

1 The Contemporary ICRC and Its Critics

The Slippery Slope of Decline?

The ICRC is the oldest of the humanitarian organizations. It is the richest and the best organized, and its mandate is the clearest.

David Rieff¹

Despite ICRC expanding budgets and staff, one could find a lot of discontent among a range of former ICRC officials during the time frame 2015–2022. This quiet controversy, ignored by elites in places such as Washington and London, not to mention by mainstream members of the media such as the *New York Times*, raised important questions. Apart from issues of personalities and personal style, more than a few among “*les anciens*” – literally “the elders” but in this case the alumni of ICRC employment – thought the ICRC was making grave mistakes that threatened the future of the organization. On the other hand, some defenders of current organizational trends thought, to use the words of one high official of that time, that the whole bruhaha was, as translated from his French, nonsense (*betise*).

Given those clashing views, for those interested in this establishment humanitarian organization and/or global humanitarian affairs, the situation merited a closer look. I published my last big overview of the ICRC back in 2005 and evidently much water has flowed under the bridge in the meantime.² In this opening chapter I introduce the views of the critics. In the next chapter I situate the ICRC in the global humanitarian system, which helps to explain at least some of the reasons for the trajectory of ICRC policymaking.

Through a review of selected details, this introduction raises the key question at the center of this book: Is the widely respected ICRC, called by some the gold standard among global humanitarian actors, in the process of losing its unique focus and expertise? Or has its recent policymaking been misunderstood by critics who have a faulty view of developments in a changed and still changing world? Given the ICRC’s place – historically and in contemporary times – within global humanitarian affairs, that is an important question to address.



Photograph 1.1 ICRC headquarters, Geneva, main building, as of 2013. Formerly the Carlton Hotel built in 1876, the building with its majestic views was made available to the ICRC by the city of Geneva in 1946. Between 1863 and 1946 the ICRC operated out of different premises in Geneva.

I Early Details

On August 28, 2015, Thierry Germond, former ICRC official, wrote to Peter Maurer, president of the ICRC, questioning whether the organization under Maurer's leadership since 2012 was acting in violation of Red Cross fundamental principles. Both agreed that the ICRC as a humanitarian actor was supposed to be neutral, independent, and impartial – hence the acronym NIIHA for neutral, independent, impartial humanitarian actor or action. The general issue was whether specific ICRC activities did or did not violate core principles. Had the ICRC adopted so many new and different policies that it had lost its proper focus and in the process was now violating its core principles?³

Germond was highly experienced, having had a thirty-five-year career at the ICRC, starting with an assignment in the Biafran–Nigerian war of the late 1960s and including the important post of head of the ICRC delegation in Brussels, which meant liaison with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union. He had been entrusted by the organization with numerous delicate tasks and had personally negotiated with various high-profile or tough political leaders.

Maurer was also no lightweight, having had a distinguished career in the Swiss foreign service, serving as head of the Swiss delegation to the UN in New York and then as the top professional in the Swiss foreign ministry. He had been supported for the ICRC top spot by the outgoing ICRC president, Jakob Kellenberger, and apparently chosen as president in 2012 without major opposition by the ICRC's governing board (called the Assembly).

I say “apparently” because the board's deliberations are secret for decades, depending on subject matter. All members of the board must be Swiss, including the president and vice president, and the country comes close to manifesting reserve and discretion as national traits. Historically Swiss neutrality has been more conservative or “buttoned down” than, say, Swedish neutrality. For example, Stockholm spoke out much more about the Vietnam War than Bern did. Stockholm also spoke out much more against apartheid in South Africa than Bern did. (In fact, a lot of Swiss corporations were in tight with White minority rule there.) Neutral Sweden joined the UN much earlier than neutral Switzerland. In 2022, Sweden moved to align with Finland in applying to join NATO after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, whereas at the time of writing the Swiss government was still debating how far to go in contesting Russian policies under Vladimir Putin. Joining NATO was out of the question. Relevant was the fact that Swiss banks were famous for discretion, or infamous for dubious secrecy if one prefers.

Germond's five-page letter, in rather small font, seemed to stress three interrelated concerns with no particular hierarchy: (1) the ICRC's endorsing neoliberal capitalism and then selecting a number of members to its governing board that represented that orientation; (2) the ICRC president becoming a member of the board of trustees at the World Economic Forum (WEF), which arguably constituted an informal governing arrangement endorsing neoliberal economics; and (3) the ICRC's close relationship to the Swiss foreign ministry which had, *inter alia*, concluded in January 2015 that the WEF – headquartered in Geneva – was a “neutral and impartial” international organization, which to Germond distorted the meaning of those words. The retired official believed that the principles of neutrality and independence were being violated by an organization that was no longer fully a neutral humanitarian but was becoming too political and endorsing neoliberal capitalism along the way – which advanced the interests of Swiss corporations. In his view the ICRC, led by Maurer, was departing from its proper status and role, with dire consequences for the organization in the future.

Germond circulated Maurer's reply, which put it in the public domain. In any event, the president's response of October 5 did not contain any diplomatic secrets. Germond was not persuaded by anything in that letter and continued to insist that the fundamental Red Cross principles were being violated. (The two had had a brief verbal exchange at a public meeting in Geneva in September, and Germond had written a second letter that same month.) It was a fact that the ICRC was trying to reduce the dependency on the part of those receiving ICRC assistance, which, while not explained in the letter, was a gateway to the subject of encouraging local micro-capitalism as an alternative to repeated humanitarian assistance. This apparently did not sit well with Germond who apparently believed businesspersons in the ICRC Assembly were unduly benefitting from this orientation. All of this led some at the ICRC to see him as a leftish agitator left over from the 1960s. Be that as it may, Germond clearly did not believe that in fall 2015 the Assembly had properly considered various business and economic links. And he certainly did not believe that the ICRC and its president were being open and transparent about policymaking.

Germond was definitely not satisfied with Maurer's response, to put it mildly. He had already sent copies of his August letter to members of the Assembly, along with a few other persons. Encouraged by some of the bilateral replies if not by others, he continued to advocate for his view that the ICRC under Maurer's leadership was headed down the wrong road and undermining the image and reputation of the ICRC. He thought the acceptance of the organization in conflicts and the security

of its staff in the field were, or might be, endangered by arguably departing from earlier versions of independence and neutrality.

Germond dispatched another letter on December 15, 2015 to Maurer but also to others, including the Swiss federal president, who would convene the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference later that month in Geneva. (The Conference and other aspects of the international RC network are explained in detail in Chapter 5.) The main focus of this letter seemed to be the WEF and arguably its lack of neutrality, which supposedly then made it inappropriate for the ICRC president to be a WEF trustee. If Germond was hoping the RC Conference, which meets in principle every four years, would take up the subject, he was to be disappointed. The Swiss federal president did not get involved. No doubt high Swiss officials knew of ICRC–WEF links and did not want to rock that boat.

Switzerland is small – about 8.5 million in population. Smaller still (less than 25 percent of the national population) is the French-speaking area in the southwest of the country where the ICRC is based in Geneva. And even smaller is the network of former ICRC officials who stay in touch and care about the organization to which they dedicated much of their careers. After the second half of 2015, Germond's views circulated informally in this latter small network. Various contacts led to the formation of a group of Swiss former ICRC officials who were sympathetic to Germond's views – or at least some of those views. The leaders of this group set a goal of getting twenty-five signatures in support – more or less – of Germond's concerns. Hence it became known to some as the G-25, with voluntary membership and a leadership committee.

Like the G-77 at the UN, made up of states from the Global South that wanted more attention given to underdevelopment, and which grew over time to more than 130 members, the G-25 in Switzerland grew larger – to perhaps double the original size. Being made up of former ICRC high officials as well as routine field staff, it displayed a certain organizational competence and political *savoir faire*. Among its members was a former director-general, several directors of operations, numerous heads of departments and divisions, multiple heads of field officers, and several regional directors, among other positions – including one former member of the governing board. The group was driven by the fundamental concern that the highly regarded ICRC they had helped build was now being damaged by unwise decisions by the current leadership. They thought the active mandate was no longer clear. Concern for ICRC violation of the principles of humanitarian neutrality and independence was at the top of their list.⁴

Over time three clusters of concerned alumni emerged, focused on ICRC leadership decisions. There was Germond, who remained an independent force, marching to his own drummer, doing prodigious research on this or that aspect of his concerns, and keeping his own counsel about when and how to push his agenda. (It was Germond who in 2015 first circulated the fact that Maurer had become a WEF trustee in 2014. There had been no announcement up until then by the ICRC headquarters.) There was the G-25, with a leadership firmly convinced of the correctness of their cause but keeping a certain distance – at least sometimes – from Germond by mutual agreement. Then there was a third cluster made up of informed former officials who stayed in touch with various persons and developments, both inside and outside the ICRC, but who did not fully identify with the iconoclast Germond or become members of the G-25.

This diffuse and unorganized third group of alumni often felt at least partial unease about the ICRC's evolution and were not content, like some former high officials, to wash their hands of the whole controversy and simply defer to the judgments of Maurer and the other contemporary ICRC leaders. One of these nonaligned alumni thought the old ICRC was dead, replaced by a bureaucratic monster whose tentacles reached almost everywhere. The amorphous and shifting third grouping sought more information and were fairly sure that some mistakes were being made, even if they did not automatically buy into all the views – and style and tactics – of Germond or the G-25.

It is very difficult if not impossible to precisely categorize or summarize the views of all those uncomfortable with the evolution of the ICRC in recent decades. For sure, different individuals saw different gains and losses in that evolution. While the three groupings noted earlier capture some reality, one should not try to categorize too firmly a complicated landscape of debate about challenges, changes, and controversies at the ICRC.

The critics noted earlier might or might not participate in the ICRC Alumni Association, a group of former employees who met regularly and discussed mostly noncontroversial subjects in a collegial and nonconfrontational way.

Into 2016, Germond continued to bombard the ICRC leadership with various letters and other information attacking what he saw as the direction Maurer and “his” Assembly was taking the organization. Most, if not all, of the critiques were apparently ignored by the ICRC leadership during 2015 and most of 2016 in the sense of eliciting no written replies – beyond the first reply to Germond by Maurer. It was also the case apparently that ICRC leaders sought no quiet back channels to Germond to try to assuage his concerns. It may have been the case that the tone and volume of his messages dissuaded them from any such

effort. At one point he demanded that the entire Assembly resign for failing to properly oversee the ICRC president and directorate. Over time his name evoked very strong negative reactions from more than one high official in Geneva. In pursuing research for this book, I was told more than once to avoid being seen as carrying water for Germond or even probing some of the issues he had raised.

Subsequent interviews established that at least part of the ICRC leadership did not think the issues raised by Germond, particularly Maurer's membership on the WEF board of trustees, was all that important – at least in 2014 when Maurer took up that outside position. They thought it a minor matter of routine diplomacy and outreach. It is almost certainly the case that at some point Maurer felt himself under unfair personal attack and started refusing to discuss the WEF issue. When this author met with Maurer in Washington, DC in May 2019, I was told ahead of time by ICRC staff not to bring up the subject of the WEF. My later experience through several interactions was that other leaders were willing to discuss the WEF and other subjects flexibly but not the ICRC president.

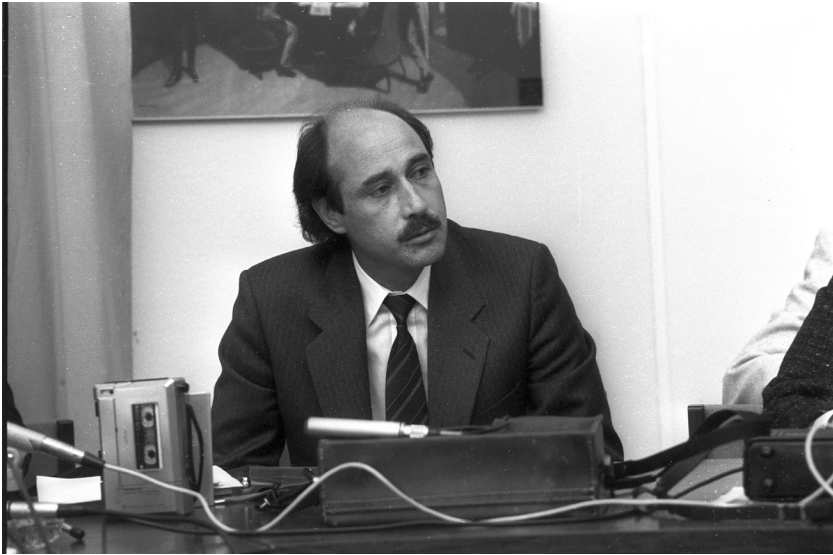
It remains unclear whether Maurer circa 2015 was convinced he was right on the WEF matter and did not want to discuss things further, or whether he realized he might be out on a limb, at least on the WEF matter, and wanted to avoid further attention on that subject. There are other theories about his thinking. Be that as it may, some insiders thought it important that Maurer basically shut off free, open, and critical discussion about the WEF internally, which to them was more important than failing to respond fully and candidly to outsiders.

In mid-September 2015, after Germond's first letter in late August, there had been one posting on the ICRC web page that, in the context of a discussion about RC principles, showed Maurer briefly mentioning the WEF in passing. Maurer said that it was important to use the WEF platform to talk to important actors that could have an impact on humanitarian affairs.⁵ This policy position had some support within the broader international humanitarian community.⁶ In January 2016, over a year after Maurer became a WEF trustee, there was a posting on the ICRC website defending in some detail that arrangement.⁷ It was not a candid costs–benefits analysis but rather a list of advantages derived from Maurer's double role. (There is much more about this especially in Chapter 10 but also in Chapter 17.)

In December 2016, the G-25 sent a long and complex letter to President Maurer challenging whether his push for close links with the for-profit sector, including his role at the WEF and other actions, were always consistent with the principles of independence and neutrality for a humanitarian organization. A central figure for the G-25 had become

André Pasquier, a former director of operations, among his other important positions. This initiative was supported by forty-four signatures.

Some former officials outside the G-25 wrote to Pasquier indicating encouragement – including former ICRC President Cornelio Sommaruga. Sommaruga, (president 1987–1999), who was a great champion of ICRC independence, was later quoted in the press as follows: “[U]n président du CICR ne peut être que président du CICR.”⁸ (The president of the ICRC can only be the president of the ICRC.) This statement, publicly reported in 2016, apparently was made at a meeting in Geneva in the fall of 2015. (In the video cited in note 4, Sommaruga speaks from the audience, also in 2015, to emphasize the RC principle of independence. Candidly, he speaks about his own independence, in the context of a “weak” Assembly.)



Photograph 1.2 André Pasquier gives a press conference in 1986 when he was director of operations. The position of director of operations is normally second in importance only to the director-general for the daily management of ICRC activities. In retirement, Pasquier became the leader of the G-25, an organized group eventually of about forty-five former officials deeply concerned about the expansion of ICRC programs and staff, and about its interpretation of the principles of independence and neutrality. In the short term, their concerns fell on deaf ears. In the longer term, financial troubles and leadership changes might lead to a different analysis.

By comparison, President Jakob Kellenberger (ICRC president 2000–2011), remained detached from all aspects of this controversy. When he was president, apparently he did not appreciate former President Sommaruga looking over his shoulder and making public comments about ICRC affairs. Kellenberger had mentored Maurer in the Swiss foreign ministry, supported him for ICRC president, and was not going to get involved in second guessing him in his ICRC post. For whatever reason Kellenberger was content to be finished with almost all Red Cross matters. (He did serve on the governing board of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva, an independent agency cosponsored by the ICRC.)

One can understand the position of either Sommaruga or Kellenberger. The former was quite concerned about the ICRC's independence and did not want to see his track record damaged on that subject. (More on this later, especially in Chapter 8.) On at least some issues he was obviously in favor of a traditional understanding of the ICRC's mandate or mission or role. The latter could well have been tired of Red Cross affairs. The ICRC presidency is not an easy role to fill.

The ICRC president meets with the top leaders of the day, and journalists want to know what he thinks. Some at the ICRC close to the top thought that all three recent ICRC presidents developed an appreciable ego because of access to many of the major figures in world affairs. But the ICRC leader is always being disappointed by fighting parties who fail to take sufficiently seriously the laws of war, or even minimal standards of decency. In the words of one provocative observer, the ICRC president as much as anyone represents "the utopian fantasy of a global village of moral concern."⁹ If so, or even if not, that position is bound to lead to frustration.

He (now she) is always confronting the dark side of human nature and seeing up close how global humanitarian tragedies unfold. The president is always trying to raise more money for humane causes. As the external face of the organization, the president has to keep up with changing and complicated subjects such as emerging rules for cyber warfare or how to make use of new technologies and represent the organization's position accurately. And someone is always watching for potential shortcomings. In some circles at the ICRC one can feel a certain siege mentality, a fear that outsiders are trying to play "gotcha journalism" or otherwise unfairly criticize the organization in its complex and difficult role. It has made mistakes, it knows it has made mistakes, and sometimes the defensiveness shows through. David Rieff, the independent writer, actually came around to appreciating the ICRC position in world affairs, but in getting there he wrote: "[K]nowledge of the ICRC's shameful

conduct in Nazi-occupied Europe had always made me skeptical of the organization.”¹⁰

Beyond Germond and the G-25, some of the other former ICRC officials who retained deep interest in their former employer and harbored some concern about this or that issue also wrote to Maurer. Some former members of the ICRC governing board wrote to both the ICRC Assembly and the WEF. Much of this correspondence was serious, well-reasoned, detailed, and without polemics. It appears to be the case that there were no replies – at least no formal or written replies.

It may have been the case that some alumni letters had some impact even if no replies were received. At least one alumnus, and then later the G-25, objected to Maurer and the organization talking about win-win situations in which business could make money by operating in conflict areas and fragile societies. According to this critique, the ICRC and the Movement were supposed to be strictly humanitarian and thus disinterested in other subjects beyond serving humanity. In this view, Red Cross promotion of taking profits went over the line.

While the ICRC continued to display much interest in an expanded role on the part of for-profit entities, especially in “early recovery” or micro-development programs, there did seem to be less public talk about the profit motive in ICRC communiqués. One could talk about increased use of business partners in ICRC activities, and the need for donors from the business world, without getting into the more controversial matter of encouraging businesses to make money from involvement with victims of political conflict. Some business roles might be helpful and others exploitative. So perhaps it was best to minimize attention to that complicated subject in ICRC public discourse. (Maybe a researcher with a stable of assistants could do a content analysis of the wording of both ICRC and WEF communiqués to establish the facts of the matter. Did Maurer and others in fact reduce references to “win-win” involving corporate profit?)

At some point Maurer turned the matters raised by Germond and the G-25 over to his vice president, Christine Beerli, a member of the Assembly who formerly had been active in Swiss politics representing a center-right political party. A normal part of the vice president’s job is to help with external relations. While the president is meeting with political figures and other leaders of the first rank, the ICRC vice president is interacting with various other outsiders, including those from the Movement, alumni, and even, at the bottom of the totem pole, independent researchers.

There followed an exchange of letters between Pasquier for the G-25 and Vice President Beerli, and then a meeting in February 2017

organized by Beerli with various former and current officials – including some from the Assembly. In subsequent letters there was discussion of possible future meetings, but they never transpired.

Without going into all details about this prolonged and multi-faceted process, one can conclude that nothing much changed on the surface for a time. The leadership of the G-25 believed, along with Germond, that most of their concerns were not being taken seriously. For the ICRC president, he apparently believed that the expressed concerns had been properly examined and found wanting. He presumably believed the leadership had made an adequate response in good faith and the matter reasonably put to rest. After all, on the ICRC website (very briefly) in 2015 as noted earlier, in slightly more detail from 2016 (covered later), internally in 2017 in a couple of different ways (covered in Chapter 10), and in still other ways the ICRC leadership had tried to explain its position on various subjects such as links to private corporations or the reasons for an expanded humanitarian diplomacy and programming in the contemporary world. Chapter 9 shows that in the midst of the Germond controversy, the ICRC came out with a report on the long relationship between the ICRC and the private business sector.

Apparently, in November 2015, after Germond had flagged the issue, the ICRC Assembly had some kind of discussion about links to the WEF and deferred to Maurer being on the board of trustees there. However, when Maurer's first mandate on the WEF board of trustees expired (2014–2017) and he indicated to the ICRC Assembly that he wanted a second term at the WEF, the Assembly could not proceed by the preferred route of consensus. His renewed mandate at the WEF was approved, but by a split vote. All of the back and forth about Maurer and the WEF from 2015 had had some effect on some ICRC Assembly members. At approximately the same time, the Assembly approved a second four-year term for Maurer as president of the ICRC. In 2015–2017, therefore, the Assembly paid more attention to the WEF issue while being satisfied with Maurer's overall leadership and the direction of the organization during his first ICRC term of 2012–2016.

In December 2017, with Maurer having been approved by the Assembly for a second term as WEF trustee, and a possible second meeting with the G-25 therefore canceled for lack of primary purpose, the G-25 leadership drafted a position paper, widely circulated, with broad focus. There was attention to ICRC dubious links with some firms in the private sector, as well as the usual attention to the WEF, expression of concern about various measures pertaining to China (covered later in the book), and attention to the rapid expansion of ICRC activities and staff.

Over time the critics grew more and more frustrated. They, being Swiss and former ICRC officials, had started quietly and without public fanfare. They were concerned not to damage the reputation of the ICRC but to effectuate change within the family.

But then articles appeared in the Swiss press, in each of the three national languages, and Swiss TV reporters began to ask pointed questions. For example, in early April 2016 the *New Zurich Times (NZZ)* ran a story on the controversy in German.¹¹ For whatever reason, the article did not draw broad attention, but it was certainly noted inside the ICRC by both leadership and staff. The article quoted Germond in addressing a variety of subjects: the growth of the ICRC and the decline of staff morale, the competition for funds with especially UN agencies, the apparent loss of ICRC focus as it broadened its economic assistance, the corporate role, the WEF, some presidential travel that might be overdone, leadership and management style, and so on. Maurer was quoted several times in the story in an effort to refute his critics.

It did not help the climate for exchanges between the critics and the ICRC leadership when in early April 2018, the editor of the Swiss *Le Temps*, who was perceived as close to the ICRC leadership, wrote a piece arguing, inter alia, that: (1) humanitarians had no choice but to seek more links to the for-profit sector, and (2) those who questioned this orientation were stuck in a 1968 view of things (referring to the French left-wing street protests of that year).¹² The piece referred to a statement by ICRC Director-General Yves Daccord, dismissive in tone, saying the ICRC was trusted in talking to the Taliban in Afghanistan, but if it talked to banks, the critics feared the worst.¹³ Such developments did not endear the ICRC leadership to the critics.

About a month later, in May 2018, the same Swiss newspaper ran a longer story.¹⁴ It was clear that some of the critics, more than Germond, were talking to the press. Several former staff agreed to be quoted by name. The focus of the article was similar to that in the *NZZ*: Maurer was dangerously wearing two hats, one for the WEF and one for the ICRC; there were relations with corporations that had not been properly vetted; there were quotes from a leaked internal survey of staff indicating some criticisms of management; and more.

Toward the end of that year the controversy was picked up by *Le Monde* in Paris, which ran a story on December 2, 2018, based on considerable nonpublic information.¹⁵ The ICRC was said to be in an ethical crisis, and there was much attention paid to President Maurer and the WEF. It was said that, to some, the expanded role of the ICRC was making it into a second UN or “l’ONU-bis.” Pasquier thought the

ICRC had become an agent for the WEF. Relatedly, some thought the ICRC was driven by Swiss national interests as defined in Bern. For former official Serge Nesi, the ICRC's treatment of the fundamental Red Cross principles, including independent neutrality, was akin to the Church abandoning the Ten Commandments. Again, there was attention to staff discontents. Rony Brauman of Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF) thought the critics were right and were trying to save the ICRC from its own mistakes. Germond was pictured as making this controversy the centerpiece of his life. Peter Maurer had refused requests for an interview, according to Rémy Ourdan, the journalist for *Le Monde*.

There were other articles on this subject, not to mention multiple radio and TV programs. For example, there was an article in the Italian region of Switzerland. In Lugano, the award-winning freelance journalist Federico Franchini wrote an article that once more focused on the ICRC's for-profit partners and Maurer at the WEF.¹⁶ While not published in a major media source, it typified the spreading media coverage of the controversy throughout the small Alpine nation.

However, few in the public, either in Switzerland or in the broader readership of *Le Monde*, seemed to care. *Le Monde*'s Rémy Ourdan, noting the article by Stéphane Bussard in *Le Temps* from May 2018, wrote that it was met by a "stupefying silence." When Maurer came to Washington, DC in May 2019, he gave a public talk at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and took questions. No one in the audience seemed aware of the controversy. There were no questions about crisis or turmoil or even debate within the ICRC or larger RC network. There have been no articles about the controversy in the American media. The same seems to be true regarding the United Kingdom and other major donor nations, except for the one article in *Le Monde*.

Clearly, however, someone at the ICRC felt it needed to address further the subject of its links to the WEF and the for-profit sector. The result was a longer internet post in 2018 by two staff members, said to be written in their personal capacity.¹⁷ The piece was basically an elaboration of what had been posted on the ICRC website page back in 2016.

In late 2018 the G-25 again wrote to Maurer, with a copy to Assembly members, noting that the WEF was sanctioning certain Russians for supporting Putin's incursion into Crimea and the Donbas which started in 2014, arguing that this showed how political the WEF was – and how Maurer should not be part of its governance. This démarche had no evident impact at the Geneva HQ.

All of this being what it was, in July 2019 Pasquier and the G-25 decided to take their concerns to one of the central organs of the RC network. They submitted a letter to the President of the Standing Commission of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. (See Chapter 5 for an explanation of where the ICRC and Standing Commission fit in the larger RC global network.)

In that letter they repeated their assertion that the current ICRC leadership was violating its own statutes and the statutes of the RC Movement. The core arguments were the same as before, namely that the ICRC was departing from the requirements that it be a neutral and independent humanitarian actor that avoided political controversies involving political economy and ideology. It was not supposed to be endorsing any of the various versions of capitalism, and it was not supposed to be intertwined with the WEF – particularly since the WEF (like the Swiss government) was supporting economic sanctions on various Russian officials after 2014, when Russia intervened in several places in eastern Ukraine. The WEF was also endorsing the defeat of this or that fighting party such as the Islamic State Group. Maurer, being a WEF trustee, was logically or indirectly implicated in these non-neutral positions at that organization. There was also the argument that the ICRC had departed from neutral humanitarian assistance by getting more involved in development activities and climate change, which were inherently political subjects.

The G-25 was doing what other advocacy groups had done: Having failed to win in one forum (quietly going to the ICRC), and another forum (talking to journalists), it then shifted to another forum (the Standing Commission representing the global Movement). After all, most of the G-25 had been negotiating with states and armed nonstate actors for their careers and knew something about how to try to advance their agenda. They might have been right or wrong about their concerns (or right about some and wrong about others), but they were persistent and determined. Some were clearly true believers in the rightness of their cause.

The Standing Commission of the Red Cross Movement declined to act on the G-25 complaint and did not inscribe the matter on the agenda of the next International Red Cross Conference scheduled for December 2019, where the G-25 hoped to have a debate that would put pressure on the ICRC. It did not help the cause of the G-25 that the ICRC always has two members on the nine-person Standing Commission, making it difficult to pursue a question through that organ that the ICRC leadership finds distasteful. The 2019 International Conference said nothing at all about the controversy. It was all pushed under the rug.

II Adding Up the Details

Up to that point the various criticisms seem to have been discounted by a leadership that seemed united behind past decisions and unwilling to make major changes. The critics, or at least most of them, remained convinced that their concerns were valid. Germond continued to bombard the ICRC president and Assembly with letters of criticism. He and others also tried to mobilize Swiss public figures, politicians, and political parties to the cause. There were meetings in Bern. In 2018 and 2019, several members of the Swiss Federal Parliament raised questions with the Swiss Federal Council, the collective executive, about ICRC and WEF neutrality. The Federal Council brushed off the inquiries with short and superficial replies, refusing to engage in-depth on substance.

Clearly the ICRC leadership stayed the course chosen regarding such matters as links to the WEF and corporate world, growing the budget and staff, adopting new personnel management practices, taking economic assistance beyond traditional emergency help, working more with migrants, getting more involved in certain urban violence below the level of armed conflict, using internationally recognized human rights more as a reference point, and so on. Above all, the leadership believed it was not violating the Red Cross fundamental principles of independence and neutrality. If it had skated close to the edge of what was permissible, it said that it was evaluating risk and reward and paying close attention. This was a way of saying that Germond and the G-25 – and the other critiques – had been noted and found wanting.

Against the historical background briefly noted here since 2015, this book examines the contemporary ICRC – its policies and principles. The triggers for deciding to do the book lay in the era of President Peter Maurer, or 2012–2022. But once one started in-depth inquiries, it was necessary to go into the roots of some changes. And that produced a work dealing with the ICRC after the Cold War. Rather than seeing just striking and recent changes on this or that subject in the last decade, one sometimes found a build-up of incremental changes over considerable time. One found more adaption than sudden change *de novo*. Or some real change was accompanied mostly by gradual evolution. What some outsiders might see as new circa 2017, to choose one arbitrary date, might sometimes have discernible roots going back to about 1991 and the end of the Cold War.

Having now noted the controversy and mentioned the leading issues, we turn in the following pages to systematic analysis and finally evaluation. Has the ICRC lost its specific focus that helped build the reputation of the organization? Has the recruitment of a more varied and larger staff



Photograph 1.3 Peter Maurer (left) became President of the ICRC in 2012, endorsed by the outgoing President Jakob Kellenberger (right). Maurer dismissed the criticisms of Thierry Germond and André Pasquier, and others. Kellenberger showed no interest in the controversy and, unlike another former president, Cornelio Sommaruga, did not become involved on either side.

killed the goose that laid the golden egg – that egg being a cohesive and dedicated staff in the field? Has the organization’s leadership violated the fundamental RC principles that require it to be a neutral, independent, and impartial humanitarian actor?

One can close this opening section in slightly different terms by asking what exactly is at the core of this controversy – this complicated debate among a few humanitarian practitioners that remains quite obscure to most outsiders – as evidenced by the little public attention it has received. At first glance the dispute appears to be centered on two primary subjects: the participation of the president of the ICRC on the board of the WEF, and the links between the ICRC with certain for-profit donors and partners. Some might include relations between the ICRC and Swiss authorities in Bern as a third major issue. Some believed that Bern, through Peter Maurer, had organized a triangle centered on Swiss national interests with the ICRC and WEF as secondary players. But the controversy goes considerably beyond these specific subjects.

It may be that the most important aspect of the controversy covers what traditionalists within the ICRC call its “specificity” or sometimes its “unicity” – namely its primary focus and the limits on its activities. In fact, the scope of some ICRC activities had been considerably enlarged before the Maurer era. In reality, the more important issue might be the very broad interpretation of its original and unchanged self-defined role as a NIIHA. The ICRC used to be an institution that focused on activities where it was pretty much the only one to perform them, clearly centered on war and political prisoners. Now it seems the ICRC is undertaking new tasks with broader scope that it *might* be better positioned to perform than others, at least for a time, or maybe just expanding its tasks because it (temporarily?) has the resources to do so, or maybe just enjoying being a more important actor in the eyes of the World Bank and other major players in international affairs. It is particularly this latter task expansion that this book seeks to analyze. And task expansion entails staff expansion, with greater need for specialization.

The ICRC remains an organization that gave itself the duty to consider, and perhaps act on, any subject linked to violent conflict that it felt required attention from an independent, neutral, and impartial humanitarian agency. Its interpretation of the meaning of this core mandate, a self-adopted mandate not originally given to it by either the Red Cross Movement or international humanitarian law (IHL), but confirmed by both, has always been affected by changing conditions. This everyone acknowledges. Have the expansive changes since about 2000, but in some cases evolving since the end of the Cold War, been well considered as the leadership claims, or poorly thought out as the critics argue? That is the central subject of the pages that follow.

III Conclusion

Are the critics right but maybe for the wrong reasons? Has the ICRC lost its way not because of links to capitalist actors and the WEF, but because it is spreading itself too broadly without clear limits? Is it dissipating its efforts because it has not established where neutral humanitarianism ends and traditional political activities begin – like promoting development and responding to climate change, or for that matter broadly engaging in a response to pandemics? Has the ICRC become, rather than a unique actor with a specialized focus, another do-gooder organization trying to do almost everything for almost everybody? Has it become like some other nongovernmental organizations – the International Rescue Committee comes to mind – a sprawling do-gooder with activities for anyone affected by crisis, underdevelopment,

refugee status, lack of proper education, victims of gender bias and racism, and adversely affected by pandemics and global warming? Does it really have a clear, well-defined interpretation of its mandate anymore? If David Rieff was right as of 2005, that the ICRC had the clearest mandate among international humanitarians, as quoted at the top of this chapter, is that still true?

Notes

- 1 D. Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), p. 19.
- 2 D. P. Forsythe, *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 3 In this chapter and indeed throughout the book, if I refer to unpublished sources, I have the document in my possession. Also, I use the abbreviation RC to avoid writing out each time “Red Cross and Red Crescent.” Its use also avoids prioritizing Red Cross over Red Crescent. The abbreviation can also be read as including official aid societies, as in Israel, that use in their international operations the Red Crystal emblem, which was approved by states and then the RC Movement in 2005–2006. There is more on this latter subject in later chapters.
- 4 The RC fundamental principles are discussed throughout the book. For a start, see ICRC, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary* (1979). www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/fundamental-principles-commentary-010179.htm (accessed August 22, 2022).
- 5 ICRC, “Stubborn Realities, Shared Humanity: History in the Service of Humanitarian Action,” YouTube (2015). www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LyNIXPUI7k (accessed August 22, 2022).
- 6 A. Slemrod, “Princes and Bankers and Aid! Oh My!” *The New Humanitarian*, May 26, 2017, www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2017/05/26/princes-and-bankers-and-aid-oh-my (accessed August 22, 2022).
- 7 ICRC, “Mieux servir les personnes vulnérables grâce à la coopération avec le Forum économique Mondial” (2016). www.icrc.org/fr/document/mieux-servir-les-personnes-vulnerables-grace-la-cooperation-avec-le-forum-economique?amp (accessed August 22, 2022).
- 8 R. Ourdan, “Suisse-Monde: ‘Le CICR est devenu une sorte d’agent opérationnel du WEF et des entreprises partenaires’. Peter Maurer: CICR et WEF sous la même casquette” (2018). <https://alencontre.org/suisse/suisse-monde-le-cicr-est-devenu-une-sorte-dagent-operationnel-du-wef-et-des-entreprises-partenaires-peter-maurer-cicr-et-wef-sous-la-meme-casquette.html> (accessed August 23, 2022).
- 9 D. Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), p. 37.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 11 J. P. Kapp and M. Woker, “Die Guten aus Genf” (2016). www.nzz.ch/international/die-guten-aus-genf-ld.12428?reduced=true (accessed August 24, 2022).

- 12 In French they are called the “*soixante-huitards*,” which refers to protestors from 1968 who supported labor rights and were seen by some as utopians, idealists, or modern communards – alluding to the Commune of the French Revolution of 1789 and thereafter.
- 13 S. Benoit-Godet, “Finance et humanitaire: la nécessaire collaboration” (2018). www.letemps.ch/opinions/finance-humanitaire-necessaire-collaboration (accessed August 24, 2022).
- 14 S. Bussard, “Les liaisons a risques au CICR,” *Le Temps* (2018). www.letemps.ch/monde/liaisons-risques-cicr (accessed December 6, 2022).
- 15 R. Ourdan, “Crise éthique à la Croix-Rouge internationale” (2018). www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/11/30/crise-ethique-a-la-croix-rouge-internationale_5390802_3210.html#xtor=AL-32280270
- 16 F. Franchini, “I rapporti con partner privati intaccano la credibilità del CICR” (February 2019). www.areaonline.ch/I-rapporti-con-partner-privati-intaccano-la-credibilita-del-CICR-5d581a00 (accessed August 30, 2022).
- 17 J. Fleurinor and C. P. Cramer, “The ICRC and Partnerships with the Private Sector: Evolution and Ethical Considerations” (n.d.). <https://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2018/03/15/the-icrc-and-partnerships-with-the-private-sector-evolution-and-ethical-considerations/> (accessed August 30, 2022).