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The ICRC delegate: an exceptional humanitarian player?

Brigitte Troyon and Daniel Palmieri

Brigitte Troyon is Deputy Director for International Law and Co-operation within the Movement and Daniel Palmieri is Historical Research Officer at the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Abstract

"What is an ICRC delegate?" Here, in a sentence, is the focus of this article. Going through the in-house perception, which highlights the extraordinary and singular nature of this humanitarian player, and through the view of the public, which oscillates between the missionary of humanity and the mere holder of a temporary job, the authors attempt to give the reader the key to unveil and discover this peculiar profession.

Explaining to the uninitiated what it means to be a delegate[1] of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) may seem an almost impossible task. People outside Switzerland may quickly associate the symbol of the Red Cross with charitable relief activities in aid of people in distress, but very often their knowledge stops there. The very term "delegate" – unique among humanitarian organizations, which prefer the terms "representatives", "members" or "staff" – does not usually give rise to any comment. Despite their special mandate and their sometimes exclusive activities, in the eyes of the general public ICRC delegates are just part of the amorphous mass of humanitarian workers, while their parent organization is confused in the best of cases with the Swiss Red Cross. For, paradoxically, even those who have no clear idea of what the ICRC does almost instinctively associate it with Switzerland. This is evidence of the persistence, and above all the effectiveness, in the collective imagination of a discourse formulated at the end of the nineteenth century which gave prominence to Switzerland's humanitarian tradition.

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This article sets out, therefore, to define what an ICRC delegate really is. It is intended both for outside readers and – perhaps unexpectedly – for ICRC staff themselves. For the authors have observed, on the basis of their research and the results of a brief opinion poll, that although ICRC staff seemed to have an innate understanding of what a delegate is, they often have difficulty in expressing that understanding in a concise manner without falling back on professional jargon or circumlocution. That is hardly surprising, for the pages that follow will show that the question has been widely discussed and has caused quite a lot of ink to flow within the very organization that engendered these delegates. Before proceeding to the heart of the matter, however, it might be useful to trace the evolution of the delegate throughout the ICRC's history.

The delegate through history

The emergence of the "delegate" follows closely on that of the International Committee of the Red Cross itself. Indeed, in March 1864 (that is, a year after its founding), the fledgling Committee decided to dispatch two "delegates",[2] one to approach the Danish belligerents and the other the Austro-Prussians, who at the time were fighting over the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein.[3] The term "delegate", used for the first time, had a diplomatic connotation – that of an envoy entrusted with certain powers – and thus did not refer to any actual profession. Nor indeed did it refer to any humanitarian activity, since the brief of the ICRC envoys was to gather information about the two armies' medical services and, first and foremost, to act as observers. The term was used in connection with a mission in a context of armed conflict (and not in one of the more usual contexts at the time, such as that of an international congress); in a way this prefigured the working environment of generations of delegates to come.

During the 1870 war the Committee again delegated one of its members, Gustave Moynier, in Basel, but this time to accomplish the essentially administrative task of setting up the International Agency.[4] Although Dr Appia for his part did announce his intention of travelling to the theatre of the Franco-Prussian war, this was to be in a personal capacity, since the ICRC decided "not to delegate to M. Appia any official function for the time being, so as to avoid

1 This expression is considered to mean an expatriate ICRC staff member performing an activity for which he has had no previous training. For the sake of simplicity, in this article the masculine pronoun is used to designate both men and women, as the general context makes it clear to which gender it refers.
2 Dr Louis Appia and Captain Charles Van de Velde.
3 "General Dufour insisted upon the duty incumbent on us at present, in order to preserve our stamp of *impartiality* and internationality, to dispatch two delegates, one to Germany and the other to Denmark." *Minutes of the Meetings of the International Committee of the Red Cross, 1863–1914*, ed. Jean-François Pitteloud with contributions from Caroline Barnes and Françoise Dubosson, ICRC/Henry Dunant Society, Geneva, 1999; Meeting of 13 March 1864, p. 27.
4 Ibid., Meeting of 18 July 1870, p. 98.

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anything that might cast doubt on the complete neutrality that must animate the International Committee".[5]

It was during the insurrection in Bosnia and Herzegovina, then a Turkish province, that the Committee again recruited delegates, three on this occasion.[6] They were dispatched in December 1875 to the neighbouring principality of Montenegro to help set up a National Red Cross Society, and quite incidentally to bring aid to the refugee population. Their stay lasted several weeks, and the term "delegation" was used for the first time to describe this operation, which also saw the first truly humanitarian activities conducted by delegates.

There followed a long interval, lasting more than forty years, before the term "delegate" was used again, this time during the Balkan wars of 1912–13.[7] The person in question was entrusted with the task of gathering information on the organization and functioning of the medical services of the states involved in the conflict.

The cataclysm of August 1914 prompted, for the ICRC, the first large-scale recruitment of personnel, both for work in Geneva and for activities abroad. About forty people bearing the title of delegate worked sporadically throughout the conflict, mostly visiting prisoner-of-war camps. Their ranks swelled further immediately after the war, to reach more than a hundred.[8] In view of the humanitarian situation in a Europe brought to its knees by four years of fighting and the direct effects of the war, the ICRC had to deploy major efforts which required an increase in numbers of expatriate staff. From the mid-1920s to 1932, on the other hand, apart from a permanent representative in Moscow,[9] there is no trace of any delegates working for the ICRC. It was only with the succession of devastating conflicts that marked the period between the two world wars – in China (1932), Chaco (1932–5), Abyssinia (1935–6) and then Spain (1936–9) – that delegates reappeared for any significant length of time. Their numbers grew further during the Second World War: 340 individuals were recruited to serve as delegates between September 1939 and June 1947.[10] While at the end of the hostilities the Geneva-based organization had to discharge quite a number of the delegates it had employed between 1939 and 1945, those who remained, and later their successors, especially from the late 1960s, conferred on this function the permanent nature that has been maintained until today.

5 Ibid., p. 102.
6 Frédéric Ferrière (physician), Charles Goetz (pharmacist), Aloïs Humbert (professor of zoology).
7 For Carle de Marval (physician).
8 To be exact 110, according to *L'expérience du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge en matière de secours internationaux*, ICRC, Geneva, undated, pp. 54–60.
9 This was Woldemar Wehrlin. See Jean-Daniel Praz, *La mission Wehrlin du CICR à Moscou (1920–1938): Délégation ou …légation? Analyse des relations CICR–Confédération au travers d'un cas particulier de fonctionnement du Département politique*, University of Fribourg, 1996.
10 *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on its activities during the Second World War (September 1, 1939 –June 30, 1947)*, Vol. I, *General Activities*, ICRC, Geneva, 1948, p. 83.

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From representative to staff member

Giving a simple description to an outsider of what it means to be an ICRC delegate is no easy matter. Of course, everyone understands without having to have it spelled out that a delegate represents the organization that "delegates" him around the world. That, indeed, is the explanation given by the ICRC president, Max Huber, in answer to a question from the young Marcel Junod (later a model and spiritual father for generations of delegates), who was just leaving for Ethiopia, "What shall we have to do exactly when we get there?" "You will be our representatives."[11] But above and beyond this literal meaning, the mystery remains unsolved. Various avenues may be explored with the aim of understanding and defining this unique humanitarian player.

Very often the matter is resolved by enumerating the professional tasks performed by the person concerned. This procedure is a longstanding one. In 1953 the *Delegate's Manual* stated, "The activities of delegates are comparable to those of the ICRC, of which they are both the eyes and ears and the executive agents. Representing as they do all the Geneva departments abroad, their tasks are always many, and vary according to the place and the circumstances."[12] There follows a list of these various treaty-based or traditional activities: visiting prisoner-of-war camps, conducting activities relating to the work of the Central Tracing Agency, preparing and organizing relief operations, and carrying out medical activities or activities on behalf of refugees and stateless persons. This sort of explanation was still in vogue and was even improved upon 20 years later: "A prison visitor … a spokesman for enemy internees in a nation at war … a doctor or surgeon at the bedside of wounded or sick victims of hostilities … a registrar of records to identify detainees, search for the missing, bring families together again … a distributor of food and blankets … a transport manager: these are only some of the jobs of an ICRC delegate."[13]

It should be noted that while at first being a delegate was not a career, it gradually became one in accordance with the adage "practice makes perfect". Emanating as he does from the International Committee, the delegate symbolizes not only its expectations but also its ambitions. As long as the ICRC believed that it should play only a co-ordinating role, acting merely as a sort of transmission system between the various societies making up the Red Cross Movement and leaving it to them to bring aid directly to the victims, the delegate's primary role was that of an observer who looked on and drew up a report. That being so, it was hardly surprising that the members of the ICRC should choose those who were to be their eyes, their ears and even their voices from among their peers or their close

11 Marcel Junod, *Warrior Without Weapons*, ICRC, Geneva, 1982, p. 16 (1st edn in French: *Le troisième combattant: De l'ypérite en Abyssinie à la bombe atomique d'Hiroshima*, Verlagsanstalt Ringier, Zofingen, 1947).

12 *Manuel du délégué. Informations et instructions générales à l'usage des délégués et correspondants du CICR*, ICRC, Geneva, September 1953, p. 36. (All the translations are made by the authors.)

13 "ICRC delegate: A demanding and fascinating career", *International Review of the Red Cross* (IRRC), No. 174 (September 1975), p. 435.

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acquaintances, for they felt that these essentially diplomatic tasks could be carried out only by trusted individuals belonging to the same circles as they.

As the ICRC began to abandon this role of administrator of the Red Cross Movement to become an entrepreneur, basing its work on the notion of practical assistance which expanded in parallel with the increasing range of beneficiaries, the role of its delegates became "democratized"; they now served also as the "hands" of the organization. From then on delegation meant, more than ever before, "sending someone with the power to take action". Popularization of the delegate's role progressed sporadically, especially during the two world wars. But it was only at the turning point of the 1970s that being a delegate really became a profession and was recognized as such.[14] This new professionalism clearly has to be associated with the evolution of "humanitarianism" in general, and with the growing interest it aroused among the public, and then among governments; this was a phenomenon which could already be perceived at the time of the war in Biafra (1967–70) but came under the full media spotlight from the late 1980s. From then on good intentions and amateurism were no longer acceptable, in view of the financial resources at stake in humanitarian operations and the prevailing level of competitiveness. Obviously, the changes in the nature of conflict over the past twenty years (with, among other developments, the breakdown in the structure of armed violence) have made it increasingly necessary to employ individuals specially trained for the role of a delegate.

With the increase in professionalism came the separation of tasks, which turned out to be something of a two-sided coin. An article published in the *International Review of the Red Cross* in 1975 listed the different professions practised by those who at the time were considered to be ICRC delegates working in a delegation:[15] "[prison] visiting delegates; visiting medical delegates; clinical medical delegates; para-medical personnel; Central Tracing Agency delegates; specialized relief delegates; transport specialists; administrators; radio operators".[16] This enumeration might convey the wrong impression. In fact, for a very long time there has been a tacit hierarchy among the different roles allocated to delegates, and hence a sort of occult segregation between those who regard themselves as performing "noble" tasks – and who therefore feel that they alone may bear the title of "delegate" – and all the others who are assigned the "dirty work". According to this internal scale of values, the position of a delegate conducting visits in places of detention is considered vastly superior to that of the "flour-sack" delegate who hands out relief supplies. And what can be said of the rest of the delegation staff, especially the nurses, whose acquisition of the title "delegate" was seen by some hardliners as an aberration, or even a sacrilege? Was this attitude – which can only be described as pretentious – based on and justified by the fact that the Geneva

14 The first introductory course for ICRC delegates was held in 1971. The ICRC was the first humanitarian organization to provide its staff with this type of training, which was dispensed immediately after recruitment.

15 Occupying a post abroad is still seen as an essential condition for being granted the title of delegate.

16 "ICRC delegate", above note 13, pp. 443–4.

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Conventions recognize only the detention activities of ICRC delegates?[17] Or was it that detention delegates often enjoyed advantages when it came to reaching the higher echelons of the organization? That remains an open question.

Another way of grasping the very essence of what it means to be a delegate is to identify – in both the positive and the negative sense – not his tasks but his skills. This is what the revised version of the *Delegate's Manual*, completed in the 1970s, set out to do. Under the heading "What he is", the manual points out that the delegate is quite obviously a representative of the ICRC, but is also an impartial negotiator, the "enemy's advocate", and an information agent, or even an agent expected to gather intelligence useful for his headquarters in Geneva. While he may occasionally play the role of secret agent, a delegate must abandon any ambitions of becoming a diplomat, an inspector, a judge, a civil servant (alas!) or a Samaritan.[18]

Finally, more objective characteristics, such as age, nationality, marital status and level of education, may be taken into account.

It is this third approach that the ICRC opted for in the 1980s, not only to explain its expectations to those outside the organization but also to recruit new staff. For faced with a shortage of qualified delegates, and thus a lack of personnel to man its delegations, the ICRC was obliged to review its recruitment system, which was judged too passive and too restrictive. This effort, initiated in 1978, resulted in the establishment not only of a proper recruitment service[19] but also of a system of checklists – several of the headings are still in use today – which served as the first step in the selection of future delegates. As a general rule, according to the selection criteria drawn up in this way, candidates were expected to be Swiss, in sound health, of good appearance; in possession of a university degree or other professional training plus a few years' experience; to have language skills … and above all to be of proven moral character![20] This procedure soon produced results, and thanks to recruitment campaigns launched in the press, and even television advertisements, the number of applicants increased significantly in the early 1980s. To guarantee a certain level of quality while at the same time meeting the need to find new staff, these selection criteria were used mainly for an initial screening process.

The "Swissness" of the delegate?

One of the criteria in question was particularly striking: to exercise the profession of delegate a candidate had to be of predefined, that is, Swiss, nationality. So if the

17 See Article 88 of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 27 July 1929, and also Article 126 of the Third Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August 1949.

18 *Manuel du délégué*, ICRC, Geneva, 1972, "Définition du délégué", pp. 145–8.

19 A Recruitment and Training Division was set up at the ICRC in 1979.

20 At the time, age was not really considered to be a decisive factor, as candidates had to be between 25 and 55 years of age (preference being given to the 25–35 year age group). However, the upper limit was brought down to 45 years, then to today's limit of 40. The lower limit has remained more or less unchanged, ranging between 23 and 25.

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definition (and the peculiarity) of an ICRC delegate had to be encapsulated in one word, it could be said that he is Swiss! This rule, placed on a formal footing in the mid-1970s, is based on a much older practice. A member of the first contingent of delegates destined to serve in Spain during the civil war, Raymond Courvoisier, remembers the insistence of the ICRC on the single-nationality status of its representatives during a presentation of its activities and role.[21]

It is quite clear that this rule derives from identification with the members of the Committee who, at first by practice,[22] then by statute,[23] are co-opted from among Swiss citizens. If the Committee was going to delegate some of its powers, it might as well be to fellow citizens presumed to share its values. One might also wonder whether the ever greater politicization of the ICRC's concept of neutrality – and hence of its alignment with the neutrality of the Swiss Confederation – was instrumental in making a passport bearing a white cross a necessity for employment in the organization symbolized by the red cross.

Admittedly, the term "neutrality" has always been used at the ICRC, but it appears that at the time it was seen as a concept close to those of impartiality and independence. The organization's 1921 Statutes reflected this view, stating as they did that "The aim of the International Committee of the Red Cross is to maintain the fundamental and unchanging principles which are at the basis of the Red Cross organization, that is, impartiality, political, religious and economic independence, the universality of the Red Cross and the equality of its members" (Article 3).[24] Similarly, when the Committee decided to send its very first delegation to meet each of the two belligerents involved in the War of the Duchies, this was to preserve its "stamp of impartiality".[25] If the two delegates were seen as "neutral", it was first and foremost because they took no position in favour of either of the parties. The fact that neither was of Danish or of German origin was certainly a further advantage for their mission, but the criterion of nationality was not the most important. Endowing this idea of neutrality with political significance, and in particular a Swiss connotation, never occurred to the members of the ICRC. In fact, while Dr Appia was indeed a Swiss national, the second envoy, Captain Charles Van de Velde, was entirely Dutch. Similarly, during the Great War a Dane carried out visits to prisoners of war in Germany in 1918, while the Committee's permanent delegate at Allied headquarters in Salonika in 1917 and 1918 was French! The same phenomenon can be seen after the war: among the 110 delegates working for the ICRC between 1918 and 1923, seven were foreigners, and these included French, Russian, Swedish and German nationals.[26]

21 "[The members and delegates of the ICRC] are ineluctably and exclusively of Swiss nationality." Raymond Courvoisier, *Ceux qui ne devaient pas mourir*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1978, p. 19. (Translated by the authors.)

22 François Bugnion, "The composition of the International Committee of the Red Cross", IRRC, No. 307 (July–August 1995), p. 428.

23 From 1930.

24 *La Croix-Rouge internationale: Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et les Conférences internationales*, 5th edn, ICRC, Geneva, 1925, p. 67. (Translated by the authors.)

25 See note 3.

26 *L'expérience du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, above note 8, pp. 54–60.

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In the early 1920s the ICRC's broad conception of neutrality seemed to become more rigid. At first this was a reaction to attempts to "internationalize" the International Committee launched by the League of Red Cross Societies, which was critical of the Committee's single-nationality (in fact, entirely Genevan) composition. To counter any project involving a merger or union with the League, in 1923 the ICRC decided to open its doors, but only to eminent Swiss nationals, considering that this concession "would strengthen it and to some degree parry criticism levelled at it for its exclusively Genevan character".[27] Notable among the nominees were jurist Max Huber and Federal Councillor Giuseppe Motta. ICRC President Gustave Ador expressed reservations about the latter because of his status as a politician, suggesting that this might pose a threat to the ICRC's neutrality. His scruples were, however, set aside by other members of the Committee, who argued that "M. Motta is a Swiss, and therefore a neutral, politician …".[28] With the co-option of the minister a dual process was set in motion: a politicization of the ICRC's neutrality in contact with Swiss neutrality, then a sort of symbiosis between the two forms of neutrality. While Switzerland's political neutrality made the existence of the ICRC and its work possible, the ICRC's neutrality reinforced the Confederation's position of political disengagement. Motta explicitly drew attention to this situation, referring to "the existence of this weapon protective of Swiss neutrality that is the ICRC".[29] The changes made to the ICRC's Statutes in 1930 clearly reflected that position; not only was this the first time that mention was made of the Swiss nationality of the members of the Committee (Article 7), but it was also on this occasion that the word "neutral" first appeared in the Statutes.[30]

In a context of growing polarization in Europe between democratic states and authoritarian regimes, the equation ICRC = neutral = Swiss became established, a formula whose raison d'être was fully justified first by the years of war, then by the Iron Curtain. It was therefore hardly surprising that at the beginning of the 1950s the ICRC president called on a member of the Federal Political Department to help draw up draft regulations governing the status of ICRC delegates, intended to replace the internal employment contract in use until then. The new text stated at once that "only *Swiss* citizens of both sexes and good reputation may be taken into consideration as members of delegations".[31]

Thus Swiss nationality became an ineluctable condition, which until the early 1990s characterized[32] the ICRC delegate[33] and served to distinguish between

27 ICRC Archives, A PV, Meeting of the Committee, 28 June 1923.
28 Ibid.
29 ICRC Archives, A PV, Meeting of the Committee, 2 June 1927.
30 "Art. 4d. – In particular, the ICRC aims to be a *neutral* intermediary", *Manuel de la Croix-Rouge internationale*, ICRC, Geneva and League of Red Cross Societies, Paris, 1930, p. 146 (emphasis added).
31 ICRC Archives, B AG, 250-001, *Projet de règlement concernant le statut des délégués du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, Article 3, 25 January 1949 (emphasis added).
32 For the ICRC, as for the authorities, while the Swiss population for its part seemed unaware of and even surprised by this, as shown by several opinion polls conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s.
33 Apart from his nationality, the ICRC delegate displays other facets of his Swissness, including the way in which he views his work, expressing this view in terms which also apply to Switzerland and the Swiss

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him and the other members of a delegation. For while on a pragmatic basis the ICRC was not opposed to the recruitment of non-Swiss personnel (but if possible on secondment from National Red Cross Societies) for ad hoc technical or medical duties (secretarial work, accountancy, nursing, etc.), traditional and treaty-based tasks – especially those connected with representing of the organization and conducting protection activities – were entrusted exclusively to Swiss nationals. Moreover, only the latter were issued with "diplomatic passports"[34] for their work as delegates. The ICRC went further at the turn of the 1980s, when it stressed that only Swiss staff members could bear the title of "delegate"; some exceptions were nevertheless made when it came to Agency posts (work to reunify families split up by war), which were mostly occupied by women.

The masculinity of the delegate?

The previous point prompts us to ask whether another possible definition of an ICRC delegate might not be found in a solely biological matter, in other words, whether a delegate can only be a man.

We have already noted that the 1949 draft on the status of delegates makes no discrimination based on gender, the position being open to both sexes. In practice, however, for many years it was males who had the almost exclusive right to exercise this profession. And although the gender issue was raised regularly, it was always in the form of "the problem of female delegates", which was obviously quite insoluble for their male colleagues.

Admittedly, an article published in the *Review* in 1975 pointed out (perhaps with regret), that "up to the present time, there have been few women delegates", although "the experience of recent years indicates that women members of delegations make an effective contribution", thanks to their quality of empathy, or even their maternal nature.[35]

The fact remains that when selection criteria were placed on a formal basis it was not openly specified that both male and female candidates could apply. This possibility was left to the judgement of the recruiter, taking into account the general rule that applicants with the same qualifications had an equal chance of being accepted. It was later specified that, where possible (*sic*), the post of delegate had to be opened to women.[36] Let it be said that the ICRC's highest authorities

people in general (meticulousness, order, respect for authority, discretion, efficiency). Foreign observers also note these aspects of Swissness to which they often add, and not in any negative sense, that of predictability. On the other hand, they may regret that ICRC delegates sometimes demonstrate attributes which are less favourable but also seen as typically Swiss (inflexibility, coldness, arrogance, slow-wittedness).

34 This practice dates back a long time. Already during the First World War, the Federal Political Department issued diplomatic passports to ICRC delegates. Today only heads of ICRC delegations and senior ICRC staff (exclusively Swiss nationals) may obtain this document.

35 "ICRC delegate", above note 13, pp. 439–40.

36 With the notable exception of posts for delegates visiting prisons, which were reserved for men. At most, in situations where the psychological state of women prisoners was deteriorating without any obvious

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would have preferred a more explicit formula, feeling that the principle of equality of opportunity between men and women should be stated clearly. But the administration decided otherwise, not without advancing weighty arguments in support of its position. One of these arguments held that women delegates would be unacceptable to many governments (although it was admitted that this was merely an assertion and difficult to back up with concrete examples); another pointed out that the natural career opening for women at the ICRC, that is, Agency work, was no longer viable because of the excessively large number of female employees. More surprisingly, another factor mentioned was the persistence of misogynous attitudes[37] on the part of senior staff both at headquarters and in the field, the authors of the text asserting that they, of course, were above such simplistic reactions!

Enough of these explanations. It should be mentioned, however, that such a degree of sexual formalism might be understandable while the ICRC was an exclusively male preserve, that is, during about the first fifty years of its history, but things had changed by the beginning of the 1920s. At that time not only had the Committee already co-opted women members,[38] but these had already proved their worth in the field, even if in a very modest way. Indeed, in the list of the main ICRC delegates in 1918 given in the document cited earlier, two female names appear out of a total of 110.[39] One is that of a member of the Committee (Mlle Ferrière), who was granted the title of delegate for a mission during which she represented the organization and conducted negotiations. The second female delegate named, although entirely forgotten, merits closer attention. Indeed, Zénaïde Dessonnaz[40] was the first woman really to play the role of a delegate as it is understood today, personally bringing aid to victims.

Acting as her husband's "volunteer"[41] assistant, Madame Dessonnaz worked at his side from May 1921, distributing relief supplies to Russian refugees in Belgrade and organizing medical assistance for children. She subsequently accompanied her husband to the Ukraine, where at first she worked as an unpaid secretary for the ICRC. At her husband's express request,[42] she then became officially associated with the organization's activities before being granted, at the end of 1922, the title of assistant delegate.[43] In the field she was mainly

reason, the delegate was advised to introduce his wife and leave her to talk to them! Marcel A. Boisard, *Guide pratique à l'intention des collaborateurs du CICR en terres d'Islam*, ICRC, Geneva, 1989, p. 120.

37 Themselves a reflection of a very Swiss mentality when it came to female matters. Indeed, the Swiss Confederation was long regarded as an underdeveloped country with respect to the way in which it treated its female population; Swiss women obtained the right to vote at national level only in 1971.

38 Marguerite Cramer in 1918, Pauline Chaponnière-Chaix in 1922 and Suzanne Ferrière in 1924.

39 That is, 1.8 per cent of total numbers: *L'expérience du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, above note 8. Formerly, the few women to be found in ICRC delegations were restricted to secretarial duties (see, for example, the list of expatriate staff in the *Bulletin international des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. LII, No. 221, 15 January 1921, pp. 47–8).

40 Of Russian origin, Zénaïde Dessonnaz was a doctor and the wife of ICRC delegate Georges Dessonnaz.

41 *L'expérience du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, above note 8, p. 55.

42 ICRC Archives, Mis 25a 5/138, Letter from Georges Dessonnaz to the ICRC Missions Commission, 19 June 1922.

43 ICRC Archives, A PV, Missions Commission, meeting of 22 December 1922.

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involved in health activities, and in co-ordinating the dispatch of food supplies to starving populations. The end of humanitarian operations in the Soviet republics also marked the end of Madame Dessonnaz's work for the International Committee.

Between the two world wars, apart from members of the Committee who were given the title of delegate for diplomatic purposes, no woman really played this role in the field. During the Spanish Civil War, however, an attempt was made to encourage the recruitment of women. The ICRC proposed that delegates on the spot be consulted "to see whether it would be possible for them to have female staff if the International Committee could find nothing else [*sic*]"[44]. Nothing came of this. Similarly, when Marcel Junod, head of ICRC operations in Spain, was looking for a delegate with a driving licence, he said, "We might, if we really have to, resort to the services of a woman who knows how to drive",[45] but this, too, came to nothing.

It was not until the end of the Second World War that female (assistant!) delegates were again found working for the ICRC in conflict zones, but once more in tiny numbers: one woman to 122 men in October 1944; one to 146 in January 1945, one to 165 in September 1945.[46] In 1946 their numbers rose slightly, reaching 3 per cent (four women to 148 men)[47], only to fall again. In a list drawn up in May 1948[48] there was only one female delegate to 75 men, and none at all among the ICRC's 70 representatives in 1949.[49] Women made a modest return in the 1970s, only to find themselves subjected to a quota ten years later, when the office of the Director of Operations announced in so many words that it was not ready to absorb such a rapid growth in the number of female delegates. It is true that while they represented an average of 12.5 per cent of delegates completing their training in 1980, the proportion had increased to 48.5 per cent a year later. As this progression seemed inexorable, the recruitment service felt "obliged" to apply a much more restrictive policy to female than to male candidates. The results were not long in coming; in 1982 only 17 per cent of delegates in training were women. All was not lost, however, as the Recruitment and Training Division, faced with this new "feminization" of applications, committed itself to "adapting its policy and to cautiously pursuing an experience which might have favourable results".[50] This "caution" was perhaps prompted by the fear that if too many staff (especially females!) were taken on, there might be a risk of threatening that innate characteristic of the male Swiss delegate, that is, his exceptional status.

44 ICRC Archives, A PV, Missions Commission, meeting of 7 November 1936.
45 ICRC Archives, CR 212-36/7218, Telephone call from Dr Junod in Perpignan, 6 April 1939.
46 "Liste des représentants du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge dans les cinq continents", *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge* (RICR), No. 310 (October 1944), pp. 757–60; No. 313 (January 1945), pp. 116–19; No. 321 (September 1945), pp. 683–7. It should be noted that the delegate mentioned in October 1944 and the one mentioned in January 1945 were the same person.
47 RICR, No. 326 (February 1946), pp. 89–93.
48 RICR, No. 353 (May 1948), pp. 343–5.
49 RICR, No. 366 (June 1949), pp. 417–19.
50 Internal ICRC document.

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The delegate: an exceptional being?

More than any other attempt at a description, it appears that it is the personality of the ICRC delegate which defines him best, and above all which differentiates him from the uniform mass of other humanitarian workers. The ICRC itself has not been sparing of words in its explanations of this distinctive trait. At first sight the exercise is a daunting one, for "the ICRC delegate must have a combination of such contradictory qualities as to make him quite an exceptional being".[51] Indeed,

> [He] must be at one and the same time a man entirely outside the norm and entirely within the norm. Entirely outside the norm because he must be a sort of venturesome wanderer; entirely within the norm because he has to comply strictly with all the laws and customs of the country where he works. He must be totally obedient and take the appropriate initiatives at all times.[52]

Now accommodating, now inflexible, the delegate must also have sufficient judgement to know which attitude to adopt.

> He must be capable of taking decisions, and sometimes quickly, but he must avoid being hasty …; [he must] be impartial, but not insensitive; he must have initiative, but a good team spirit. He must … be able to express himself well in several languages [and] know enough to keep his mouth shut about confidential matters …[53]

Apart from these skills, the "good" delegate must be

> strong enough to resist intense physical and psychological stress. … He needs great personal discipline so as not to lose his nerve and "crack up" when he can no longer bear what he sees. … His three guiding principles are: *Tenacity – Punctiliousness – Modesty*.[54]

The list does not end there, and enshrined in various instructions issued to future delegates the following requirements can also be found: mental stability, resistance to frustration, sense of observation, honesty, common sense, reliability, tolerance, altruism, devotion to duty, etc. And to these, after all, must be added humanitarian motivation!

The *Review* concludes, "In other words, [the future delegate] must carry the ICRC mission in his heart, without acting like a missionary zealot; and while embodying all the qualities and contradictions of *homo sapiens*, he must be willing to dedicate himself unstintingly, for a relatively modest salary."[55]

51 "ICRC delegate", above note 13, p. 435.
52 Yves Bodmer and Jean-Charles Rey, *Analyse de certains aspects de la culture du CICR. L'idéologie de l'exceptionnel: avantage ou inconvénient?*, Cahier III: La recherche pratique, University of Geneva, March 1993, p. 86.
53 "ICRC delegate", above note 13, p. 436.
54 Interview given by Cornelio Sommaruga to *SonntagsZeitung*, 2 September 1990.
55 "ICRC delegate", above note 13, p. 436. The issue of financial disinterest is, moreover, a recurrent one: see Courvoisier, above note 21, p. 19.

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Spotting such a rare bird is therefore a veritable challenge, and once he is captured it is difficult to know what category to put him in. So in one sense the ideal delegate would be a really exceptional being. And even though this profile is rather unrealistic, it is consistent with the importance of the issues at stake. It can only be regretted, then, that these exceptional qualities are appreciated only within the ICRC and not by the public at large. For in the eyes of the public, "delegate = poor guy in a state of crisis".[56]

Conclusion: what, then, is a delegate?

Far be it from us to dwell on the opinion quoted above. But it certainly represents one of the multiplicity of views – and hence of possible definitions – of an ICRC delegate. Between the in-house perception, which highlights his extraordinary and singular nature, and the view of the public, which focuses on his marginal or even anomalous status; between the big-hearted adventurer, the missionary of humanity,[57] and the young graduate trying to find his way, the mere holder of a temporary job, there must surely be a happy medium.

We have seen above that while the status of the delegate could be explained in various ways (by reference to his activities, his skills, his responsibilities, etc.), not one of these alone allows us to grasp the complex essence of this humanitarian player. To come closer to the reality of the matter, therefore, all those definitions have to be brought together. From the resulting kaleidoscope the following portrait emerges: a delegate is a Swiss man who is called on to conduct activities in aid of victims of the violence of war[58] and its direct consequences, and who brings to this task specific qualities and an exceptional personality. This sketch, although rather crude, is sufficient to distinguish *homo delegatus* from other humanitarian workers in the field. Yet a look at what is really going on today reveals that this general image is quite obsolete.

As far as *gender* is concerned, the profile of the typical delegate has become significantly feminized in recent years. Left with the meanest share in the early 1980s, women have evened the score in scarcely one generation. At present more than four delegates out of ten in the field are women (41 per cent in 2005), and their numbers have been steadily increasing over the past few years. The situation is even more favourable at the recruitment stage, as currently the ICRC is accepting a larger number of female applications, which obviously has

56 Jean-Pierre Widmer, *Délégué CICR: Atout ou pénalisation pour la suite d'une carrière professionnelle*, IDHEAP, Geneva, 1986, Annex 6-6 (quotation). Today this assertion no longer holds good. Because of changes in the Swiss job market, the ICRC delegate is now seen as a specialist with skills of interest to employers in other areas of activity. (Translated by the authors.)

57 The term "international social worker" has also been used to describe ICRC delegates: see ICRC Archives, B AG 013-001, "Le travailleur social international en face du problème ORIENT-OCCIDENT", p. 4.

58 This expression is intended to cover all categories of armed conflict and internal violence or disturbances.

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repercussions on the number of female delegates engaged (57 per cent in 2006). Do these figures reflect the success of long-standing efforts to make the profession of delegate accessible to women? Or perhaps, as is the case in other areas where certain tasks are being increasingly entrusted to women, might they indicate that men are losing interest in humanitarian work or even feel that it has lost its prestige? The question remains open. In any event, the delegate is no longer a representative of the stronger sex only. And if there is still a gender issue at the ICRC, it relates more to the level of responsibility accorded to female staff than to the number of women working for the organization.

A comparable change has occurred when it comes to *nationality*. The profession and title of "delegate", inaccessible for so long to anyone without an identity document bearing a white cross, have become internationalized, or at least westernized.[59] This upheaval in ICRC tradition – for upheaval it was – occurred more or less on the heels of another major revolution, the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War. As a result, the notion of neutrality associated with Swiss nationality lost its substance, and foreign staffs were able to accede to the rank of delegate from 1993.[60] Today this transformation has been reinforced, if need be, first by the Swiss Confederation's entry into the United Nations and subsequently by the trend in Swiss foreign policy to become closely involved in current issues, two factors which in their turn contribute to a more relative view of the concept of neutrality.[61] The move to internationalize ICRC staff was seen as an innovation, but this was to overlook the fact that the organization had already conducted the same experiment almost a century before, as pointed out earlier in this article.[62]

Turning now to the matter of *personal skills*, it is interesting to note first of all that this focus on the individual and his qualities may be regarded, also at the ICRC, as a post-1968 phenomenon. Previously stress was laid above all on the way in which the delegate was expected to behave in order to "demonstrate that he was worthy of the idea he represented",[63] rather than on his personality. Far from losing their pertinence – unlike the criteria of gender and nationality – the

59 Non-Westerners recruited as delegates in 2006 numbered thirteen (11 per cent as compared with 65 per cent non-Swiss Westerners). These percentages show that there is still a long way to go before the ICRC becomes truly international, especially when it comes to expatriate posts for national employees, whose experience and skills are greatly underexploited by the organization.

60 Today non-Swiss nationals account for more than half the total number of delegates (52 per cent in 2005).

61 Indeed, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs recently embarked on an analysis of what Swiss neutrality means in the twenty-first century.

62 A further challenge (see note 59) still facing the ICRC in terms of internationalization relates to the language policy. For a long time an entirely French-speaking organization, the ICRC gradually opened up to English as well, although it still expects its foreign staff, especially those working in Geneva, to have an active or passive knowledge of French. English and French are now recognized as the organization's official working languages, but adoption of a single language – English – would further advance the process of internationalizing ICRC personnel. This question of language, however, touches on the very problem of the special, even unique nature of the ICRC as an international organization (and also as the reflection of a sort of Swissness); and that explains the reluctance to make such a move.

63 *Manuel du délégué*, above note 12, p. 16. (Translated by the authors.)

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personal qualities of candidates for the post of delegate remain by far the most important selection criteria. There is an awareness that, as in the past, the qualities required may "at first glance appear contradictory: [for] ICRC staff must be tenacious yet flexible, creative but methodical, at one and the same time curious and discreet, sensitive but able to control their emotions"[64] … and also be quite young. The ICRC therefore continues to seek "the dynamism of youth and the prudence of maturity".[65] This contradiction is at the basis of most of the requirements relating to the recruitment of future delegates, the stage at which the candidate's various characteristics (motivation, leadership qualities, ability to grasp the essentials of a situation, communication skills, etc.) are thoroughly investigated.

Of course, demanding work requires competent staff. But one could wonder whether this selection procedure, however necessary to maintain the quality of the personnel recruited, might not have two quite unexpected results. That is, whether applying a selection procedure that relies on a set of predefined qualities, most of which reflect those expected of Swiss candidates in the past, might not create the risk of "Helveticizing" foreign candidates – a process already ingrained in the ICRC's history and culture – and thus annihilate the asset represented by the internationalization of delegates. Similarly, trying to fit candidates into the same mould by requiring that they all present exactly the same qualities, while disregarding their differences and their own personal backgrounds, creates the danger of overlooking the human individual and all the immense possibilities he represents, and therefore of leaving aside what ultimately constitutes the exceptional character of a delegate.

64 "Working for the ICRC: A wide range of profiles and missions", ICRC website.
65 "ICRC delegate", above note 13, p. 436.

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