

Misused Helpers The German Red Cross 1919 till 1945

A documentary by Wolfgang Bergmann

When we think of the Red Cross, what comes to mind is helpfulness, lifesaving activities, or charity work and disaster relief, whether in Germany or elsewhere. The German Red Cross society (DRK) has an unchallengeable position in the collective memory of the people, particularly of the older generation that experienced the Second World War. But the Red Cross also had its place in the Nazi strategy of 'total war', whether in air raid protection on the home front or in the Wehrmacht's medical service. Yet the partisan role of the Red Cross in the National Socialist system from 1933, which had been prepared after the loss of the First World War, does not appear at all in the organization's historical self-description or awareness. How does the German Red Cross of today deal with its past? In its headquarters in Bonn there hang the portraits of all DRK presidents since 1921 - with one exception: no picture of Ernst Robert Grawitz, Reichsarzt of the SS and Acting President of the German Red Cross from 1938 to 1945, is to be found there. Nor will one find any admission of guilt in the portrayals of the DRK, and its activities as accomplice and accessory to the annihilation of the Jews in Europe are hardly ever a topic in Red Cross publications. Is this chapter of the German Red Cross society's history still taboo, almost fifty years after the end of the Second World War? Is the German Red Cross a society with amnesia?

What do young Red Cross aides or nurses think when they practice rescuing soldiers and providing first aid in Bundeswehr manoeuvres? Are they aware of the historical connections of this civilian-military co-operation? A film that poses questions about the past from the German Red Cross's present might begin with this.

This documentary makes use of historical film clips, including Red Cross propaganda films, and visit witnesses of the times and historical sites. We will be structuring the film according to working hypothesis based on our research: after the end of the First World War, the German Red Cross society did not really devote itself to peaceful social welfare work, but extended its hegemony over competing service organizations such as the Social Democratic Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund cleverly, and prepared strategically to provide support services in wartime again. The Nazi take over of the Red Cross and its blind support by the membership was not a matter of external compulsion, but a development that had been prepared by the Red Cross hierarchy before the Nazis came to power, they handed the organization and its members over to the Nazis. The leadership of the German Red Cross and the apolitical 'helping hands' of its members thus shared in complicity for the death of millions.