

# Humanizing War?

ICRC – 150 years of humanitarian action

RATH MUSEUM, GENEVA

30 APRIL - 20 JULY 2014

## PRESS RELEASE

*The history of the ICRC is neither more nor less than the sum of thousands of life stories, of people grappling with a frenzied history of violence and war.*

### Reliving humanity in war

**Geneva (ICRC) – March 2014.** The *Humanizing War?* exhibition is an invitation to find out about the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). It also invites reflection on how the nature of conflict has developed, and the parallel development of the ICRC's work. Centre-stage in the exhibition is the human dimension, vividly experienced through the emotions sparked by photos and film clips and the stories told by other forms of evidence, such as archives, contemporary objects and audio documents. Visitors are confronted with the human experience of war, and with the complexity of the humanitarian challenges that have presented themselves over the past 150 years.

To commemorate the founding of the ICRC in 1863, and the signing of the first Geneva Convention in 1864, Geneva's museums of art and history are mounting a major exhibition on this humanitarian organization and the challenges it has faced at different times, showing its history in the light of parallel developments in the nature of conflicts and violence.

At the heart of the exhibition, and right the way through it, are figures who exemplify this human side of war: the belligerents, the victims and the ICRC people who go about their work between them. In practice, however, this classification is not very precise: a belligerent could be a soldier, a prison governor, a head of State or an officer, for example. It is always the person who uses force, or oppression – the one who either does or does not authorize the ICRC to carry out its mandate. The victim might be a wounded soldier, or a prisoner – a civilian, or a relative of someone who has gone missing. The victim is the person who is suffering. And finally, the men and women of the ICRC are the ones carrying out – or attempting to carry out – their humanitarian mandate in between these two groups. They could be founders, or delegates, or nurses, or logisticians... They are simultaneously both players and witnesses.

These three categories interact with one another in a constant flow of activities which sometimes blur their status – they are figures whose identities and faces change depending on the time and situation they find themselves in. Individuals succeed one another in all three roles, and their different paths constantly intersect with the course of the ICRC's work as it develops.



This history is illustrated by concrete examples from each of these individual journeys - in fact, they are the very essence of the exhibition. With each personal account, each film, each image, the visitor sees more and more clearly that the history of the ICRC is no more nor less than the sum of the paths taken by thousands of individuals, all grappling with the frenzied violence of conflict.

**The exhibition was organized by a partnership of Geneva's art and history museums, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Caen Memorial, in cooperation with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum.**

**It has been made possible by the generous support of the Hans Wilsdorf Foundation.**

### **Exhibition curators**

Bertrand Mazeirat, head of the exhibitions department at Geneva's art and history museums

Daniel Palmieri, historical research officer at the ICRC

Iris Meierhans, head of the ICRC's project on 150 years of humanitarian action

Stéphane Grimaldi, director of the Caen Memorial

### **Press contacts**

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### **Practical information**

#### **Musée Rath**

Place Neuve - 1204 Geneva

Open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., and until 8 p.m. on the second Wednesday of the month

Closed on Mondays



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### Concept behind the exhibition

Focusing on humanitarian action by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) over 150 years, the exhibition shows the development of:

- conflicts and the context of violence;
- the identities of victims and the kinds of violence they suffer;
- the ICRC's work methods and resources, both technical and human.

These themes, which are closely interlinked, lead on to the following issues:

- philosophical and moral aspects which, while often complex, are nevertheless central to the ICRC's work (neutrality, dignity, impartiality, etc.);
- the diverse operational procedures adopted by the ICRC in its work down through its history (passing on messages, restoring family links, visiting prisons, training combatants in the law, creating records, medical aid, water and habitation, economic security, research and planning, etc.);
- legal and diplomatic aspects (the gradual development of international humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions, signatory countries, diplomacy, influence, confidentiality, public denunciation, etc.).

Amid this diversity, and the interweaving of the issues, the visitor becomes absorbed not just in the history of the ICRC but also in a process of deeper reflection about the organization. This analytical approach is prompted by paradoxes, by confessions of powerlessness, and by certain admissions of failure that it has also been decided to include in the exhibition. Finally, the link between the ICRC and the city of Geneva is highlighted, in particular the Rath Museum.

### Rath Museum on loan to the ICRC

The Rath Museum, which opened to the public in 1826, thanks to the generosity of the Rath sisters, was Switzerland's very first fine-arts museum, designed specifically to be "a temple of the muses", to house and display works of art.

Between 1914 and 1919 it closed on account of the First World War, and the ICRC, which was acting as an intermediary between prisoners and their families, installed its new International Prisoners-of-War Agency in the museum's premises.



## Exhibition itinerary

The itinerary for the *Humanizing War?* exhibition has two parts. First, visitors are introduced to the salient facts in the history and development of the ICRC, in a section that explains the theoretical bases underpinning both the ICRC's work and international humanitarian law. In the second section, which focuses more on activities, visitors are brought face to face with the day-to-day reality of the work done by the International Committee of the Red Cross. They are transported right into the middle of field assignments, to see how the ICRC upholds people's dignity in the midst of armed violence, and to gain an understanding the kinds of aid brought to victims and the challenges besetting the ICRC's work today.

The exhibition's structure follows a certain path: it starts with the setting up of the ICRC in 1863, recalling the historical background to the initiative and introducing the five founders responsible for it. After this initial immersion visitors are suddenly jolted by an evocation of the 150 years of violence between then and now. International humanitarian law, meanwhile, develops as a corollary to these turbulent events, as if in counterpoint. And as the journey through the century comes to an end, the image that emerges is of the ICRC as it is today, with its staff of 13,000 and its worldwide presence.

Moving on from a section devoted to the organization's emblems, visitors are led into a kind of maze where they gradually meet the victims and learn about their rights. The ICRC's work methods are explained along the way, together with the difficulties its representatives encounter in their meetings with combatants, their negotiations with authorities, and their visits to prisoners. The section ends with a presentation of the various kinds of aid the ICRC delivers to victims of conflict, which in turn gives an idea of the profiles and needs of beneficiaries.

This room is not the end of the itinerary, however: the history of the ICRC is not finished. Now, as in the past, the International Committee of the Red Cross has to tackle new challenges. Some of these are presented interactively in the final section, where five ICRC staff members talk about facing new difficulties and challenges in their everyday work.

Finally, an extension to the itinerary adds a display illustrating the historical links between the ICRC and the Rath Museum, which was used in the First World War as the office of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency.



## Partners

### Musées d'art et d'histoire de Genève

Geneva's multidisciplinary art and history museums invite visitors to travel through time, pausing at key milestones in the history of western civilisations. The network, which reaches into other parts of the city with the Rath Museum and the Maison Tavel, has as its centrepiece the main Art and History Museum with its collections on archaeology, applied arts and fine arts. Inaugurated in 1910, it is one of the three largest museums in Switzerland, and the only one to have assembled such a wide variety of collections: paintings, sculptures, prints and historical objects illustrating myriad aspects of both art and daily life as they developed through several millennia. The museum also houses two unique entities: the graphic arts archive, containing a collection devoted to prints and drawings, and the library of art and archaeology. The iconic Rath Museum, a testament to Genevans' keen interest in the arts, is where the art and history museums' temporary exhibitions are held. When the building opened to the public, in 1826, it was one of the first in Europe to have been specifically designed to house and display works of art.

### International Committee of the Red Cross

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which was founded in 1863, works throughout the world to help people whose lives have been shattered by a conflict or other armed violence, and to publicize the rules protecting victims of war and ensure they are respected. It is a neutral, independent organization whose mandate springs from the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Despite the strenuous efforts made – after the experience of two world wars – to bring about lasting peace, armed conflicts still remain a feature of human existence: in attempting to resolve their disputes, nations, peoples and ethnic groups still resort to weapons, thereby condemning their own civilian populations to suffering and death. It was the realization of this tragic reality that led, 150 years ago, to the founding of the ICRC, whose goal is to preserve a certain degree of humanity even in the midst of conflict. The principle guiding the ICRC's work is that even war has limits – limits that have repercussions both for the conduct of hostilities and for the behaviour of combatants. By now, nearly all the countries in the world have agreed to be bound by the rules stemming from this principle – the rules based on the Geneva Conventions, and known collectively as international humanitarian law.

### Mémorial de Caen

From the origins of the Second World War to the ending of the Cold War, this museum's itineraries illustrate and explain the terrible history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the 360-degree Circular Cinema in Arromanches, the Caen Memorial is one of Europe's leading memorial centres, attracting 630,000 visitors every year. Over the past ten years it has been renewed continually, and is now central to reflection about the role of history in our societies. It was felt that Caen, a city that was bombed in the summer of 1944, and was seen as a martyr to the Liberation, deserved a tribute worthy of its suffering. It was given one – although in the spirit that continues to inspire all the Memorial's work: that of reconciliation. And it is the spirit of reconciliation that guides visitors through the different stages in the itinerary, where the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is imaginatively recreated for them.

