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HENRY DUNANT AND THE FRENCH RED CROSS

It will be remembered that during the Conference of October 1863 in Geneva, from which the Red Cross originated, resolutions were passed concerning the forming in each country of committees and private relief associations to give assistance to the wounded. Henry Dunant was concerned particularly with establishing the committee in France and already in December of that same year he received the following letter from Colonel Favé, Aide-de-camp of Napoleon III :

His Majesty highly approves the object of the Conference and the recommendations made with a view to its accomplishment. He is pleased to contribute to your work by sponsoring the formation of the relief committee which you are at present endeavouring to set up in Paris and he readily authorizes you to make known his sympathy in this regard.

The Emperor has also instructed me to write to His Excellency the Minister for War, that some senior army officers be authorized to sit on the committee which you are organizing.

From that moment, support by a number of leading personalities was assured and on April 22, 1864, acting as Secretary of the International Committee of Geneva, Dunant convened a preliminary meeting in Paris. The purpose of this was to inform those who might support this humanitarian work, at that time in embryo. This meeting took place on May 25, 1864 and Dunant delivered an address which was one of the first displays of oratory by the author of A Memory of Solferino. We still have the text of the speech, which is as follows :

Gentlemen,

Encouraged by several amongst you, I have taken the liberty of convening this meeting today, in my capacity as Secretary of the International Conference which was held last October in Geneva, in order to examine by what means civil and voluntary charity can effectively reduce the horrors of war.

That Conference, which was attended by official delegates from fourteen European governments, including that of France, unanimously passed recommendations and resolutions on the best means henceforth of coming to the assistance of wounded on the battlefield.

These resolutions and recommendations were as follows :

Since the October meeting, twelve countries may already be considered as having fully complied with the requirements laid down by the Conference for the formation of relief committees. These twelve States are : Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Oldenburg, Prussia, Saxony, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Württemberg. Moreover, committees are at present being formed in the Grand Duchy of Baden, in Bavaria, Hanover, the Grand Duchy of Hesse, in Portugal and in Russia.

As regards the recommendations put forward by the Conference, twelve governments have been pleased to advise the International Committee of their standpoints and ten of these are ready to adhere to these recommendations without any reserve, namely : France, Hanover, the Netherlands, Oldenburg, Portugal, Prussia, Saxony, Sweden, Switzerland and Württemberg. Russia has merely made reserves with respect to the neutralization of volunteers and Denmark has done likewise with regard to the neutralization of inhabitants coming to the assistance of the wounded.

In addition, it appears that official adhesion to the recommendations will soon be forthcoming from the Duchy of Baden, Spain and Mecklemburg-Schwerin.

In view of these facts and seeing the ideas of the Conference studied, accepted and put into practice in several European countries, I believe — especially in consideration of the favourable interest in our views which has been expressed in Paris — that France cannot and should not remain in the background.

Since committees are being formed almost everywhere, it is only natural that in an international work there should be proper reciprocity and that something should be set afoot also in France. This, Gentlemen, is one of the main reasons impelling me to appeal to you for your valuable assistance in favour of an undertaking which is of undoubted interest to France, and I thank you for having been so kind as to respond to this appeal.

What must now be done ?

The most important question is indisputably the neutralization of ambulances and hospitals for the benefit of official or volunteer medical personnel and for the wounded themselves.

This is, however, a question which concerns the governments and one which is soon to be solved.

In agreement with the International Committee, the Swiss Federal Council is at present convening another Conference to take place in Geneva towards the end of this summer and to which will be invited all the civilized Powers in order that an agreement may be signed by the Diplomatic Delegates to ratify officially the recommendations put forward by the International Conference.

His Excellency the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in Paris, has promised to give his whole-hearted support to the Swiss Government's invitation to the Powers and we have every reason to hope that the next meeting will result in the universal adoption of this important humanitarian idea in such a way that we shall see it realized in full.

The notion which immediately follows on is that of the formation of standing committees in peace time, composed of the most farsighted and honourable men from each country — Societies which may act as intermediaries between the army which is fighting and suffering and the civilian population anxious to relieve and alleviate the agony of the soldiers.

Indeed, in order to utilize and direct, in a manner both prompt and wise, the charitable enthusiasm which is spontaneously displayed during war, it seems necessary that a standing national committee should exist in each State.

In time of war, the work of such committees is obvious enough to make it unnecessary for me to dwell on the subject here. Their peace-time functions will inevitably vary enormously depending on the country, usage and customs and the efficiency or inefficiency of the ambulances and organization of the army medical services and the Quartermaster-General's Branch.

For example, in Prussia, even before the present war and immediately after the October Conference, the Central Committee in Berlin, founded on the principles adopted in Geneva and presided over by His Royal Highness the Prince of Reuss, had contacted the official services and was successful in having great improvements

effected in several branches of these services. Consequently, this Committee was found to be extremely useful in practice.

But there is no doubt that this is not the type of work which a French Committee would be called upon to do. French army administration is recognized as the best there is.

For a French Committee, there are other fields of activity which would make themselves manifest.

I can do no more today than touch upon a few points of detail which seem not without importance. Let me give you a few examples : The French soldier is indisputably the most humane of military men. Would it not be possible to strengthen and increase further the sentiments of generosity and charity of the army and of the people by special publications at little cost, as has been done in Würtemberg, where at the present time there is hardly a single peasant who is unaware of what the international movement on behalf of military wounded is ?

Without wishing in any way to interfere in the official services, an association could encourage and reward private individuals for inventions and improvements in the transport of wounded, in medical carriages, light ambulance units with folding portable equipment, and it could also arrange for study of the best possible hospital organization at the front line and in the rear, similar, for example, to the voluntary hospitals which in the present war, starting from Altona and Hamburg, form a line across Prussia and Silesia and stretch to the far end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Such an association could call upon competent men to examine the advantages of large, well ventilated and heated mobile establishments — light, portable yet comfortable huts — to be set up in fields, under the protection of the international flag, which would then avoid overcrowding in towns and consequently the epidemics so fatal to populations. (During the flooding of the Rhône in 1888, an enterprise specialised in light buildings offered to set up in ten days adequate hutments to accommodate thirty thousand people who had been rendered homeless). Such constructions could be made up of units suitable for loading on carts like artillery trailers and assembled and disassembled whenever necessary.

A permanent society devoted especially to the subjects with which we are concerned would come to know thoroughly all the

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useful improvements — no matter how slight — in use by other armies. For example, during the war in the East, the Russian soldiers were provided with bandages for emergency dressing which they themselves knew how to apply with skill.

A regular committee, organized and ready, could prevent the bad distribution of voluntary donations and numerous abuses.

In order to ensure effective co-operation by the population, its interest must be aroused beforehand, it must be directed, guided and enlightened. Popular enthusiasm is often impetuous ; popular zeal needs stimulus and encouragement, particularly pity for the enemy wounded. We must remember that the work we are undertaking in the interest of France must at the same time be international, for this is the spirit in which committees have already been set up in the various countries of the world. Due reciprocity is essential.

Given time, our work will be applicable in many fields and will develop in ways both valuable and unexpected.

Into this category I would place the matter of voluntary hospitals, about which it was not at first my intention to speak. But I am convinced that these will be found in France ; that when the need is felt they will be formed spontaneously, but then they will find wise counsel and essential support from a committee already experienced.

In the United States, Austria, Prussia and Denmark, hundreds of devoted charitable men and women have served in ambulances, in hospitals and even on the battlefield with the full permission and approval of the military authorities. Let no one offend France by presuming that her people are less patriotic, humane and of less Christian charity than the people of Denmark, Prussia, Austria and the United States.

In conclusion, Gentlemen, I ask you with emphasis to adhere to and give your patronage to the cause in France.

I am happy to be able to convey to you the full sympathy of the French Government.

Allow me to read to you the letter which on December 21, 1863 Colonel Favé addressed to me on the instructions of His Majesty the Emperor of France.

It is not for the International Committee to tell France how the French Committee should be organized. I wanted to bring to the attention of honourable men of distinction in all respects, a subject which seems to us to be of the greatest importance and which has been so considered in most of Europe.

At the last Conference, the Geneva Committee which had taken the initiative, was appointed to fulfil the rôle of the International Committee. In view of its providential position as a neutral country, Switzerland, considering it to be its duty to endeavour to be of service to the Powers concerned, is merely paying a tribute of gratitude.

I therefore ask your permission, Gentlemen, to request you to organize at least a provisional commission, so that the International Committee may correspond with this French Commission as it does with the committees already constituted elsewhere, so that the International Committee may keep you informed either of the proceedings at the next Conference, or of any interesting ideas which may be produced elsewhere and also of the experience of our delegates in Denmark and Schleswig, as well as to receive your good counsel and valuable opinion.

Henry Dunant succeeded in his intention, since following this meeting at which he took the floor, a provisional commission was formed in Paris, which soon became the Central Committee and enabled the Red Cross to take a solid foothold in France and the National Society to develop its fine humanitarian action during the century which followed.