

Forsythe, David P., *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, xv + 356 pp., £17.99) ISBN 0521848288.

It is an organisation uniquely positioned in the world of humanitarian affairs, distinguished by its extensive history and its *sui generis* status under public international law. Throughout its existence the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has aimed, with more and less success, to operate on the balance point between a respect for states' readiness to engage in military conflict, and a desire to be faithful to a pure humanitarian impulse, an impulse which views the very notion of armed conflict as morally abhorrent. In recent years its mandate has grown to be more complex, as it has begun to conduct operations outside of officially labelled armed conflicts. The dissonance inherent in the ICRC's mandate, however, remains unchanged, and invites criticism from all angles. So too does its putative adherence to such demanding hallmark principles as independence, impartiality, and neutrality. David Forsythe's *The Humanitarians*, a prodigious research effort which draws upon an impressive array of previously untapped sources, offers a deft and rich political analysis of the ICRC's recent historical trajectory. In so doing, it captures the essence of the organisation's struggle to make good on its pretension to neutrality and its attempts to adapt to the considerable transformations that the field of international humanitarian affairs has undergone over the last thirty years, or so. Though the book does spend some time examining the myriad internecine fractures that have afflicted the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Forsythe holds that until universal humanitarianism triumphs over nationalism, internal fragmentation will persist. The author makes clear that his analysis forgoes degrees of legalistic accuracy in favour of readability. As a political scientist, Forsythe's strength lies in the description of power relations, not in the illumination of the niceties of international law.

The monograph is composed of three parts. It begins with an historical analysis which spans the entirety of the organisation's history, paying particularly close attention to developments within the last three decades. This section is subdivided into chapters on the ICRC's progress through its early years, during and after, the Cold War. It concludes with an investigation of the ICRC's role in the context of the US-led 'war on terror'. Part two outlines the organisation's principles and policies, maps its structural reality, and scrutinises the nature of its relationship with international humanitarian law (IHL). The conclusion recapitulates the work's main points and considers the question of the ICRC's future direction.

Forsythe's principal thesis is that the ICRC prior to the early 1970s was justifiably described as a 'totally unprofessional' organisation (p. 9), but has since seen vast improvement. He credits the long-overdue implementation of recommendations advanced by the 1975 Tansley Report with much of the ICRC's contemporary progress. It is his view that developments in the ICRC's recent history, such as its newly acquired inclination towards meaningful self-examination, and the increasingly powerful facility of the media and other elements in international relations to prompt such self-examination, have strengthened its capacity to act effectively. The implementation of an increasingly systematic attitude towards training guidelines and policy consistency combined with a newly developed understanding that the views of professionals in the field should be accorded more weight in the formulation of operational decisions have set this gradual wave of professionalisation in motion.

A broad range of its characteristics, including its tendency towards slow-paced, incrementally ameliorative steps -trends which are in many ways inimical to rapid professionalisation- are very much a product of the ‘Swiss character’ which Forsythe suggests has played an integral role in shaping ICRC policy throughout the organisation’s history, though he readily admits that he cannot support this view with scientific certainty. It is clearly Forsythe’s wish that the ICRC move away from what he views as an anachronistically close relationship with the ‘Swiss character,’ and that it should continue to distance itself from Berne by way of internationalising not only its professional staff, but its upper echelons as well. As all critiques of the ICRC must, he revisits the organisation’s unpardonable complicity in the Holocaust, accusing it of the worst variety of legalistic escapism. This, the most salient example of Geneva’s jeopardonously close relationship with the Swiss Confederation, emphasises the importance of protecting ICRC independence. While steps have certainly been made towards this end, such as the 1992 decision to internationalise the ICRC’s professional ranks, much room for improvement exists. The author’s cautious projection that by 2025 the ICRC Assembly ‘may’ be under some pressure to internationalise betrays an acute understanding of just how deeply imbued the Swiss-centeredness of the ICRC political culture is.

The author commends the ICRC’s steadfast devotion to its guiding principles but, at the same time, criticises its tendency to invoke such principles in support of dogmatic adherence to policies whose moral groundings are far from clear. For instance, the question of the ICRC’s unswerving commitment to immunity from testimony in criminal prosecutions for its members is especially troublesome for Forsythe. What, he asks, will happen to the criminal prosecution of those who perpetrate crimes of atrocity if the ICRC, journalists and all aid agencies are exempted from the act of testifying? He prescribes the adoption of a more balanced and supple approach to such morally delicate issues, underscoring the role of rigorous creativity as a guarantor of ICRC progress. For, as he points out, ‘neutral humanitarianism is not an automatic thing; it has to be carefully constructed’ (p. 181). Flexible diplomacy is a vital ingredient in this process of careful construction -one which allows the ICRC to exceed the narrow limits of strict legalism.

For Forsythe, the ICRC’s inveterate conservatism is something of a mixed blessing. On the positive side, it can and does act as an effective vehicle for the furtherance of an agenda steeped in social liberalism by working to maintain the organisation’s blue chip reputation for consistency and discretion. Conversely, it creates very real constraints on the possibilities for rapid execution of positive change, and often results in the implementation of morally ambiguous policy. Forsythe is by no means calling for an end to the ICRC’s prudential approach, but rather suggesting that it is not one worthy of unconditional adherence. Instances when the ICRC has risked confrontation with states are few and tend to have been very carefully selected, as in the cases of its involvement in the anti-landmines campaign and its stalwart expression of support for the creation of a permanent and independent International Criminal Court. For the ICRC, the construction of a legal framework matters.

Matter though this legal framework may, Forsythe is dismissive of claims that the ICRC’s work has been substantively moulded by IHL. In fact, he maintains that ‘even without IHL the organisation would be doing more or less the same thing it does now’ (p. 244). This, he says, is because of moral reasoning and historical practice: an assertion that would have carried greater force had it been tied to a detailed evaluation of the complex relationship between the historical development of ICRC practice and its role in the formulation of IHL. That said, the claim gains

accuracy when applied to the ICRC's work in situations which are not well accommodated by existing IHL, such as 'complex emergencies' and other sub-clinical conflicts.

The book's overriding message appears to be that the ICRC is unquestionably a great organisation, but one that would do well to enhance its receptivity to internal and external criticisms alike. According to Forsythe, 'the view of the ICRC as heroic leader with impressive accomplishments is not wrong. But it is incomplete' (p. 292). The book is primarily an attempt to draw the reader's attention to these points of incompleteness. At times the author even deigns to suggest, albeit in the broadest of brushstrokes, how these gaps might be filled.

The broad spectrum of source material used in *The Humanitarians* manages to shed light on an organisation which has largely been left shrouded in the darkness of self-imposed secrecy. The book will appeal to those with a deep interest in the intricacies of IHL and the inner-workings of the ICRC itself. It is a welcome addition to the sparse literature on the ICRC which, while it may lack legalistic accuracy, brims with keenness of insight and the wisdom of a scholar who has spent much time tracking the course of this enigmatic organisation.

David Gault, University of Nottingham