

# The Nazi genocide and other persecutions

25 October 2007

*Document adopted by the ICRC Assembly on 27 April 2006.*

The genocide of the Jews and Gypsies and other persecutions carried out under the Third Reich were the cause of unspeakable suffering. That such events were allowed to happen is the greatest failure of Western civilization.

This failure is also that of the Red Cross as a whole, but it weighs most heavily on the ICRC given the organization's specific mission and its position within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Millions of men, women and children – mainly Jews, but also Gypsies, the handicapped and all those whom the regime considered as opponents or resistance fighters – were exterminated in cold blood, in atrocious conditions, without the ICRC being able to do anything to protect them. Never had the organization's guiding principles been so outrageously flouted, in a total perversion of moral values that resulted in the industrialization of death. For the survivors and the families of the victims, the wounds inflicted by these events remain open to this day.

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. The organization remained a prisoner of its traditional procedures and of the overly narrow legal framework in which it operated. Having abandoned the idea of public condemnation – convinced as it was that this would not change the course of events, fearing that it would jeopardize the activities it was carrying out for other victims, especially prisoners of war, and not wishing to exacerbate Switzerland's relations with the belligerent States – the ICRC essentially relied on its delegates to make confidential representations to the authorities of the Reich or its satellites. However, these delegates had no access to the corridors of power. Only towards the end of the war did the ICRC's leaders make high-level representations to certain leaders of the Reich and its satellites.

In the words of Jean-Claude Favez, who made the most thorough independent study of the ICRC's efforts to help the victims of Nazi persecution and who, to that end, was granted unlimited access to the ICRC's archives, the organization "did not take the supreme risk of throwing the full weight of its moral authority into the scales on behalf of these particular victims." <sup>1</sup>

Having confined itself to two options – that of the very limited aid operation it was carrying out for the victims of Nazi persecution, with derisory results in regard to the situation of the victims and no impact on the genocide, and that of public condemnation, an ultimate weapon that the ICRC felt it could not use, the organization was unable – until the last months of the war – to make determined, sustained, high-level diplomatic representations to the leaders of the Reich or to

those of its allies or satellites, not all of whom shared the destructive fanaticism of Nazi dignitaries. 2

Such approaches should have been attempted, even if it could be doubted that the desired results would be achieved. For if crime meets with no protest – were it only by means of confidential representations – if repeated atrocities meet with no condemnation – even if no material sanctions are imposed – then it is to be feared that the moral values underlying international humanitarian law will eventually wither away.

With this in mind, the ICRC today regrets its past errors and omissions. This failure will remain engraved in the organization's memory, as will the brave acts undertaken by many of its delegates at the time.

While history cannot be rewritten, the ICRC intends to honour the victims of Nazi persecution by fighting for a world in which the dignity of every man, woman and child is respected in all circumstances.

**Notes:**

1. Jean-Claude Favez, avec la collaboration de Geneviève Billeter, *Une mission impossible? Le CICR,*

*les déportations et les camps de concentration nazis*, Lausanne, Editions Payot, 1988. This book was published in English under the title *The Red Cross and the Holocaust* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), pp. 273–282

2. "The question may therefore be asked why between, on the one hand, the aid operation, derisory from the point of view of the victims, [...] and on the other the public appeal, a weapon of last resort which the ICRC [...] felt it could not use, no diplomatic initiative was launched that was both worthy of the drama being enacted before everyone's eyes and based on a precise calculation of risks, such as a protest letter to Hitler or Himmler, or better still a mission by Huber or Burckhardt to Berlin or Berchtesgaden." (Favez, 1999, *op. cit.*, p. 279)