

Communities worldwide responded to the Holocaust with indifference, undoubtedly aiding the Nazi regime in carrying out a mass genocide during World War II. One indifferent group in particular, ironically has the motto “to alleviate human suffering, protect life and health, and uphold human dignity.” That group, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), declares a humanitarian stance, ensuring “protection and assistance for victims of war and armed violence” (“Who We Are”). Yet, the ICRC neglected their moral obligation by choosing inaction during the genocide. They failed victims of the Holocaust in 1942 by not releasing a public appeal, and again in 1944 after visiting Teresienstadt, a Nazi ghetto.

The world was watching as the Germans systematically murdered millions. In 1941, Winston Churchill announced over the BBC that “there has never been a methodical, merciless butcher on such a scale” (“Winston Churchill”). In 1942, a public Polish broadcast reported the “mass shootings and torture of tens of thousands in concentration camps” (Webb). The Riegner Telegram of 1942 announced the Nazi goal of exterminating all Jewish persons “in countries occupied or controlled by Germany” (“Britain” 5), and affirmed “ways of extermination [were] being discussed including the use of prussic acid” (“Britain” 5). Even the ICRC admitted to being aware of the injustice occurring during the war by stating, “information about the persecution inflicted on Jews did... filter out of Germany and the German-occupied countries, to reach the Allied governments, and some of this information also became known to the ICRC” (“The ICRC”). Despite widespread knowledge, the ICRC remained neutral in the matter of genocide by not raising public awareness or fully investigating the treatment of victims trapped and suffering in concentration camps.

In 1942, the ICRC drafted a general appeal about the growing genocide designed specifically not to single out “Germans alone about their treatment of Jews, Roma, homosexuals,

and other victims of the death camps” (Forsythe 47). Instead of focusing only on “the deportation, hostage-taking and massacres of civilians” (Bugnion), the ICRC tiptoed around the injustices by also concentrating on “the expansion of aerial bombing raids directed against civilian population [centers], the tightening of the blockade... and the fate of prisoners of war not protected by the 1929 Geneva Convention” (Bugnion). The draft was never finalized or released. Why would the ICRC not speak out on behalf of the victims they claim to represent?

Philippe Etter, a leading member of the ICRC and Swiss politician, spoke against the appeal saying he did not want to “run the risk of offending Nazi sensitivities with a public statement – regardless of how mild, vague, and balanced such a statement might be” (Forsythe 48). This selfish input had a deeper origin, for “Swiss policy during this period was to tilt toward the Nazis through such matters as cooperative banking so as to guarantee Swiss independence and forestall anything in Berlin about an invasion of Switzerland” (Forsythe 48). Clearly for Etter and the other ICRC members, the potential of a disrupted friendship between two countries carried more weight than speaking out against Nazi atrocities against millions.

In October of 1943, The Nazi regime captured some 450 Jews in Denmark, all of whom were sent to Theresienstadt. Immediately following the capture, the Danish government “relentlessly requested permission to visit [the ghetto]” (Margry 146). Germany eventually agreed by inviting the ICRC for a guided tour the following year. Evidently, the ICRC may not have even inspected the treatment of victims if wasn’t for the persistence of the Danish government. In preparation for the guided tour, the SS increased Jewish deportation rates to Auschwitz to hide over-crowding and created a façade of fair treatment by ordering remaining “Jewish prisoners to paint house fronts, clean streets, dig flower beds, erect a playground for children, refurbish the ghetto café and ghetto bank, and [create] a community center with a stage,

prayer hall, library and verandas” (Margry 146). Finally, on June 23, 1944, the ICRC visited Theresienstadt. They were thoroughly impressed with the faked representation of the living conditions, such as sinks without plumbing, despite obvious hints of mistreatment, such as bruising under the eye of a victim (“Theresienstadt: Red Cross Visit”). Following the propagandistic tour, the ICRC did not request to visit any other camps, and made no further investigative efforts.

The ICRC failed miserably to act in accordance with their core foundations of protecting war victims. With over 40,000 concentration camps established by the Nazis from 1933-1945 (“Nazi Camps”), one visit on Nazi terms was enough for the ICRC to overlook the massacres taking place. Obviously, they acted as an ally to the Nazis by observing the genocide and collectively making the decision to look the other way.

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