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Navigating Neutrality: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 is considered to be one of the most vicious intrastate conflicts in European history. The conflict consisted of two opposing groups: Republicans and Nationalists. While the Republicans fought to protect the existing liberal democracy of Spain, the Nationalists sought to restore the former Spanish monarchy. Although an intrastate conflict at its core, the Spanish Civil War had many international actors involved on both sides. However, a neutral intermediary worked bilaterally on both sides of the conflict: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Founded in 1863 at the Geneva International Conference by Jean Henry Dunant, the ICRC was created to provide a wartime humanitarian assistance network. The ICRC always had jurisdiction to provide humanitarian assistance to international conflicts, but struggled to find legal backing to enter into intrastate conflict to provide assistance. This paper examines the evolution of the ICRC, specifically within the context of its humanitarian assistance during the Spanish Civil War. It argues that the ICRC was able to make a significant humanitarian contribution to the war through internal reforms, negotiations between Republicans and Nationalists, evacuations, and medical aid. The paper analyzes a combination of primary and secondary source documents to provide background on the internal reforms necessary for the ICRC to be able to intervene. The Spanish Civil War tested the capacity and abilities of the ICRC to effectively deliver aid to combatants and civilians in warzones, proving to be critical in the trajectory of future ICRC interventions.