

Geneva, the ICRC and the limits of humanitarian action

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During the war Geneva was home to the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose activity expanded enormously. Its Central Prisoners of War Agency collected and passed on millions of pieces of information about captives, and its delegates visited prisoner-of-war camps in the belligerent countries.¹ This humanitarian work strengthened the international reputation of Geneva and of Switzerland.

The ICRC has also been criticised for its stance in the face of the persecution and extermination of the Jews. Although informed of Nazi policy, the Committee decided in 1942 not to issue a public appeal, and its opportunities for access to the concentration camps remained very limited.² The institution later acknowledged the limits of its action during this period.

This history illuminates a tension that runs through International Geneva: neutrality and discretion, which make it possible to act in difficult settings, can also lead to silence in the face of grave crimes. The financial centre experiences a comparable tension between the discretion owed to clients and responsibility towards the victims of criminal practices. Part F will return to the role of the ICRC and the humanitarian organisations in Geneva's identity.

1 Notes

1. ICRC, Archives, "L'action du CICR pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale" (blogs.icrc.org/cross-files): resumption of the activities of the Central Prisoners of War Agency on 14 September 1939; Nobel Foundation, "The Nobel Peace Prize 1944" (nobelprize.org): prize awarded to the ICRC "for the great work it has performed during the war on behalf of humanity", announced in 1945. ↩

2. ICRC, “The ICRC in WWII: the Holocaust” (icrc.org): in the summer of 1942 the ICRC debated a general appeal on violations of international humanitarian law and “decided in the end not to issue the appeal”; in 1995, at the ceremony commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz, its President Cornelio Sommaruga publicly regretted the past errors and failings; ICRC, Archives (blogs.icrc.org/cross-files), policy statement of 2006: “This failure is aggravated by the fact that the ICRC did not do everything in its power to put an end to the persecutions and help the victims”. ↩

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Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-geneva-the-icrc-and-the-limits-of-humanitarian-action