

War and Peace

by L. Boissier

In our April 1968 issue we published an article by Leopold Boissier, former President of the ICRC, which had appeared in the Journal de Genève. Later the same journal contained another article by the same writer, on a subject which is receiving the full attention of the Red Cross. We therefore consider it worthwhile reproducing here some of its main passages (Ed.).

We are living in times of a ferment of ideas and words. Political and legal instruments for the maintenance or restoring of peace are weakened by the ambiguities which undermined their foundations and by the misunderstandings which spread confusion in their vocabulary.

Violence is waged in several parts of the world, bringing in its train hate and bloodshed. But in almost every case it is impossible to define its character and therefore to apply the remedies proposed by law and customs. There is of course a law of war; it was framed by Conferences at The Hague, the last of which took place in 1907. Since then weapons of destruction have been developed in a way which could not be foreseen sixty years ago. Moreover, one can no longer say what is and what is not war. . . .

. . . In the midst of this anarchy, noble minds seek something to which to cling. That something must be free from the contamination of rival ideologies, must never have taken sides, must have maintained constant a calm and persevering neutral attitude. This brings them to the International Committee of the Red Cross, and they ask it to act in favour of peace.

The International Committee received such invitations in the first place with extreme caution. Its task in time of war and

WAR AND PEACE

disturbance is to save the lives of wounded or disarmed combatants, whatever may be the cause which they serve. There is no just or unjust war for the Committee; neither is there discrimination between those in uniform and those whose only distinctive mark is an arm-band. Because of its ubiquity in alleviating the suffering of victims of all wars, the International Committee does not pronounce judgment on conflicts. It does not intrude into politics, a fact of which governments appealing to it must be convinced.

The exception proves the rule. It needs the threat of disaster on a world scale to impel the Committee to go momentarily beyond the principles it has adopted. Because it gauged the danger of atomic war in 1962, it agreed, at the request of the United Nations, to help find a peaceful solution to the Cuba crisis. Its delegates would have inspected ships bound for the island in order to check that they carried no nuclear weapons. Many of the Committee's friends were taken aback by this bold decision, others heartily approved. The 1963 Congress commemorating the Centenary of the Red Cross foundation congratulated the Committee for its decision and exhorted it to carry out its mission as a neutral intermediary between States in conflict, in order to contribute to the maintenance of peace.

The Committee's attitude encouraged those in Red Cross circles who had long wished to delegate to the institution specific responsibilities in the struggle for peace. So much that in 1965 the XXth International Conference of the Red Cross, in which governments took part, did not shrink from adopting a resolution entitled "The Red Cross as a Factor in World Peace", recommending the International Committee to "undertake, in constant liaison with the United Nations and within the framework of its humanitarian mission, every effort likely to contribute to the prevention or settlement of possible armed conflicts, and to be associated, in agreement with the States concerned, with any appropriate measures to this end". Then again, a Round Table meeting last year in The Hague, after reviewing the Committee's potential for the promotion of peace, urged it to widen its scope to bring such prospects within its purview.

That is how matters now stand and the time has come to, examine how the International Committee should proceed hence-

forth. The road it has so far followed has been undeviating and led direct to the victims of armed conflicts. Must it in future, alongside the first road with its landmarks of events in which so much suffering was alleviated, blaze a new trail leading to direct or indirect intervention in issues which bring governments into conflict with each other ?

For the moment it would seem preferable to leave the Committee to go on carrying out its traditional task and, by the example of charity and solidarity which it sets, to contribute to the development of peaceful means to settle international conflicts. Its statutes, its activities, and especially the Geneva Conventions, with their unremitting appeal for human fellowship, should be taught in schools, universities and wherever soldiers and diplomats are trained.

It is for governments and international institutions to become more aware of the restraints demanded of them by humanitarian law. All nations should realize that the Red Cross is not only a shelter in time of war, but also a leaven of service and mutual assistance.

There are great prospects opening on a horizon full of promise. Is peace one of these promises? This question calls for mature consideration and a great deal of faith before the day arrives when the Committee may perhaps, whilst remaining true to itself, deem it its duty to act to save peace when it is threatened. There will certainly be risks in this; but nothing ventured, nothing won. At the outset a thought expressed by Pandit Nehru at the International Conference of the Red Cross in New Delhi must be remembered: " War begins in the minds of men ".

Léopold BOISSIER

Member of the International Committee
of the Red Cross