

THE SHAPE OF THE EMBLEM

The shape of neither the red cross nor the red crescent has been laid down. This is made clear by Mr. Jean Pictet, Director-General of the ICRC, in an article published by the League review, Panorama (Geneva, 1966). In view of the importance of the subject, and the questions which various National Societies ask themselves in this connection, we think it will be useful to give below a reprint of this article.

Legally and on the international level, the use of the red cross sign is regulated by the First Geneva Convention for the amelioration of the condition of the wounded and sick in armed forces in the field. The institution of the Red Cross in the world and the safeguard of victims of armed conflicts are based on this Convention, concluded in 1864, revised and expanded in 1906, 1929 and 1949.

This Convention declares (Article 38, 1949) : " As a compliment to Switzerland, the heraldic emblem of the red cross on a white ground, formed by reversing the Federal colours, is retained as the emblem and distinctive sign of the Medical Service of armed forces."

Let me say in passing that it is not at all certain that the founders of the Red Cross and the promoters of the first Geneva Convention in 1863 and 1864 consciously intended, in inventing the red cross, to reverse the colours of the Swiss flag. No text of that period justifies such a conjecture. The analogy may only have occurred to people later. But since the 1906 Convention this reversal of colours has become official and has been very courteously presented as a compliment to the country which is the birthplace of the Red Cross.

Whatever the truth, some people have wondered whether to conclude from this Article of the Convention that the red cross should have the same proportions as the Swiss cross, fixed by the Federal Assembly in 1889, as " a white cross, upright and humetty

(i.e. whose arms do not extend to the edges of the shield), having arms equal to each other and of a length exceeding their breadth by one-sixth ”.

This is obviously a misinterpretation. The word “colours” should be taken in its strict sense, as referring to the white and the red. If the flag had been meant, the term “reversal ” could not have been used. The proceedings of the 1906 Diplomatic Conference are moreover explicit: it deliberately refrained from defining the form of the cross, since definition might have led to dangerous abuses. Sometimes, on the battle-field, for example, red crosses have to be made with whatever means are at hand. They have even been known painted in blood on a piece of white cloth.

When time is short, it is not always possible to keep to precise rules. Otherwise the adversary could claim that these signs are not valid because the proportions are wrong and so try to justify an attack against persons or objects enjoying immunity under the Convention.

Similarly, on the commercial level, unscrupulous individuals, relying on a strict definition would be able to evade the legal prohibitions and misuse the sign with impunity, by employing a slightly smaller or larger red cross than the established size.

For the same reasons, the Convention did not fix the shape of the white ground (the distinctive emblem established by the Convention is not a red cross but a red cross on a white ground), or the shade of red, as Switzerland did for its flag.

In practice, however, it has become the custom everywhere to use a Greek cross as the distinctive sign. This is a cross with four equal branches formed of two crosspieces, one vertical and the other horizontal, intersected at their centre and not extending to the edge of the shield. The cross on the Swiss flag is therefore a Greek cross.

This custom has become so widespread that it is now well established and accepted, and thought should be given, when an opportunity arises, to making it official by explicit mention in the Geneva Conventions. The word cross in fact applies to a countless variety of signs. To cite only the simplest and best known in Europe, there is the Latin cross, whose vertical branch is longer in the lower part

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(this, the cross used by Christian religions, is different from the red cross and clearly denotes the latter's religious neutrality) the cross of St. Andrew, in the form of an X, the cross of St. Anthony, in the form of a T. On other continents, the Egyptian cross (key of life), the swastika, etc. come to mind.

The sign of the cross can be found in every part of the world and in every age from ancient antiquity. If the symbolism of signs is studied in comparative ethnography it will be seen that the cross represents man in the universe. The human being is shown standing, arms outstretched, in the centre of the cosmos, represented by the cardinal points, the zenith and the nadir. At the same time it reflects the fundamental duality of the world and of life, uniting the vertical element, expression of the active or masculine force, and the horizontal element, expression of the passive or feminine force. But it is also the simplest and most eloquent of purely graphic signs. It is *the* sign. When one wants to mark a point, one makes a cross.

With so many varieties possible, it is clear that one specific type, the Greek cross, must be adhered to as the emblem of the Red Cross and protective sign. But the characteristics of this Greek cross (length and thickness of its branches, intensity of the red, etc.) must be left to each user to decide, for the reasons given above.

On the national level, some authorities or National Red Cross Societies have fixed the form of the Red Cross for their own use, for administrative or aesthetic reasons, in order to unify the presentation of badges. This is a perfectly legitimate practice. But this of course in no way reduces the protective value of emblems improvised to give legitimate cover to persons and objects safeguarded by the Geneva Conventions.

Most of the Societies which have defined the form of the cross in their regulations seem to have chosen the cross of five equal squares, the easiest and most economical to mass produce, as the crosses fit exactly into each other. Nevertheless a cross is more elegant when the branches are a little longer than they are wide.

The same remarks apply to the red crescent, admitted, as everyone knows, by the Geneva Conventions as an exceptional sign for Moslem countries. The Conventions have not fixed its form.

In 1907, the Ottoman Empire officially adopted this emblem by reversing the national flag (without the star which accompanies it).

The Turkish Red Crescent Society has statutorily fixed the dimensions of its distinctive sign, which are the same as those of the national flag : it consists of a red crescent on a white ground whose points are turned towards the left. On a flag, however, the points of the crescent are directed in the opposite direction to the pole. It is then the wind which directs it—for the wind blows where it will . . .

Orientation towards the left symbolises the first quarter of the moon, which marks the beginning of the Moslem month. Apart from Turkey, Tunisia and the USSR Moslem States have adopted this orientation. The Societies of all the other Islamic countries have given preference to orientation towards the right.

The crescent is then a " decrescent ".

The Red Crescent Societies which met in Rabat discussed the form of the crescent and its possible standardisation. No decision has yet been taken.

In conclusion, whatever the form given to it, we must never forget that the emblem instituted by the Geneva Conventions has as its ultimate aim the saving of lives. Let us make sure that it retains its value as an inviolable symbol so that nothing may tarnish its splendour.