

OPINION NOTE

How warfare has evolved – a humanitarian organization’s perception: The case of the ICRC, 1863–1960

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To understand how war is perceived and how it has evolved over time, we must first choose the right agent to study: one that is at once involved in the bellicosity, and yet keeps its distance. Such an agent will be better placed to maintain an objective and rational view of developments. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) would seem to fit the bill. As a humanitarian organization that has been working with the victims of armed conflict for more than 153 years, the ICRC has plenty of experience of war, yet it preserves its ability to interpret critically in its capacity as non-belligerent. It is therefore in a position to grasp the evolution of mankind’s oldest activity over one and a half centuries – a period during which warfare has undergone incredible and deadly transformations in conjunction with technological breakthroughs and the rise of extremist political ideologies. On top of this, the ICRC was itself, in its early days, made up of people who had experienced war in one way or another. Of the five members who decided to found the organization in February 1863, three had personally experienced armed violence

to varying degrees.¹ This fact also made the nascent organization uniquely entitled to voice its views on a subject of which it had empirical experience.

Unfortunately, although the word “war” is omnipresent in its publications, statements and archives, it must be admitted that for many years the ICRC does not seem to have addressed this issue other than as a theoretical and general concept. Its writings are not exactly overflowing with polemological analyses enabling us to define both the subject at hand and its changing nature. It was therefore necessary to scour hundreds of texts² to draw out, piecemeal, some overarching ideas about how the ICRC viewed belligerence. These views were often constructed around opposing terms – war/peace; military/civilian; civilization/barbarity; national/international – and it was upon those dualities that the ICRC gradually built its imaginary version of war, which we will attempt to decipher here. This intellectual exercise went on for the first fifty years of the ICRC’s existence, coinciding with the organization’s very scarce presence on the battlefield itself. Structural reasons meant that the ICRC, then a small-scale organization, was largely absent from the theatre of military operations before the cataclysm of 1914. This absence, moreover, went hand in hand with the ICRC’s long-standing hesitant apprehension of belligerence. The main reason that our article only covers the period up to the 1960s is because, from then on, the ICRC deconstructed its centennial make-believe version of war to understand it in a different way. In the conclusion to the article, we will briefly outline how the ICRC reacted to the new forms of war that appeared after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The age of illusions: 1863–1914

War/peace

The ICRC and the Red Cross are not pacifist organizations. This credo opens the first issue of the *Bulletin International des Sociétés de Secours aux Militaires Blessés*, in response to the reproach levelled at the ICRC that it strove to attenuate the effects of war rather than cutting off the roots of evil.³ The ICRC and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) that it

1 In addition to Henry Dunant (1828–1910), who instigated the Red Cross project after his traumatic experience of seeing wounded soldiers after the Battle of Solferino (24 June 1859), there was General Guillaume-Henri Dufour (1787–1875), Swiss army officer and engineer, then commander-in-chief of the Swiss federal army during the Sonderbund civil war (1847); and Louis Appia (1818–1898), who was a war surgeon during several armed conflicts, including the 1859 Italian War.

2 The research for this essay focused in particular on articles published in the *Bulletin International des Sociétés de Secours aux Militaires Blessés* (which became the *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge* (BISCR) and later the *International Review of the Red Cross*), on the reports of the International Conferences of the Red Cross, and on publications by ICRC members, especially Gustave Moynier (1826–1910), second president of the ICRC from 1864 to 1910.

3 *BISCR*, No. 1, October 1869, p. 3.

founded set out primarily to humanize conflict.⁴ Paradoxically, while war constituted the reason for its existence and its “business” to all intents and purposes, the ICRC quickly came to espouse a discourse which suggested that it, too, sought to fight against this scourge. In 1873, Gustave Moynier observed that the Red Cross indirectly served the efforts of the so-called peace societies (i.e., the peace movement), of which it was in fact a useful auxiliary.⁵ The founding of the ICRC and of the Red Cross was indeed intended to curb bellicose activity. Through organized, concerted and universal assistance for the victims of war, the ambition of the rescuers who banded together under the emblem of a red cross on a white background was to bring compassion to the battlefield. The more humanized war became, the less inhumanity would occur. This would inevitably lead to the “perfectly natural desire to see the source of so much misfortune run dry”,⁶ and finally, in the future, to the disappearance of war itself – which, since it would no longer be an expression of human brutality, would lose its purpose. As Moynier asked in 1888, was war not already seen as being the exception, deplored by all?⁷ Tensions between people and nations would find other – peaceful – outlets, modelled on the arbitration tribunals⁸ proven to have prevented parties from resorting to armed force. The founders of the ICRC, while far from naive, had this perception reinforced by the successes they had notched up. To their credit, they had achieved the creation of the Geneva Convention – a universal and permanent international treaty that placed limits on the hitherto absolute power of States to wage war. This first text of modern international humanitarian law (IHL) paved the way for other similar agreements, each of which restricted that kingly right a little more. But of course, on the other hand, the ICRC was also witnessing the modernization of weapons and the development of new killing machines. Here, too, this phenomenon made the violence ever more threatening and lent even more weight to the “impassioned pleas against war”.⁹ Weapon modernization could also, paradoxically, have beneficial effects for victims. The creation of so-called “humanitarian” bullets¹⁰ that penetrate tissue and bone at high speed while keeping their shape was one example of those advances, because such ammunition caused less irreversible

4 In the words of Louis Appia; “Rapport adressé au Comité international par M. le Docteur Appia sur sa mission auprès de l’Armée alliée dans le Schleswig”, *Secours aux blessés: Communication du Comité international faisant suite au compte rendu de la Conférence internationale de Genève*, Geneva, 1864, p. 144.

5 “Les dix premières années de la Croix-Rouge”, *BISCR*, No. 6, July 1873, p. 241.

6 *Ibid.*

7 “Les causes du succès de la Croix-Rouge”, *Mémorial des vingt-cinq premières années de la Croix-Rouge, 1863–1888*, Geneva, 1888, p. 13.

8 Modelled on the Alabama tribunal of arbitration, held in Geneva in 1872.

9 “Les causes du succès de la Croix-Rouge”, above note 7, p. 16.

10 The *BISCR* devoted many articles to the perfecting of handguns, which were still the most commonly used weapons in war. One of the earliest examples of “humanitarian” bullets was mentioned in *BISCR*, No. 64, October 1885, pp. 151–152. Among the members of the ICRC, Dr Ferrière was the most reluctant to adopt this terminology; see, for example, his article “Les balles humanitaires”, *BISCR*, No. 154, April 1908, pp. 89–90.

harm and killed fewer people at the end of the day.¹¹ But the overriding factor that would prevent these new technologies of war from being truly deadly was the reluctance of States themselves to use them; no State wanted to be the one to take that first uncivilized step and become an outcast. Wasn't the same true of asphyxiating gases and dum-dum bullets, which had been prohibited by the 1899 Hague Convention?

The setting in which the ICRC developed was another factor likely to reinforce these irenic tendencies. After all, the ICRC was founded in Switzerland by Swiss citizens. Since the peace treaties of Vienna and Paris of 1814–15, the Swiss Confederation had not been involved in any international conflict.¹² It had experienced some internal unrest, but the most serious – the so-called Sonderbund civil war of 1847 – lasted barely a month and claimed fewer than 100 lives (of some 200,000 men mobilized). What's more, the victors – led by General Guillaume-Henry Dufour, future ICRC member – behaved in a “humane” way both during and after the fighting. All these facts led the ICRC to imagine that war and violence would be gradually defeated by man's ingenuity and solidarity, in particular that born within the Movement.

The ICRC's love affair with peace reached its height at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the awards of the first Nobel Peace Prizes. The connection between peace and the Red Cross was central to the case that Henry Dunant made, with the support of certain pacifists, with a view to being awarded this recognition. He succeeded in 1901.¹³ The ICRC wanted to try its luck too, but had less success, with no fewer than five refusals between 1900 and 1905, whether as an institution or in the name of its president, Gustave Moynier.

Civilization/barbarity

The kind of war that underpinned the ICRC's humanitarian programme was of a particular sort, which could be classified as Napoleonic: namely conflict between States, with forces of well supervised conscripts,¹⁴ and involving only a few decisive, if bloody, battles. Reinforcing this vision, the founders of the ICRC observed three recent or ongoing wars: the Crimean War (1853–56), the Italian War (1859) and the American Civil War (1861–65). The latter of these, while a civil war, nevertheless saw states fighting against each other.

11 As proven in the articles that the *BISCR* published about developments noted in army medical reports that showed a drop in mortality rates among the wounded from one war to the next; see, for example, “Quelques rapports sanitaires à propos de la guerre sud-africaine”, *BISCR*, No. 124, October 1900, pp. 269–279.

12 Switzerland was the country least likely to go to war, according to the ICRC: see “L'avenir de la Croix-Rouge”, *BISCR*, No. 50, April 1882, p. 81.

13 Henry Dunant's candidature was, however, contested by one section of the peace movement. To soothe these tensions, the very first Nobel Peace Prize was jointly awarded to Henry Dunant and the French pacifist Frédéric Passy.

14 For the ICRC, this factor also contributed to a certain degree of commiseration towards soldiers who were nationals and not mercenaries; also on this topic, see *ibid.*, p. 68; “Mémorial des vingt-cinq premières années de la Croix-Rouge”, *BISCR*, No. 76, October 1888, p. 151.

It was with this model of war in mind that the ICRC would develop and, in parallel, forge the Movement and IHL. While those conflicts were by no means angelic – thinking in particular of such bloody events as the battles of Solferino and Malakoff – they did take place between “civilized” States. War, while of course remaining humankind’s greatest self-inflicted evil and one that should be fought against and wiped out, nevertheless acquired an air of legitimacy and honour when waged between two nations that had acquired the same degree of “civilization”. Only States could minimize war’s terrible impact, especially for the victims. Civilization, therefore, also civilized armed violence. Without necessarily subscribing to Thomas Aquinas’s “just war” theory, in its early decades the ICRC, adopting a largely chivalrous view of war, acknowledged that it was necessary, while waiting for an alternative to be found. What’s more, when war was waged in the name of civilization, it even seemed to be a requirement.

The ICRC supported the West’s “civilizing” mission in the world, which was hardly surprising given that the organization was born of that same Western stock. The reason was simple: given the number of indigenous peoples who did not count as civilized because of their barbaric ways,¹⁵ others had to civilize them. Hence the need for colonial expeditions and conquest which, as well as bringing “progress and enlightenment” to remote corners of the globe, would at the same time abolish their terrible warlike habits and contribute to this process of humanizing warfare. For the few non-European nations, this process of civilizing violence could take place without any external military intervention. Such was the case of Japan, held up as an example by the ICRC,¹⁶ after choosing to adopt Western civilization and become a standard-bearer for the Red Cross in Asia.

The ICRC also participated in this civilizing mission by seeking to involve as many countries as possible in its humanitarian project.¹⁷ Every uncivilized country that adopted the Red Cross principles and emblem – like Japan and Siam¹⁸ – represented a victory for the ICRC. But there were also some defeats, such as the Ottoman Empire, which, despite rapidly becoming one of the signatories of the Geneva Convention,¹⁹ was unable to cease its “savagery” towards its Christian inhabitants²⁰ and, moreover, had renounced the cross for

15 The populations of Africa was the primary target of this criticism; see, for example, “La Croix-Rouge chez les nègres”, *BISCR*, No. 41, January 1880, p. 5. Surprisingly, this stereotype of “uncivilized” peoples also applied to whites in Africa. Thus, the Boers – a population of Dutch origin whose ancestors emigrated to southern Africa in the seventeenth century – were called “semi barbarians” by the *BISCR*: see “Les insurrections dans l’Afrique austral”, *BISCR*, No. 46, April 1881, p. 53.

16 At the risk of failing to give due consideration to the violations of IHL committed by Japan against a State like China, seen as less civilized: see “La guerre sino-japonaise et le droit international”, *BISCR*, No. 107, July 1896, p. 212 in particular.

17 On the ICRC’s efforts to encourage the Japanese delegation that visited Switzerland, see “L’ambassade japonaise”, *BISCR*, No. 17, October 1873, p. 11–16. Japan ratified the Geneva Convention and founded a Red Cross Society in 1887.

18 Siam (now Thailand) ratified the Geneva Convention in 1895 and at the same time set up a fledgling Red Cross society. The Siam Red Cross was recognized by the ICRC in 1920.

19 In 1865.

20 See the many accounts of atrocities by Turkish troops recounted in the *BISCR*, particularly during the Great Eastern Crisis (1875–78).

the crescent.²¹ And then there were cases where the ICRC was blind, such as President Gustave Moynier's fervent support²² for the Congo Free State – the first African State to adopt the Geneva Convention (1888) and set up a Red Cross society (1889), but which proved to be a puppet State controlled by Leopold II and where the system of colonial exploitation led to one of the first ethnocides of the twentieth century.²³ Still in the name of civilization, there were aberrations like the ICRC's affirmation that it had been necessary for British troops to kill the wounded Dervishes after the Battle of Omdurman (2 September 1898).²⁴ This binary vision of civilization versus barbarity persisted at the ICRC, though in a more nuanced form, throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

International/national

The ICRC's plan was to start by tackling the tip of the iceberg – international conflicts, which were the most visible and publicized and the biggest threat to global stability.²⁵ The ICRC therefore addressed States to suggest that they set up civilian societies for relief to wounded soldiers and ratify, from 1864, an international pact recognizing those societies and protecting their members and the victims they would care for. From the start, the ICRC did not forget that there was also the submerged part of the iceberg, made up of internal wars that took various forms – but it left the task of humanizing them for later.²⁶ From the time of the Third Carlist War (1872–76), however, the ICRC's interest in civil wars rose, because the Spanish example had shown that there could be fighting within a single nation that still followed the ideal model which the ICRC had envisaged for international conflicts (organized armed forces respecting a certain code of chivalry and ready to reach agreements, especially when it came to helping the wounded).²⁷ The idea that the Red Cross had a role to play in fratricidal conflicts therefore took hold,²⁸ and national relief societies would be involved in several such conflicts, especially in their colonies. It goes without saying that, in this context, the relief was primarily, if not exclusively,

21 This change took place during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–78.

22 Gustave Moynier was, moreover, Congo's consul-general in Switzerland from 1890 to 1904.

23 It is estimated that several million Africans died in Leopold's Congo as a consequence of colonial exploitation of the territory between 1888 and 1908; for figures, see: <http://necrometrics.com/20c5m.htm> (all internet references were accessed in December 2015).

24 "Les blessés de la bataille d'Omdurman", *BISCR*, No. 117, January 1899, pp. 40–41. While continuing to plead "attenuating circumstances", the ICRC nevertheless gave a British war correspondent in Sudan an opportunity to speak out against what had happened: see "Les blessés de la bataille d'Omdurman", *BISCR*, No. 118, April 1899, pp. 109–113.

25 "We are restricting ourselves to addressing only the issue of the great struggles for power in Europe": see Jean-François Pitteloud (ed.), *Procès-verbaux des séances du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge, 17 février 1863–28 août 1914*, Geneva, 1999, p. 20.

26 *Ibid.*

27 See "Les blessés espagnols", *BISCR*, No. 19, April 1874, pp. 145–148; and "Les blessés espagnols", *BISCR*, No. 20, July 1874, pp. 194–197.

28 "It is to be hoped that, in internal conflicts, the parties will draw on the charitable principles that have governed our work, and that they will at least agree on one shared idea: respect and care for the wounded": "Les dix premières années de la Croix-Rouge", *BISCR*, No. 16, July 1873, p. 235.

administered to the occupying troops. It is also worth noting that when disturbances broke out in the Ottoman Empire, the ICRC’s sympathy lay instantly with the victims on the insurgents’ side, who were often Christians like the ICRC’s members.²⁹

Military progress/humanitarian progress

Lastly, to round up this ICRC origins story in relation to war, the organization seemed very interested in technological advances – not only, as we have seen, in terms of “humane” weapons, but also and above all in terms of the potential improvements in care for the wounded soldiers who, prior to 1914, were the ICRC’s main concern. The organization ran competitions to perfect the design of its stretchers and to improve the set-up of a field hospital. It canvassed the national relief societies and regularly published their proposals in the *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge (BISCR)*, complete with illustrations. The ICRC also advocated the use of electricity on the battlefield in order to collect the wounded at night.³⁰ As for the combatants, the ICRC stressed, for example, the extent to which improvements in transportation, and in particular the use of the railways, had changed the face of war, giving it the appearance of both speed and mass, made possible by the swift transfer of troops from one side of the European continent to the other. The issue of future wars, in relation to the continued and innovative efforts being made to find ever more disastrous ways to kill one’s fellow man, was clearly addressed at the Fifth International Conference of the Red Cross (International Conference) in 1892. The International Conference put this issue to the National Societies, and called upon the ICRC to gather their views and to report to the next Conference.³¹ Thus, in 1897, at the Sixth International Conference, the ICRC submitted a list of nineteen measures aimed more at preparing the National Societies for traditional mass warfare than for a conflict using new scientific discoveries.³² This was hardly surprising, since the Movement overlooked certain key advances and did not, for example, anticipate the effects of military use of civilian technology. In 1911, therefore, although it reported on the bombardments by Italian aircraft during the Italo-Turkish War (air strikes that also hit some protected sites), the ICRC did not pick up on the fact that this was the first time that bombs had been dropped from planes, and that war would henceforth be fought in the skies.

29 See, for example, the articles “L’insurrection macédonienne”, *BISCR*, No. 136, October 1903, pp. 205–206; and “Le Comité de Constantinople et les massacres arméniens”, *BISCR*, No. 159, July 1909, pp. 191–192.

30 Resolution M of the Third International Conference, Geneva, 1884. The same Conference expressed the wish that antiseptic dressings be the norm in the medical services of all armies operating in the field, as well in National Red Cross Societies.

31 Fifth International Conference, Rome, 1892.

32 Sixth International Conference, Vienna, 1897.

Disillusion: 1914–18

The First World War marked a twofold turning point for the ICRC in terms of its perception of how war was evolving. Its work for the victims, mainly prisoners of war, was on an unprecedented scale. The ICRC became a truly operational organization, epitomized by its International Prisoners of War Agency, which at the height of the conflict had more than 1,200 staff, and the material and financial means to match. This time the ICRC was directly involved, sending representatives (known as delegates) to inspect prison camps in the belligerent countries. It was therefore in direct contact with the reality of war, which became a tangible subject for study. Paradoxically, it was at this time that a dichotomy emerged between the ICRC in Geneva and the ICRC in the field – a split that would have repercussions for how armed violence was perceived by those facing it directly and those far removed from it and only able to understand it through the eyes of those on the ground.

The ICRC's direct involvement in the war enabled it to observe more closely how things were evolving, and in particular the new methods of waging war. Underwater warfare and the torpedoing of ships (including hospital ships), reprisals against prisoners of war and the use of poison gas were all issues of concern to the ICRC. Throughout the conflict, the organization issued protests and appeals to the belligerents to limit or ban the use of new weapons.³³ However, these efforts were often in vain or only acted upon well after the end of the war, as in the case of poison gas.³⁴

The lack of reaction to its initiatives opened the ICRC's eyes to a new reality: war was no longer chivalrous – even though it was still largely waged by “civilized” societies – and overstepped all the limits imposed by international law. The violence was becoming as barbaric as it was among the “barbarians”. Stemming from this observation, the ICRC realized the ineffectiveness and inadequacy of that same law which was supposed to govern armed violence. These two phenomena led the ICRC, even before the end of the conflict, to consider drafting a code for prisoners of war that would be adapted to the new face of war.³⁵ This work would first come to fruition in 1929 with the adoption of the Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.

Another major upheaval in the ICRC's perception of war concerned the victims. The invasions of Belgium, Serbia and northern France, the deportations of civilians, the hostages taken among occupied populations, and finally the tragic extermination of Armenians and Assyrian-Chaldeans in the Ottoman Empire

33 First published in the *BISCR*, these appeals and protests were collected and published in a book at the end of the conflict: *Actes du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge pendant la guerre 1914–1918*, Geneva, 1918.

34 The efforts begun by the ICRC on this issue came to fruition with the adoption, in 1925, of the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare.

35 Daniel Palmieri (ed.), *Les procès-verbaux de l'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre, 21 août 1914–11 novembre 1918*, ICRC, Geneva, 2014, p. 235, available in French at: www.icrc.org/fre/resources/documents/publication/p4220.htm.

brought home to the ICRC that war no longer just affected soldiers. The First World War highlighted that civilians were and had always been victims of armed conflict. For further proof that this was a long-standing phenomenon, the ICRC had only to recall the images that emerged during the Balkan Wars revealing the suffering of communities forced out of former Turkish territories in Europe. This realization prompted the ICRC to devote part of its humanitarian work to civilian victims, setting up a section especially dedicated to them within the International Prisoners of War Agency. In the field, when they had the opportunity and authorization, ICRC delegates also visited civilians detained because of their enemy nationality.³⁶ Further, the ICRC publicly denounced injustices committed against civilians, including the Armenian massacre of 1915.³⁷ But it was on the ICRC’s post-war activities that this new focus on civilian victims really had an impact.

After the First World War: 1920–30

The interwar period saw the ICRC renounce the distinction between international conflicts, where it had a legal mandate to intervene, and internal conflicts, which lay outside its mandate. Called upon to help with the process of repatriating former prisoners from Russia and the former Central Powers, the ICRC set up its first permanent delegations abroad, either in transit countries or in the countries of origin of those former prisoners. At that time, Eastern Europe, where the ICRC was now present – whether in Berlin, Prague, Budapest or Warsaw – was experiencing major political instability, giving rise to unrest, revolutions and wars. The ICRC was inevitably drawn into several of these events, as epitomized by its delegate in Hungary, who was present at the time of the Bolshevik revolution of March 1919, followed by the “White” counter-revolution in August. The ICRC delegate, faced with people’s suffering and humanitarian opportunities, got involved in an internal crisis, which would normally lie outside the ICRC’s mandate. By acting in this way, the delegate unwittingly paved the way for the ICRC’s future involvement in non-international armed conflicts; he also opened up the ICRC’s work to other victims (in this case, political prisoners³⁸) and to new activities (direct distributions of aid and medical supplies to civilians).

Much of the ICRC’s work in the 1920s was therefore focused on non-combatants, for whom decisions made in wartime were still taking their toll (e.g., the economic blockade of Germany and its allies, leading to food shortages in

36 The reports of the delegates’ visits during the First World War were published in *Documents publiés à l’occasion de la Guerre*, 24 series, Geneva, ICRC, March 1915–January 1920.

37 “An Armenian committee has appealed to us concerning the Armenian populations massacred by the Turks, with the undissimulated purpose of extermination”: *BISCR*, No. 184, October 1915, p. 438.

38 “La protection des étrangers à Budapest”, *BISCR*, No. 202, 15 June 1919, p. 705. Another category of new victims was refugees, particularly from Russia: “Appel du Comité international en faveur des réfugiées russes nécessiteux”, *BISCR*, No. 220, 15 December 1920.

those countries³⁹) or having direct consequences, with the redrawing of the map of Europe and the resulting clashes between nationalities. The Hungarian precedent and other internal disturbances (such as in Silesia and Ireland) ended up making the ICRC's role in civil wars official, putting an end to the dichotomy between international and national. Surprisingly, this new area of humanitarian action continued to be overlooked by the law of war, as all efforts to revise the treaties continued to focus on international war; the Geneva Conventions of 1929 were a perfect example of this.

The other major shift in the ICRC's perception was the realization that there was little chance of an end to war one day. Contrary to pacifist hopes, expressed in particular by the victorious States, the First World War had its successors. Thanks to its delegations in Eastern Europe, the ICRC was well placed to observe that the guns had not fallen silent after 11 November 1918. New international conflicts broke out between Poland and the fledgling Soviet Russia, between Hungary and its neighbours, and between Greece and Turkey, perpetuating the carnage of 1914–18. Exhortations to “combat the warlike spirit that still hangs over the world”, as the 1921 International Conference put it,⁴⁰ or the stronger idea of preventing war, expressed during the 1934 International Conference in Tokyo,⁴¹ sounded a lot like pious hopes.

Hope for universal peace was also dampened by the inability to achieve respect for the law – Hague and Geneva alike – both during the First World War and after. As for the plan to set up an international criminal court to try violations of the Geneva Convention, as the ICRC proposed in 1921, it was a dead letter.⁴² That was why the ICRC's efforts would now focus on striving to strengthen existing IHL. The first step was to have specific protection for certain categories of victims who had paid the highest price in the First World War – i.e., prisoners of war and inhabitants of territories under military occupation. While the ICRC was successful for the first group, with the adoption in 1929 of a specific convention for prisoners of war, its draft for a new international treaty containing thirty-three articles protecting civilians of enemy nationality – which had been endorsed by the Fifteenth International Conference in 1934⁴³ – stalled in the face of the reticence of some States. The ICRC also pushed for the protection of civilians against the dangers of airborne chemical warfare agents; it was entrusted with a mandate by the 12th International Conference to this end.⁴⁴ It convened three international expert committees between 1928 and 1931 and set up a document centre on airborne chemical warfare to collect all the information about the subject and make it available to the National Societies and

39 Maurice Gehri, “La vie chère en Autriche”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 22, 15 October 1920.

40 Resolution V of the Tenth International Conference, Geneva, 1921.

41 Resolution XXIV of the Fifteenth International Conference, Tokyo, 1934.

42 Resolution IV of the Sixth International Conference, Vienna, 1897. Fifty years earlier, the ICRC had already proposed that an international criminal body be set up with the same purpose, also to no avail; see “Note sur la création d’une institution judiciaire internationale propre à prévenir et à réprimer les infractions à la Convention de Genève, par M. Gustave Moynier”, *BISCR*, No. 11, April 1872, pp. 122–131.

43 Resolution 39 of the Fifteenth International Conference, Tokyo, 1934.

44 Resolution V of the Twelfth International Conference, Geneva, 1925.

the public. However, the ICRC ran out of financial resources and stopped this work in early 1938.

Many of the armed conflicts of the 1930s were characterized by the presence of an authoritarian political ideology that lay at the origin of the violence. The examples of the Spanish Civil War, the Sino-Japanese wars and Italy’s territorial conquests demonstrated that it was no longer just about defeating the enemy, but rather about destroying the enemy. It seems that the ICRC did not realize, or ignored, the totalitarian nature of the regimes involved in these confrontations, and that it continued to classify these “new” conflicts according to its usual system (international wars or civil wars). The delegates on the ground, on the other hand, while not classifying the violence, noted that the conflicts were special. Thus, when protected Red Cross sites were bombed and mustard gas used by the Italian army in Ethiopia, and when prisoners were executed by Francoist and Republican forces in Spain, the ICRC delegates on the ground communicated their concerns about violations of the law and this new heightened kind of fighting to Geneva. But ICRC Headquarters did not really take much heed of complaints from the field.

The end of illusions: 1939–45

For the ICRC, the Second World War brought with it a sense of déjà vu. The organization was faced with the same issues as during the previous world war, although this time the humanitarian needs and efforts would be on a scale never reached during the 1914–18 conflict. In terms of the law, the situation was mixed: although the ICRC had the satisfaction of seeing that its work for the abolition of poison gas had paid off – this weapon was not used on a mass scale during the war – on the other hand the protection of civilian populations against air raids, something for which the ICRC and the Red Cross had campaigned,⁴⁵ proved unattainable from the Poland Campaign onwards. In March 1940 the ICRC issued a long appeal against the use of aviation as a method of warfare,⁴⁶ but to no avail. Meanwhile, the question of prisoners of war, protected since 1929, exposed the ambivalence arising when an international norm clashed with totalitarian ideologies. Whether it was the Soviet Union’s treatment of the prisoners it took, Japan’s treatment of the captives who fell into its hands in the countries it occupied, or Germany’s treatment of Soviet prisoners – all these situations remained outside of humanitarian law and action, despite the ICRC’s efforts.

But it was the experiences of civilians in occupied territories that would really expose the limits of the ICRC’s perception of war. At the start of the conflict, the ICRC suggested that the belligerents adopt the 1934 Tokyo draft convention, just for the

45 See in particular the appeal for protection of civilians against bombing from the air, made in Resolution IX of the Sixteenth International Conference: *Sixteenth International Red Cross Conference, London, June, 1938: Report*, Geneva, 1938, p. 103.

46 “Appel concernant la protection de la population civile contre les bombardements aériens”, *BISCR*, No. 452, April 1940, pp. 321–327.

duration of the hostilities. Only Germany was willing to discuss this, provided it was reciprocal, which was not the case. This lack of protection had catastrophic consequences for civilians deported in the territory of the Third Reich. Throughout the war, the ICRC did its utmost to intervene in order to help these victims in various ways, which were modelled on its activities for prisoners of war: gathering information about the deportees, exchanging correspondence with their families, delivering food and medical supplies to concentration camps, and trying to carry out visits in the camps at the same time. Most of these initiatives were rejected by the German authorities. While the ICRC cannot be reproached for doing nothing for civilian deportees, what should be highlighted is its inability to break free of a mindset that lumped them in with “traditional” victims of armed conflict, no different from soldiers. The organization failed to grasp that the deportees were different, especially the “racial” deportees, and completely misjudged a key factor: time. The deportees were being condemned by their jailers to certain death, unlike prisoners of war, who could hope to be released one day. In this regard, traditional humanitarian step-by-step efforts were useless for these civilian victims whose days were numbered. The ICRC, like many others, was unable to break free of its usual approach, which it sought to apply to a situation that was decidedly unusual.

Unlike in the First World War, the issue of new technologies of warfare was not on the ICRC’s radar during the conflict, but it returned with a vengeance in August 1945 with the two atomic bombings of Japan. The fear aroused by this new weapon of mass destruction revived a pacifist discourse within the Movement that had fallen into disuse. It gave rise to two resolutions adopted at the first post-war International Conference⁴⁷ and became a primary focus of the Movement for the Cold War decades to come.

The age of reason: 1945–60

The period immediately after the Second World War saw the ICRC re-examine the last of the dualities underpinning its make-believe vision of war: that of civilization versus barbarity. Up to then, the term “barbarity” had been used to describe the various colonized peoples. Most of the colonial conflicts that had taken place in the first half of the twentieth century had served to reinforce the ICRC’s vision of a fight between civilization and savagery. True, the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935–36 had shaken this world view, showing that a civilized nation could be crueller than the “barbarians”. But the final blow came when the extermination camps were set up – the work of a nation that was also the birthplace of *Kultur*. From that time on, the ICRC made a radical about-turn and started to look more closely at those who were supposedly still in the shadow of civilization. This

47 Resolution XXIV (“Non-directed Weapons”) earnestly requested States to undertake to prohibit absolutely all recourse to atomic weapons in the event of war; Resolution LXIV (“The Red Cross and Peace”) reaffirmed the Red Cross’s determination to work for enduring peace among nations. See *Seventeenth International Red Cross Conference, Stockholm, August 1948: Report*, Stockholm, 1952, pp. 94 and 102–103 respectively.

change of attitude was helped along by the emergence of the wars of decolonization from 1945, which would gradually spell the dismantling of the Dutch, French, British, Belgian and Portuguese empires. During these conflicts – classified in legal terms as civil wars or internal disturbances – the ICRC largely came to the aid of the colonized, whether combatants or civilians. The dissymmetry of the forces involved meant that for the most part, the toll was heaviest among the indigenous populations. That brought the ICRC up against reason of State – which could have been a major obstacle for its efforts to exercise its humanitarian mandate. While the French government was quick to grant the ICRC permission to visit enemy combatants and civilians captured during the conflict in Algeria, the organization struggled to obtain the same permission from the British during the quashing of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, where it was only briefly able to act at the very end of the events. When working in the field, ICRC delegates noted that, while the action of the colonizers was legitimate, that did not exclude ill treatment of the colonized peoples who had rebelled and been captured. Cases of torture during the Algerian War were the most striking example of this. Although the other side was not absolved of all crimes – far from it – the distinction between “civilized” whites and the other “barbarians” nevertheless disappeared from the ICRC’s discourse, even if racism could still be detected in the odd report or letter. But after 1945, the ICRC only approached war – regardless of where it was taking place – in terms of combatants and victims, and of its duty to protect them as best it could.

Conclusion: A new perception of warfare?

It had therefore taken several decades for the ICRC’s perception of armed conflict to align with reality, and for it to adapt to, if not understand, how warfare was evolving. The fact that the organization had not been physically present on the battlefield for the first fifty years of its existence partly explains this time-lag. It had lived on imported images of conflict, drawing on the imaginations of its members, who had grown up in a country that had long been spared the scourge of war and revelled in that fact. The ICRC had also yielded to a Western, Christian view of the world, which prevented it from correctly judging armed violence, especially when it came to colonial conflicts. This peculiar mindset formed the starting point for the organization and, initially, for modern international humanitarian law.⁴⁸ Founded to “humanize war” (in the words of one of its founders, Louis Appia) and not to fight it, the ICRC nevertheless let itself get carried away by the pacifist message of the late nineteenth century, perhaps more out of ambition than conviction.

This idealistic vision evaporated with the outbreak of the First World War. The ICRC realized that war, far from becoming more humanized, was increasingly inhumane, owing in particular to technology (tanks, submarines, aircraft, gas, etc.).

⁴⁸ We could also ask whether the ICRC founders’ erroneous belief that the scope of the 1864 Geneva Convention was based on reciprocity had been the start of their skewed perception of war.

And the representatives that the ICRC sent to help the victims of the war (military prisoners and civilian internees) only confirmed this sorry realization. In Geneva itself, the ICRC came into contact with the suffering caused by the conflict, witnessing the arrival of thousands of French civilians driven from occupied territories. Although the ICRC did respond to these dreadful developments by denouncing the violations committed against people or in the conduct of hostilities, sometimes it took a while to react, as though it needed to prove to itself that all of this was really happening. The case of poison gas, used from 1915 and only denounced by the ICRC in 1918, is a telling example of this. Unable to count on mankind's goodwill, the ICRC turned to the law – imperfect, admittedly, but the last guarantor of civilization. The organization supported many initiatives by the belligerents aiming to establish a “humanitarian” framework for war, then it began thinking itself about revising the existing law, but once again only in a reactive way, drawing on past experience rather than trying to anticipate how war would develop in the future.

Following the First World War and in particular from the 1950s, the ICRC therefore went from having a theoretical interest in armed conflict to being a steadily growing presence in war zones. From that time, and for roughly the next four decades, the organization evolved in a relatively clear-cut conflictual environment. Things deteriorated again after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the bipolar world, with the emergence of new forms of violence: ethnic, nationalist and unstructured conflicts, then the “war on terror”, and finally other situations of violence not amounting to armed conflict (such as the Arab Spring) that make up so many of the contexts in which the ICRC is working. It seems a little premature to analyze whether and how the ICRC has changed its perception of armed conflict since the beginning of the 1990s. It can nevertheless be supposed that, in light of some of the civil wars in West Africa and the Caucasus in particular, a concept like “barbarity” may have regained currency at the ICRC, especially when the organization has itself been a direct victim of violence in these settings. It also seems obvious that the “war on terror” has blurred the distinction between peacetime and wartime that had hitherto reigned. That said, and unlike in its early days, the ICRC has directly experienced these new forms of violence. This has brought it into contact with new victims and new needs, and has above all forced it to overhaul its understanding of war. This “knowing by doing”, which began in the First World War and continues to this day, is also undoubtedly one of the reasons for the ICRC's longevity. Its existence as a humanitarian organization has depended on it adapting continually to its working environment. Today, the ICRC is once again facing a turning point in the evolution of warfare as a result of major technological challenges in the form of cybernetics and possibly of robotics, which have the potential to fundamentally change how wars will be fought in the future. While the ICRC may try to prohibit them or, failing that, restrict their deadly impact through the law, it would be hard pressed to anticipate the humanitarian needs that would result from any military use of these methods. And that is an abiding characteristic of war: its effects can only really be perceived once they have happened, and only then can we really talk about the evolution of warfare.