starting with its founding. Pivoting between his role as a practitioner and a historian, Moynier sometimes used “I” and sometimes adopted a more indirect style. For example, at times he wrote of the Committee in the third person: “Henceforth, it [the Committee] was always viewed as the natural guardian of the traditions of the Conference and the one body authorised to interpret its thinking.”<sup>41</sup> He sometimes referred to himself in the third person as well: “This proposal was made by your president of the time; finding it recorded in a book that had just appeared, he felt he was doing the right thing by sharing it with you.”<sup>42</sup> Yet he was not averse to using the first person and emphasizing his contribution to the Red Cross’s success: “I thought as much already in 1863, and ... I went so far as to predict for them that the mission that they had just announced, but that only existed on paper, ‘would reverberate the world over’.”<sup>43</sup> When discussing the 1863 conference at which the Committee was created, he wrote openly of boldness and wild hopes.<sup>44</sup> He also claimed to be the source of the text that was submitted to the 1864 conference and became the first Geneva Convention.<sup>45</sup> Although in his writing he

36 *Ibid.*, p. 169 (*Review’s* translation).

37 *Ibid.*, p. 171 (*Review’s* translation).

38 *Ibid.*, p. 173 (*Review’s* translation).

39 J. Kellenberger, *Humanitäre Tätigkeit in Konfliktsituationen*, above note 22, p. 41.

40 François Bugnion, *Gustave Moynier 1826–1910*, Ed. Slatkine, Geneva, 2010, p. 85.

41 Gustave Moynier, *Notions essentielles sur la Croix-Rouge*, Georg et Cie, Geneva, 1896, p. 36 (*Review’s* translation).

42 Gustave Moynier, “Les dix premières années de la Croix-Rouge”, *Bulletin de la Société Genevoise d’Utilité Publique*, No. 10, 1873, p. 2 (*Review’s* translation).

43 G. Moynier, above note 9, p. 20 (*Review’s* translation).

44 G. Moynier, above note 42, p. 8.

45 Gustave Moynier, *Mes heures de travail*, Société Générale d’Imprimerie, Geneva, 1907, p. 46.

often referred to his accomplishments, he did not mention other people for fear of overlooking some of them.<sup>46</sup>

Moynier's particular approach to writing the Red Cross story culminated in his memoirs, where he declared himself to be the founder of the Red Cross:

After confirming with the writer, Mr Henry Dunant, that he had no intention of filling that grave gap on which he had rightly focused attention, I resolved to take the initiative myself for this charitable campaign and to take on the role of founder, which as yet belonged to no one.<sup>47</sup>

Moynier downplayed Dunant's importance in the founding of the Red Cross. In his supplementary notes, he wrote of Dunant without ever citing him, and he even sought to destroy his image, accusing him of not having a "positive vocation" and of having been fired by a bank for incompetence.<sup>48</sup> Worse yet, although Moynier acknowledged the merits of *A Memory of Solferino*, he reckoned that the book was written by "a more practised writer" than Dunant.<sup>49</sup> Going further, he implied that Dunant was brought into the Committee in order to assist Moynier – who was quickly disappointed by Dunant's work. Moynier also justified Dunant's removal from the Committee in the wake of his business failings. He considered Dunant a "pseudo philanthropist"<sup>50</sup> and noted that even Geneva's justice system felt Dunant was "someone who it was important to ensure could do no more harm".<sup>51</sup> In his memoirs, Moynier deliberately sought to discredit the man who came up with the idea behind the Red Cross, and he laid full claim to the merits of this charitable institution.

More surprisingly, given the recent changes in the ICRC's communications approach, Cornelio Sommaruga also adopted the second approach and took full responsibility for his opinions and for his impact on the organization's operations. In interviews, he said "I" and gave his opinion quite freely: "I would say", "I think", "I believe", "myself", "personally", "in my opinion", "for me" (one of his leitmotifs), "during my presidency", "in my view", and so on.<sup>52</sup> He would go back and forth between personal statements and more formal ones.<sup>53</sup> For Sommaruga, the president is the one who knows: "You may be interested to learn that ...".<sup>54</sup> Of interest for this study is the fact that he not only had an insider's take on the organization's work, but was also deeply involved in that work and could therefore speak of the ICRC from a position of authority: "Having myself seen a great many ICRC delegates at work ... I know well that

46 G. Moynier, above note 42, p. 75.

47 G. Moynier, above note 45, p. 35 (*Review's* translation).

48 "I only knew that he had no positive vocation, but that he held a pen in a bank, and that he was let go because he was unable to write letters in proper French." *Ibid.*, p. 53 (*Review's* translation).

49 *Ibid.*, p. 55 (*Review's* translation).

50 *Ibid.*, p. 62 (*Review's* translation).

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63 (*Review's* translation).

52 These examples are from Guy Bedouelle, "L'humanitaire et le politique, conversation avec Cornelio Sommaruga" *Pierre d'Angle*, No. 2, April 1996; and M. Lorenzi, above note 30 (*Review's* translation).

53 M. Lorenzi, above note 30.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 106 (*Review's* translation).

the possibilities for such credible action are boundless.”<sup>55</sup> From this perspective, it was his experience as president that gave him the credibility needed to address certain topics. He also drew on his experience to reach certain conclusions: “What convinces me all the more of this, after ten years at the helm of an organization that pioneered humanitarian action, is my daily realization that ...”<sup>56</sup>

The ICRC is a sizeable organization built on the commitment of large numbers of highly qualified employees – yet the president stands out. In a collection of interviews, Cornelio Sommaruga made that clear: “[D]uring my tenure an important event occurred in which I played a clear role that I consider positive ...”<sup>57</sup> He was writing about being the first person to condemn the internment camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>58</sup> He noted that it was thanks to the ICRC and to his own efforts that people learned of the famine in Somalia in 1991,<sup>59</sup> and he emphasized his own role in the success of the Ottawa Landmine Ban Convention: “Yes, it’s true, my colleagues and I played a key role in getting the convention ratified.”<sup>60</sup> At the same time, he mentioned a number of decisions he took on his own, against the advice of some of his colleagues – for instance, when he first publicly stated that landmines should be banned: “I made this very important decision without running it by the normal decision-making bodies, in this case my colleagues on the Committee, because I did not have time before the press conference.”<sup>61</sup> While Max Huber favoured the Red Cross community and self-effacement, Sommaruga emphasized his own authority and his own character: “It’s true, I stepped in where other presidents before me didn’t.”<sup>62</sup>

Jakob Kellenberger, in a collection of interviews, also spoke of his experience.<sup>63</sup> Although these were personal interviews, he went back and forth between “I think” and “we think”. The way the interviews were conducted encouraged him to open up more and to share his opinions and his thoughts. He did not hesitate to illustrate his comments with recollections; in such cases he was both witness and participant, reporting on what he saw and what he did. The text combined factual information, such as about the ICRC’s operations, and more personal impressions. Kellenberger also used numerous examples from his field visits and added a more human and personal touch by recounting his meetings with such figures as Pervez Musharraf, Kofi Annan, Vladimir Putin and

55 Cornelio Sommaruga, “Humanitarian Law and Human Rights in the Legal Arsenal of the ICRC”, in Daniel Warner (ed.), *Human Rights and Humanitarian Law: The Quest for Universality*, M. Nijhoff, The Hague, 1997, p. 133.

56 C. Sommaruga, above note 28, pp. ix–xiii.

57 M. Lorenzi, above note 30, p. 201 (*Review’s* translation).

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

60 Virginie Poyetton, *Cornelio Sommaruga: L’humanité en mission*, Slatkine, Geneva, 2018, p. 107 (*Review’s* translation).

61 M. Lorenzi, above note 30, p. 96 (*Review’s* translation). Sommaruga makes similar statements in V. Poyetton, above note 60, pp. 107–108.

62 M. Lorenzi, above note 30, p. 96 (*Review’s* translation).

63 H. Erny, above note 23, p. 15.

George W. Bush.<sup>64</sup> In a speech after his presidency ended, Marcel Naville still spoke of the ICRC as an expert and cited his own experiences.<sup>65</sup>

## Creating a sense of objectivity

The style of writing employed by different presidents may vary from a very personal tone to a more distant and impersonal one, but it very often conveys a sense of objectivity and legitimacy. Apart from obviously personal writings, the only text analyzed as part of this study in which the writer asserts his subjectivity is Max Huber's *The Good Samaritan*:

The pages in which this meditation is set down are of a purely personal nature, and in no way express the views of an institution. If the author's thought was focused upon the Red Cross, it was simply because the position entrusted to him there has brought him the experiences, and placed him before the oppressive problems [about which he presents] conclusions in this essay, as he has had to do since the beginning of his Red Cross work and will have to do till the end of the chapter. Again, for himself, personally.<sup>66</sup>

This passage illustrates how the author's views as expressed in the book were influenced by his experience as ICRC president.

In various texts, certain phrases are used to explain and support the writer's assertions. Gustave Moynier felt he was entitled to speak about the history of the Red Cross and even claimed to be doing a historian's work. His writings display a real historical ambition: "I endeavoured to write in layman's terms through my various essays ...".<sup>67</sup> He reminded his readers on occasion that he was totally objective and factual: "I felt it appropriate to simply state the facts ...".<sup>68</sup> He felt entitled to refer back to the Red Cross's early years because he witnessed them up close: "The author of these pages, after helping give birth to the Red Cross and serving it for 33 years, believes he is doing something useful by recording his experience here."<sup>69</sup> His involvement and his experience attested to the truthfulness of his words: "Owing to my participation in the various conferences that addressed this topic, I am in a position to certify that ...".<sup>70</sup> His very position as president and his direct involvement in the ICRC's history gave him credibility:

It is in response to this legitimate desire that I will attempt to trace [the Red Cross's] history and demonstrate the successful outcome. The active role I

64 *Ibid.*

65 "Allocution de Monsieur MARCEL NAVILLE, président de la Fondation pour Genève", in Jacques Freymond, *Continuité d'une politique étrangère: Allocutions et textes*, Fondation pour Genève, Geneva, 1982, pp. 7–13.

66 Max Huber, *The Good Samaritan: Reflections on the Gospel and Work in the Red Cross*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1945, p. 25.

67 G. Moynier, above note 9, p. 3 (*Review's* translation).

68 G. Moynier, "Les dix premières années de la Croix-Rouge", above note 42, p. 76 (*Review's* translation).

69 G. Moynier, above note 41, p. 7 (our translation).

70 G. Moynier, above note 9, pp. 21–22 (*Review's* translation).

played in this success allows me to do so, and I feel that, in so doing, I will to some extent be completing an unfinished civilizing mission, which will only truly be completed once it is understood and approved by everyone.<sup>71</sup>

This was what authorized Moynier to “narrate” and “lay out”<sup>72</sup> the facts surrounding the birth of the ICRC and of the Red Cross in general. He seemed to believe that his writings were excellent reading for anyone interested in learning about the Red Cross’s work: “I like to think that the many details I have just shared already give a rather clear idea of the activity of the relief committees during the 1870–71 war.”<sup>73</sup> This self-assurance recurs: “The developments that I just described are sufficient to provide you with an exact account of the preparatory work required of our societies in times of peace.”<sup>74</sup>

In general, ICRC presidents presented events as self-evident or as a result of common sense.<sup>75</sup> In some cases, ICRC presidents took personal notes in anticipation of potential memory lapses. To our knowledge, Jakob Kellenberger was the only one to mention his private journal in his published writing: “I also like to note what I experienced and how I felt so that I can understand it more clearly and work on it, in a diary of sorts.”<sup>76</sup> It is possible that other presidents did the same and used their personal notes to help them remember events, but they don’t mention it.

The ICRC presidents employed all these elements – their experience and authority, being a first-hand witness, and using an impersonal tone – to establish objectivity. They also drew on techniques of a more academic nature. They often referred to legal works, history books, university courses on the ICRC, and the organization’s own published texts. When Gustave Moynier, Max Huber and Paul Ruegger wrote about legal issues, they included extensive footnotes. This scholarly practice is most evident in essays unpacking detailed legal matters.<sup>77</sup>

In some cases, particular historians are assigned certain attributions in the presidents’ writings. Paul des Gouttes, a former ICRC secretary and vice-president as well as a former *Review* editor-in-chief, was considered a “particularly qualified historian of the Red Cross”<sup>78</sup> by Paul Ruegger. Ruegger also mentioned Frédérique Noailly, who wrote her thesis on the ICRC, as “a distinguished historian of the Red Cross”.<sup>79</sup> Here again, referring to subject-matter experts lends objectivity to a text and undoubtedly makes it more credible.<sup>80</sup>

71 Gustave Moynier, *La neutralité des militaires blessés et du service de santé des armées*, Impr. Toinon, Paris, 1867, p. 18.

72 G. Moynier, above note 45, p. 46 (*Review’s* translation); G. Moynier, above note 42, p. 3 (*Review’s* translation).

73 *Ibid.*, p. 62 (*Review’s* translation).

74 *Ibid.*, p. 36 (*Review’s* translation).

75 M. Lorenzi, above note 30, p. 20.

76 H. Erny, above note 23, p. 47 (*Review’s* translation).

77 G. Moynier, *Etude sur la Convention de Genève pour l’amélioration du sort des militaires blessés dans les armées en campagne: 1864 et 1868*, Geneva, 1870; M. Huber, above note 5; M. Huber, above note 13; P. Ruegger, above note 27.

78 P. Ruegger, above note 27, p. 390 (*Review’s* translation).

79 *Ibid.*, p. 412 (*Review’s* translation).

80 If we were to analyze everything the presidents wrote, including their speeches, we would surely find various references to Red Cross historians, including some former delegates.

## The use of history in ICRC presidents' contributions

ICRC presidents do not just make history, they write it. But what role does their writing about history play in their arguments? Could it conflict with the research done by historians? The presidents have clearly not been bothered by this prospect. In fact, they have believed that the Red Cross's work is so important that it should be properly studied: "The historical role of this work has become too important for us not to analyze the circumstances that gave rise to it."<sup>81</sup> There was no doubt that we could only understand this work "in its historical context".<sup>82</sup> These aspirations were already evident in the early years of the ICRC: Gustave Moynier already wanted his work to be completed, and he believed that Red Cross literature should "include documents meant for the general public, as these pages – whose virtue lies in a scrupulous faithfulness to historical truth – will have little appeal for that public".<sup>83</sup> This excerpt shows again that Moynier was sure of his objectivity. For Moynier, it seemed obvious that future historians would agree with him, since the "role of impartial history ... is to ensure each person is duly credited".<sup>84</sup> However, Moynier's attempts to lay claim to the main merits of the Red Cross mission ended in utter failure, if we are to judge by Henry Dunant's current standing and the oblivion into which Moynier has fallen. All ICRC presidents have stated at least once their desire for a historical study on some topic or other – for example, Paul Ruegger hoped for "an in-depth legal and historical study"<sup>85</sup> into the ICRC's decision to accept its international mission, and he also mentioned another topic that would be worth "an in-depth monograph".<sup>86</sup> Such desires unmistakably illustrate the need for the ICRC to understand its past better from both a political and an operational perspective. The same is true for the history of IHL – the organization's ability to face up to future challenges in the legal realm depends on it.<sup>87</sup>

When historical works are written about the ICRC, the organization's president may be asked to write the preface.<sup>88</sup> These writings extol the importance of historical study and of the Red Cross's work, and they often cite the key role played by the ICRC in the development of IHL and of the humanitarian sphere. They are also used to underscore the ICRC's continuity and its depth of experience: "Even today, ICRC delegates, whose task is to protect and assist millions of victims of some 30 conflicts around the world, are following in the footsteps of their predecessors in Spain from 1936 to 1939."<sup>89</sup> The events

81 G. Moynier, above note 9, p. 4 (*Review's* translation).

82 M. Huber, above note 13, p. 25 (*Review's* translation).

83 Gustave Moynier, *La Croix-Rouge, son passé et son avenir*, ICRC, Geneva, 1882, pp. 254–255 (*Review's* translation).

84 G. Moynier, above note 71, p. 40 (*Review's* translation).

85 P. Ruegger, above note 27, p. 385 (*Review's* translation).

86 *Ibid.*, p. 389 (*Review's* translation).

87 J. Kellenberger, above note 27.

88 For example: I. V. Cardia, above note 25.

89 Cornelio Sommaruga, "Préface", in Pierre Marqués, *La Croix-Rouge pendant la guerre d'Espagne (1936–1939): Les missionnaires de l'humanitaire*, L'Harmattan, Montreal, 2000, p. 11 (*Review's* translation).

mentioned in prefaces often present the ICRC in a positive light: “The author also shows how the ICRC is able, thanks to the credibility of its work and the effectiveness of its diplomacy, ... to resolve extremely complex situations ...”.<sup>90</sup> In addition, the preface writers tend to praise the historiographical contribution of the works they are introducing, which often address “a crucial period”,<sup>91</sup> are “highly topical”,<sup>92</sup> or are a “remarkable book”.<sup>93</sup> In their prefaces, the presidents, while lauding the works’ critical autonomy, never fail to highlight the qualities and merits of the Red Cross.

This aspect illustrates one of the roles of history for the ICRC (and organizations like it): it recontextualizes modern-day events by showing the ways in which the ICRC is a major force in the humanitarian sphere and IHL. Furthermore, the ICRC’s historical depth strengthens its position and legitimizes it. Through their historical writings, the presidents have an opportunity to demonstrate the expertise and experience that the ICRC has accumulated over the years. While humanitarian challenges change with time, the fundamentals remain, and with its unrivalled track record, the ICRC is able to keep pace with these challenges. ICRC presidents can point to past successes – this “genealogy” of humanitarian work – when negotiating access or an assistance operation or when defending the organization’s credibility. The same is true of the organization’s legal track record. IHL arose alongside, thanks to, and in step with the ICRC, and it has become one of the most universally recognized bodies of law. It is thus in the president’s interest to promote and encourage historical research in order to better highlight this developing body of law. What’s more, an ICRC president informed by the past views the present differently. It is sometimes said that all history is contemporary, that the past is analyzed through today’s eyes. By learning about the past, ICRC presidents can find inspiration and come up with a new take on today’s challenges.

When referring to a work on the Spanish Civil War, Cornelio Sommaruga asserted that the ICRC learned a number of lessons from that conflict.<sup>94</sup> Several times he mentioned the importance of drawing lessons from the past, particularly in the context of tragic events: “In this respect, our duty to keep history in mind plays a considerable role: the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda not only oblige us to examine past errors, they also make it impossible for us to remain inactive in similar circumstances now.”<sup>95</sup> Another use of history now comes into focus. Its role is not simply to consolidate the ICRC’s position or to allow us to

90 Jakob Kellenberger, “Genève et Paris: Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la France, 1863–1918”, in Véronique Harouel, *Genève–Paris 1863–1918: Le droit humanitaire en construction*, Société Henry Dunant, Geneva, 2003, p. vii (*Review’s* translation).

91 *Ibid.* (*Review’s* translation).

92 Cornelio Sommaruga, “Mirror of Humanity: Experience and Conscience”, in François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, ICRC, Geneva, 2003, p. xxii (*Review’s* translation).

93 *Ibid.*, p. xix.

94 C. Sommaruga, above note 89, p. 11.

95 Cornelio Sommaruga, “International Humanitarian Law: Even Wars Have Limits”, in *Finnish Yearbook of International Law*, Vol. 9, 1998, p. 411.



see current events from a new perspective. A knowledge of history also lets us identify past mistakes and their consequences and, in some cases, come up with ideas for correcting them. ICRC presidents can learn and build on acquired knowledge and use it to address the challenges they face in their work, so that they can avoid repeating the same mistakes that some of their predecessors made. At times, ICRC presidents are forced by outside circumstances to confront past mistakes, but crisis can turn into opportunity – if the right lessons are learned.

When it comes to the Second World War, the ICRC should be given credit for commissioning a historian, Jean-Claude Favez, to shed light on the dark moments of that era. At a time when the ICRC Archives were not yet open to the public, this expert was able to freely consult all the documents required for his analysis. His monograph, published in 1988,<sup>96</sup> was the starting point for an abundant literature on this topic.<sup>97</sup> As requested by Professor Favez, the ICRC responded to his study. President Sommaruga wrote a short statement thanking the historian for his sizeable achievement, but also seeking to nuance some of his points. One of the president’s most interesting remarks concerns the limited amount of first-hand testimonies in the study:

This leads us to the observation that the method that consists of relying, almost exclusively, on written documents alone provides the International Committee with an image of itself that it barely recognizes. This image does not correspond to how the ICRC members and employees who worked for this organization during the Second World War perceived their experience and their commitment. ... We find it regrettable that you did not complete this necessarily sterile and fragmentary image that emerges from written documents alone, by giving more weight to the words of staff members who are still alive.<sup>98</sup>

Later in the statement, when addressing Favez’s reading of the ICRC’s intentions at the time, Sommaruga found that it was “not always convincing for those on the Committee who experienced these things themselves”.<sup>99</sup> On the one hand, we can imagine that the president has a unique and informed take on the past thanks to his expertise and his special role as a humanitarian practitioner. On the other, the line between history and memory can become blurred, and personal experience can be given precedence over academically reconstructed historical knowledge.

96 Jean-Claude Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

97 Some of the main publications include Arieh Ben-Tov, *Facing the Holocaust in Budapest: The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Jews in Hungary, 1943–1945*, Institut Henry Dunant, Geneva, 1988; François Bugnion, “L’action du CICR pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale: Le CICR infiltré par les Nazis?”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 79, No. 824, 1997; Daniel Palmier and Irène Herrmann, “Des humanitaires en eaux troubles: Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge (CICR) et les camps de concentration nazis, 1933–1939”, *Matériaux pour l’Histoire de Notre Temps*, No. 95, 2009; I. V. Cardia, above note 25; Irène Herrmann, *L’humanitaire en questions: Réflexions autour de l’histoire du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, Editions du Cerf, Paris, 2018, pp. 83–118.

98 Cornelio Sommaruga, “Le point de vue du CICR”, in Jean-Claude Favez, *Une mission impossible? Le CICR, les déportations et les camps de concentration nazis*, Editions Payot, Lausanne, 1988, p. 377 (Review’s translation).

99 *Ibid.*, p. 378 (Review’s translation).

One may even wonder whether, to borrow Annette Becker's words, Favez's book does not also help the organization heal from the trauma caused by its failings during the Second World War.<sup>100</sup>

When public criticism of the ICRC's history arises, it comes primarily from outside the organization. Favez's study on the Second World War is a good example. It is clear that tasking someone outside the organization to conduct period-specific research guarantees the work's independence and neutrality. It may also be a way of getting in front of the expected criticism in order to respond to it. In this regard, it would be interesting and surely instructive to look at a much larger corpus that includes documents written by other ICRC members and employees: Committee members, delegates, former delegates, and so on. There is a good chance that there are far fewer unfavourable studies (with evidentiary support) than purely informational texts or texts extolling the organization, and that those negative ones which do exist were written mainly by disgruntled former staff members.

Here again, the president's experience is significant, as it confers a certain authority on him when it comes to understanding his predecessors' reasoning. But ICRC presidents do not generally dispute those historical analyses with which they disagree. What's more, questions of prestige or history should never distract the ICRC from its responsibility towards its beneficiaries.<sup>101</sup> Rather, the presidents hope that the organization actually absorbs the lessons gleaned from past failures: "At the ICRC, we learn a lot from history."<sup>102</sup> This assertion is undoubtedly true – the ICRC learns from its history and from its past mistakes. It really has no other choice. With its staff constantly turning over, the ICRC's institutional memory is often short, if not entirely absent. The organization must study its history for the sake of its operational continuity and in order to move forward. The same imperative applies to the ICRC president.

## Conclusion

ICRC presidents, employing a variety of practices, have all tended to publicly discuss their work as humanitarian practitioners and to get involved in writing and interpreting the organization's recent and distant past. Some of the texts analyzed for this article, especially those written by Gustave Moynier, were used to impose their authors' perspective on events. Moynier sought, unsuccessfully, to shape history to his advantage. Whenever they defend their track record, ICRC presidents obviously have a lead on historians and can help create a perception of the ICRC that will not be reworked until much later by historians. The desire to spread one's own views and to present oneself – often unconsciously – in a favourable light is completely natural. The counterexample of Moynier shows, however, that humility is undoubtedly the most important virtue when it comes to leaving your mark for posterity.

100 Emmanuel Laurentin (ed.), *A quoi sert l'histoire aujourd'hui?*, Bayard, Paris, 2010, pp. 62–65.

101 M. Lorenzi, above note 30, p. 22.

102 H. Erny, above note 23, p. 70 (Review's translation).

Presidents' writings serve the institution's purposes, but their attitude to the history of their organization goes far beyond simply glorifying a mythical past. The texts they write are a way of giving the ICRC a long-term historical grounding. Asked about the usefulness of history, French historian Raphaëlle Branche said this: "History frees us from fatalism and a sense of irreversibility. Its very nature is to be a force of freedom."<sup>103</sup> The presidents, in the words they pen, can illustrate this conception of history. The ICRC needs history and uses it to legitimize its work and support its operations, potentially – and paradoxically – gaining more freedom in the process. The experience it has accumulated over its more than 150 years of existence gives it undeniable authority and attests to its expertise. The president too can make use of history in order to supplement his own analysis. As the ICRC has adapted and stood the test of time, its legitimacy has only increased. The organization has learned from its long experience, overcome various tribulations and avoided the trap of fatalism by seeking out new responses to humanitarian challenges. In other words, by emphasizing its long history, the ICRC is able to build on a unique heritage in the humanitarian sphere. It is thus no surprise that the organization, at times through its presidents, attempts to make the most of that history.

The ICRC's official history is, of course, imperfect. In some cases it defers to memory rather than facts; it focuses on several major figures while overlooking the large majority of staff members; it trumpets its successes and sweeps aside its failings. But it is the task of historians to rework this official history. Through their written texts, ICRC presidents – acting as both humanitarian practitioners and writers – provide an ideal entry point to anyone interested in learning more about the organization. Their writings are essential to understanding a time period and the views of one man (and maybe someday one woman) who is deeply engaged with the world. This view can then be supplemented and refined by archival research, once time has calmed passions and provided welcome perspective.

Since its creation, the ICRC has documented its work through the *Bulletin* and then the *Review*, and through the ICRC Archives, which have expanded regularly over the years. The ICRC Archives were opened to the public around twenty years ago – a political gesture by a past president – which means that people can consult documents which date back to 1863 in order to study the history of the ICRC, the history of other organizations that left few traces, and the history of the regions in which the ICRC has operated. The Archives can also be used to take a new look at specific issues, such as war medicine, IHL, the fate of civilians, technological progress in weapon development, decolonization, detention in times of armed conflict, torture and humanitarian aid in general. Furthermore, here is a distinct humanitarian value in the Archives, which can help family members get back into contact with each other.<sup>104</sup>

103 E. Laurentin, above note 100, p.84-85 (*Review's* translation).

104 Elisabeth Baumgartner and Lisa Ott, "Determining the Fate of Missing Persons: The Importance of Archives for 'Dealing with the Past' Mechanisms", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 99, No.

It is also instructive to note that the presidents' writings are not contradicted by the organization and are often published by it, either in the *Review* itself or in an *ad hoc* manner. This fact points to the fundamental role played by the president for the ICRC and to the organization's solidity and continuity over time. The Red Cross ideal and the soul of the organization itself permeate everything these men wrote. The Movement's early history is as if set in stone and so old as to have become a sort of myth. While the task of historians is to deconstruct and add nuance, certain clichés recur and help to romanticize the ICRC's history. None of that is the least bit surprising. The tendency to idealize founding myths can be found among other humanitarian organizations as well, such as the International Save the Children Union and Doctors Without Borders.<sup>105</sup>

During its first 150 years, the *Review* has helped disseminate the writings of ICRC presidents, and it will surely continue to do so. It also regularly publishes historical articles that add nuance to the ICRC's official history and contribute to a deeper and more critical reading of the past. A growing number of historical articles have been published in recent years, and one can hope that this trend will continue. Critical research can help to improve the ICRC's humanitarian response and strengthen the organization's hand in an uncertain world. Intentionally or not, a history that is of service is not necessarily a servile history.

What will be the legacy of Peter Maurer, the ICRC's current president? Will he carry on the "tradition" by which the president, informed by his personal experience, writes the first draft of the official history of his tenure? He could obviously be tempted to pen the history of the organization he runs as it unfurls, and to influence that history implicitly by telling it from his perspective. However, unlike many of his predecessors, and perhaps because he trained as a historian, he is aware that the official history will necessarily be reworked in the future:

I often wonder how history will record the period in which we now live. Will people judge the decisions and despair at the struggles? Or will they be bolstered by the possibility that even faced with the most intractable challenges, a line could be drawn between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, and thus a legacy could be passed to the next generation?<sup>106</sup>

These questions transcend the office of the ICRC's president. They remind us all that the wholly natural tendency to present oneself in the best possible light may one day be tested against the facts.

905, 2017; Valerie McKnight Hashemi, "A Balancing Act: The Revised Rules of Access to the ICRC Archives Reflect Multiple Stakes and Challenges", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 100, No. 907–909, 2018.

105 Joëlle Droux, "Life during Wartime: The Save the Children International Union and the Dilemmas of Warfare Relief, 1919–1947", in Johannes Paulmann (ed.), *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016; Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, "Revenir sur le mythe fondateur de Médecins sans frontières: Les relations entre les médecins français et le CICR pendant la guerre du Biafra (1967–1970)", *Relations Internationales*, No. 146, 2011.

106 P. Maurer, above note 8, pp. 11–12.

