In recent years, historical research concerning the International Committee of the Red Cross’ (ICRC) involvement and impact upon international affairs has seen a steady growth, both in terms of the sheer number of thorough archive-based publications, and in terms of their importance to other realms of research (most notably legal commentaries on the application of international humanitarian law). This trend is also evident in periodicals, as the longstanding International Review of the Red Cross (over 90 years old now), has recently become an integral part of Cambridge University Press’ Journals. Within this recent surge in literature, Gerald Steinacher’s contributions have played a somewhat special role in contextualizing the post WW II evolvement of the ICRC, given the overcast shadow which the Jewish Holocaust shed over the ICRC’s disturbing lack of its action, and its consequent indictment as to its knowledge and arguable tacit complacency during that era.

Steinacher is the author of the ground-breaking study on the direct involvement of the ICRC (alongside western intelligence agencies such as the CIA and the MI5) in providing the main escape route for Nazi war criminals from Western Europe to Latin America after WW II. Originally published in 2008 in German¹, The Oxford University Press translation of »Nazis on the Run« rightfully won the National Jewish Book award, and merited whole hearted acceptance in the academic community thanks to Steinacher’s painstakingly detailed archive research of the full escape route and aid which Nazis such as Joseph Mengele, Adolf Eichmann, Klaus Barbie and many others, received from the ICRC who issued them false-named travel documents, which they used to escape trial and judgment by the Allies.

»Hakenkreuz und Rotes Kreuz« (»Swastika and the Red Cross«) elaborates and develops further upon themes already explored in Chapters 2 & 3 of »Nazis on the Run«, presenting a more detailed study of the nexus between the German Red Cross movement under Nazism and its troubled albeit accepted relations with the parent organization of the International Red Cross movement in Geneva – the ICRC, and the federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies.

This is undoubtedly an important book; and for several reasons. The period between the Tokyo Red Cross Conference (1934) and the elaboration of the 4th Geneva Conventions (1946–1949) have been bitterly under studied, rendering this book as a welcomed benchmark study for this period. Not enough

research has been conducted regarding the German Red Cross movement which by 1935, following the enacting of the Nuremberg laws, had effectively become an extended arm of the Nazi party, and more specifically of the SS, with a senior SS officer (Ernst Robert Grawitz) nominated at its helm (p. 43–52). This overtake of the Nazis of the German Red Cross confronted the International movement in Geneva with a situation not entirely unknown to it – since it had previous experiences with the Italian Red Cross and its atrocious attitudes towards Italian war crimes in the failed conquest of Ethiopia (including the extended usage of chemical weapons there). Steinacher’s account is commendable in that he traces the uneasiness with which the Geneva movement accepted its Nazi counterpart, and explains to his readers the bigger context as to why that happened namely, due to the vital influence of Nation-State Sovereignty, upon which the ICRC’s entire legal apparatus hinged.

A second quality of the book lies in its exposure of the inner workings of the Geneva organization, especially the important and bitterly charged relationships between Carl Jacob Burckhardt, Max Huber, and later Count Folke Bernadotte in the latter’s role within the Swedish Red Cross, and his negotiations with Himmler towards the very end of the War and the ultimate extermination of the Jews of Hungary. Here one can already see the seeds which would ultimately change the ICRC during the negotiation around the making of the 4th Geneva Convention – seeds which Steinacher amply points to and traces in the confrontation between the Jewish NGOs (and their well-known Geneva Representative Gerhard Riegner) and the Geneva ICRC itself (see especially p. 55 regarding the famous »Riegner Telegram« and Burckhardt’s explicit knowledge of the Nazi »Final Solution« as early as November 1942!).

The complacent behaviour of the Geneva ICRC shifted rather sharply after D-Day (June 1944). As it became obvious that Germany was going to lose the war one way or another, more and more pressure from field delegates amounted upon Geneva to take affirmative actions to secure Jews within the remaining Nazi-controlled areas. And thus it came to be that Folke Bernadotte on the local level (alongside his compatriot Raoul Wallenberg) did for and saved far more Jews than the entire organization headed by Huber and Burckhardt in Geneva did (p. 104–105). This result – as so wonderfully explained by Steinacher, speaks loads both in terms of the lack of action by Geneva, and more so of the vital importance of individual initiatives during times of war – initiatives which literally saved the lives of tens of thousands of people albeit without headquarter support or involvement.

The last part of the book – the one which deals with the vital help rendered to Nazi war criminals by the Italian Red Cross and the pontifical authorities in the Tyrol area (between Germany, Austria and Italy) around the city of Bolzano – is an abbreviated repetition (including the featured pictured documents) from Steinacher’s »Nazis on the Run«. This repetitiveness is inevitable in follow-up studies such as this, although Steinacher could have invested some more effort in sparing his readers the notion that the book at times provides for a recap of previous hitherto published materials for the
sake of yet another monograph in his publication list. In addition, a read through the footnotes exposes Steinacher’s ample reliance on open sources from the Zurich cultural archives, yet with a relative dearth of sources from what some readers would have wished for namely, from the ICRC Geneva-based archives themselves. That said, the book holds well and firm to its own in terms originality, as well as its bitterly-needed contextualization, one which is missing in many other contemporary historical archive-based accounts.

And it is exactly here, in Steinacher’s contrasting of blatantly dishonest statements of denial of knowledge by the ICRC’s president Sommaruga from 1988 (p. 121), and the reversely honest submission to ample wrong doings in 1995 by ICRC officials, that one can grasp just how far the ICRC had come in internalizing, learning, and implementing the lessons it drew from its dark past. Suffice it to watch Philippe Gaillard – the ICRC delegate during the Rwandan Genocide (who saved over one hundred thousand lives there) – who in the PBS documentary »Ghosts of Rwanda« evokes the fact the during the Jewish Holocaust »everybody knew«, to understand how this great humanitarian organization changed its skin after its WWII debacle.

Anybody interested in current humanitarian action, and how we got to our world of NGOs who are committed to saving people – whoever they are in conflict zones the world over – would do well to read this book. One can only hope that as with »Nazis on the Run« (which has been translated into Italian, Polish, French and English), »Hakenkreuz und Rotes Kreuz« will also at some stage be made available to the broad non-German speaking readership interested in these themes.