

Books and reviews : "Champions of charity: War and the rise of the Red Cross"

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John F. Hutchinson, *Champions of charity: War and the rise of the Red Cross*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1996, 448 pp.

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John F. Hutchinson, professor of history at Simon Fraser University (Canada), tells the story of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement from its origins to the 1920s. The very critical look he takes at the Movement leads him to conclude that the ICRC and the National Societies fell, as it were, into a trap: in striving to ease the suffering of wounded and sick soldiers, they were gradually swept up in the nationalistic and militaristic currents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In support of his view, Hutchinson quotes abundantly from the deliberations of the diplomatic conferences and International Conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and from the works of Gustave Moynier. Numerous photographs also serve to illustrate his point. The book concludes by relating the circumstances in which the League of Red Cross Societies (today the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) was founded — an event which the author claims weakened the Movement as a whole.

At the time when Hutchinson researched his book, permission to consult the ICRC's archives was granted subject to very restrictive conditions, in particular the obligation for authors who were given access to specific documents to submit their manuscripts to the ICRC before publication. Hutchinson found this unacceptable and decided not to consult the archives. It should be pointed out that in early 1996 the ICRC made all documents over 50 years old available to researchers [1] .

Written by an author whose status is unusual in that he apparently has no connection with the Red Cross, *Champions of charity* reaches conclusions that may shock the Movement's members and sympathizers; nevertheless, they are supported by an abundance of documentary evidence which the author has examined with great care. Hutchinson deserves credit for opening a debate in which other historians may wish to take part.

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In this important book, John F. Hutchinson, professor of history at Simon Fraser University, takes a critical look at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement from about 1860 until just after World War I. To do so, Hutchinson had to overcome the "courteous stonewalling" (p. 3) of the ICRC, as well as a tendency on the part of many to treat Red Cross personnel and agencies with near religious devotion [2] .

From the very first chapter Hutchinson offers his readers a persuasive revisionist interpretation of Red Cross developments. Henry Dunant, who vigorously pushed the idea of voluntary medical aid societies that would work to help the war wounded, is shown to be an evangelical Christian with a messianic complex, who at times could spout "pseudoreligious nonsense" (p. 14). He pursued various schemes of dubious nature and was plagued by financial scandal. The Geneva Committee of Five that took up Dunant's ideas and became over time the respected ICRC manifested typical Swiss middle-class attitudes toward the lower classes and especially lower-class women (as compared to higher-class ladies). In these social attitudes, early ICRC members were of course no different from most of the European middle-class males of their time, notably the French. The particular theme of gender, and others as well, is supported not only by documentary evidence but also by the many illustrations that grace the manuscript.

Among other points, Hutchinson shows that the basic ideas written into the first Geneva Convention (1864), authorizing neutral medical personnel to attend to sick and wounded combatants, were circulating widely in Europe; that Dunant and his Swiss colleagues had no monopoly on these ideas; that the German practice of voluntary medical assistance in war was quite advanced for its time; and that these ideas and practices were accepted by States largely out of concern to make war more efficient and acceptable, rather than because of the triumph of morality over *raison d'État* . With the creation of larger, draft armies and the more rapid spread of news, military establishments needed to do more to care for the wounded. Or, as the author writes, "Realpolitik was every bit as important as humanitarianism..." (p. 29).

It is true, as Hutchinson notes, and as a recent study by an ICRC official also shows [3] , that the ICRC first saw itself not as the lead operational Red Cross agency but as an organization that would support the national aid societies. However, Hutchinson makes clear that early on, and thereafter, the Swiss founding fathers of the movement manoeuvred to protect their position as the guardian of Red Cross developments. Rather than being high-minded, self-effacing, and above the fray, the Swiss in Geneva were part of the fray, beating back an early French bid for Red Cross leadership, then later an American one. From one point of view this ICRC primacy, or at least independence, turned out to be a good thing, for the modern ICRC has proved its humanitarian worth in numerous armed conflicts and complex emergencies — especially in contemporary international relations. From another viewpoint, however, Hutchinson's history shows that the all-Swiss ICRC could be just as nationalistic, self-serving, and petty as any other component of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The author also shows that the original symbol of the Movement, a red cross on a white background, probably had nothing to do with reversing the Swiss flag. He says there is no evidence for this interpretation in the 1860s. Rather, the bogus interpretation of the symbol's evolution was allowed to develop later, as part of a wise effort to downplay the role of Christianity in the origins of a movement that had become more global and multi-cultural, especially after Turkish involvement in the 1870s.

No doubt the central point to this study is that nation-states, principally their militaries, appropriated National Red

Cross and Red Crescent Societies for their national purposes, and the ICRC was powerless to prevent them — although the Geneva group did not always oppose the nationalists. This trend was evident by 1870 but was clarified beyond doubt by World War I. There would not be, during wartime, neutral and international protection and assistance controlled from Geneva, but rather each National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society would service primarily its own nationals. From time to time the Russians or another group would propose a more centralized arrangement, but such plans always collapsed on the rocky shores of militarized nationalism. At times the ICRC joined the nationalist coalition to protect its position. Just as universal Marxism yielded to nationalism, so did Dunant's universal humanitarianism. In the United States during World War I an American was convicted of treason for refusing to support the American Red-Cross — supposedly a private or at least quasi-private humanitarian society. The Japanese Red Cross Society of the time had no trouble combining militarism, sexism, aggression and expansionism, and was perhaps not so different from many other national units of this "humanitarian" movement.

Hutchinson concludes this publication, part of a multi-volume research agenda, with an engrossing effort by the American Henry Davison to reorient and restructure the Red Cross Movement after World War I by creating the League, now International Federation, of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. His original plan would have subordinated the ICRC to League (and American) leadership. The League was created through questionable procedures and was formally recognized in 1928, but in much weakened form, in part because of shrewd manoeuvres on the part of the ICRC, which was experienced in diplomacy. But this episode left the Movement even more fractured than before, now with two headquarters in Geneva and a certain rivalry between them on many occasions since the 1920s.

Overall, Hutchinson has done prodigious and careful research with a much needed critical eye. If the ICRC will be unhappy with this work, so will be many French, Americans, Japanese, and others. In so far as this non-historian reviewer can tell, errors are few and inconsequential. Most Red Cross publications are bland and self-congratulatory. Few are the independent authors who have striven for objective understanding of this much revered Movement and who have braved the difficulties of circumventing the obstacles in gaining access to the mostly closed archives of the ICRC. This is an important book for readers interested in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, international relations, public health, and military establishments.

Notes :

1. The new *Rules governing access to the archives of the ICRC* were published in *IRRC* , No. 314, September-October 1996, pp. 554.
2. Book review reprinted with the permission of the *The International History Review*.
3. François Bugnion, *Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des victimes de la guerre* , ICRC, Geneva, 1994, 1438 pp.

