Neither the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement nor its founding agent, the International Committee of the Red Cross, is well known in detail - despite their origins in the middle of the 19th Century. Rainer Baudendistel helps to correct this situation with his excellent book, which focuses on the role of the Red Cross in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia during 1935-1936.

His work makes clear why we should care about this subject. The ICRC is supposed to be the lead actor in violent conflicts for the RC family of agencies (189 official national aid societies at last count - including now the Israeli aid society). This network is playing important roles in places like Darfur. The ICRC alone visits more prisoners of war and other types of detainees than any other organization, including in places like Abu Ghrabi and Guantanamo. This modern RC humanitarian work, whether involving relief or prisoner visits, was affected by the events of 1935-1936.

While the ICRC and the national RC societies had played a large role in the Great War of 1914-1919, the Italo-Ethiopian War was the first to see a permanent RC field mission from the start through the end of that conflict. There followed practical questions about the relationship between the Geneva-based ICRC and various national RC societies in the field (not to mention friction between the ICRC and the RC Federation, the union of the national RC societies). Questions also arose about relations between Geneva and its two-person delegation in the theater of battle.

Moreover, Baudendistel addresses pointed questions about the nature of ICRC membership and whether it tilted toward Fascist Italy at the expense of war victims and indeed of the reputation of the agency itself. The ICRC has carefully nurtured an image of independence, neutrality, and impartiality in its humanitarian endeavors around the world.

This image of principled action is a major reason why the ICRC is recognized in the 1949 Geneva Conventions, being given rights and duties by states. The agency is associated with four Nobel Peace Prizes.

Using the ICRC’s own archives, now open under the 40 year moratorium rule, along with a variety of other sources, Baudendistel shows that many members of the all-Swiss ICRC were deferential to Swiss national interests, sympathetic to Mussolini as a barrier to the dreaded expansion of communism, and hence prone to be taken in by Italian propaganda and other maneuvers. This important work fits well with the book by Jean-Claude Favez which analyzes the record of the ICRC in dealing with the German holocaust. Both books show beyond a shadow of a doubt that the ICRC in the 1930s and 1940s was much less independent, neutral, and impartial than often pictured. Both works fit well with a major history of the Red Cross by John Hutchinson, another rather recent critical study, but which stops its coverage at the end of the First World War.

Baudendistel, a former ICRC delegate, deals in remarkable detail with issues such as Italian bombing of RC field hospitals along with the overlapping matter of Italian use of poison gas. On these related issues the ICRC in Geneva neither issued a public protest nor undertook vigorous discreet diplomacy, although the agency sent a delegation to Rome in 1936 which included a direct if informal meeting with Mussolini. By contrast, the ICRC had issued a public protest about poison gas in World War I, then worked to advance the 1925 treaty against poisonous gases. Still further, after the war the ICRC allowed the Italians inappropriate influence in the production of an ICRC white paper purporting to summarize humanitarian work in the war.

There is no doubt that ICRC President Max Huber was concerned to protect Swiss national interests, working closely with Swiss Foreign Minister Motta who was openly sympathetic to Mussolini. Neither Bern nor Ge-

1 Favez, Jean Claude, The Red Cross and the Holocaust, Cambridge 1999. (There are earlier French and German editions.)
neva wanted to antagonize the Italians, who might have had designs on the Swiss canton of Ticino (Motta’s home). Huber also shared Motta’s view that the Ethiopians should never have been recognized as a state and admitted to the League of Nations, being backward and in need of European tutelage. Thus the patriotic Huber and a number of his colleagues in Geneva were prepared to sacrifice dynamic action in behalf of war victims in Ethiopia for good relations with the Italian government and its Red Cross. With the help of the Italian Red Cross, the ICRC preserved its leadership role within the RC Movement, then and later under challenge, but war victims did not necessarily fully benefit from that central role.

For those who follow the ICRC and RC affairs closely, there is still more troubling material to be found in this carefully researched book. In the mythology of the ICRC, there is supposed to be great attention given to the expatriate staff in the field (now numbering some 1200 around the world). It is the delegate on the spot who is close to the victims, and whose voice therefore should be given great weight. But in 1935-1936 the man on the spot in Ethiopia, Sydney H. Brown, fell out of favor with Geneva because of actions on both sides of that divide. He was finally dismissed not least because he had been indiscreet in his reporting and because of his sexual orientation which had led to attempted blackmail by the Italians. Even worse, his second, Marcel Junod, who has been held up as a model delegate by Geneva, turns out to have been less than truthful over time and also taken in by Italian propaganda. For Baudendistel, Junod lacked political sensitivity, like his superiors in Geneva.

Overall, the ICRC in 1935-1936 appears with considerable reason to be highly amateurish in humanitarian matters and quite politically naive. Huber was a respected jurist, but that is not the same as being a shrewd and professional humanitarian diplomat. As Favez was to write about the ICRC when dealing with Nazi Germany, Huber and the ICRC used international humanitarian law (the 1929 Geneva Conventions at that time) more as a legalistic excuse not to act rather than as a platform from which to launch an expansive, dynamic, and creative defense of war victims. (Favez directed this study, which was originally a doctoral dissertation. Hence it is not very surprising to find definite parallels between the interpretations by Favez and Baudendistel.) So in this war the ICRC, under Huber’s imprint, said that it could only act in relation to the Geneva Conventions, and since the prohibition on use of poison gas was found in another branch of international law, the agency would not publicly address the subject or cooperate with the League of Nations. Toward the end of the war there was a weak and vague ICRC letter to the Italian Red Cross on the subject of chemical weapons, but this was hardly vigorous and timely diplomacy toward the Italian government. But even on subjects falling squarely within the Geneva tradition of law, such as the treatment of prisoners of war, the ICRC in this war was less than fully dynamic and often taken in by Italian lies and distortions.

More happily, the ICRC today has recognized some of these problems in the past, mostly because of the record in dealing with the Nazis. There is a headquarters agreement emphasizing the difference between Federal authorities in Bern and the fully separate ICRC in Geneva. No member of the ICRC Assembly, its governing board, still all Swiss, can hold public office at the Federal or cantonal level. It is inconceivable that today the ICRC President would be a consultant to the Swiss Foreign Ministry, as was true of Huber in the 1930s. ICRC archives are open for independent research on questions more than 40 years in the past, although on many questions the archives are incomplete or silent. (Favez thought some documents pertaining to the Holocaust had been removed, and Baudendistel suggests something similar about some matters pertaining to the Italo-Ethiopian war.) The ICRC overall is much more professional and much less amateurish than in the 1930s and 1940s. Contemporary Presidents of the ICRC, and a number of other high officials, are well aware of the damage to the organization’s reputation because of particularly the Holocaust record. Baudendistel’s book is sure to confirm and reinforce the need for recent changes. The current ICRC is already quite at-

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tientive to issues touching upon its independence, neutrality, and impartiality.

If the agency reacted in a rather prickly way to Favez’s critique, which it did, it is likely to be more accepting of this work. Part of it has already appeared in the International Review of the Red Cross. Leading ICRC historians, like Francois Bungion, have accepted that earlier accounts of the RC role in the Italo-Ethiopian War were incomplete.

Baudendistel has produced an impressively researched and thoroughly persuasive account, shedding light not only on long hidden details of the RC world but also details of Italian policy in the 1930s-details likely to be of broad interest to military and diplomatic historians and not just those interested in the ICRC and RC affairs. For example, Mussolini was highly sensitive to international reaction to reports of Italian gas attacks. He gave orders to use, suspend, reduce, or resume such attacks based on the international context. Given this state of affairs, it is probable that a more vigorous ICRC diplomacy on chemical weapons would have made an impact in Rome.

Baudendistel is quite right in noting that a similar work needs to be written about RC action in the Spanish Civil War.