

Bicentennial:

Guillaume-Henri Dufour — A man of peace

Many events marked the celebration in Switzerland of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Guillaume-Henri Dufour, co-founder of the International Committee of the Red Cross with Henry Dunant, Gustave Moynier, Louis Appia and Dr. Theodore Maunoir.

Symposia and exhibitions were held in succession, particularly in Geneva, in tribute to Dufour and in recognition of his many talents.

Dufour, whose parents were from Geneva, was born in 1787 in Konstanz. He was an engineer, urban planner, teacher and politician. He was also, as a military theoretician and practitioner, appointed to the supreme command of the Swiss army in 1847, 1849, 1856 and 1859. Although his name is mainly associated with the victorious Sonderbund campaign in 1847 and the foundation of the Red Cross in 1863, it should not be forgotten that he modernized the city of Geneva with bridges and quays that characterize it to this day, nor that he established, between 1832 and 1864, a topographical map of Switzerland which bears his name.

Dufour's participation in the foundation of the Red Cross was traced through contemporaneous letters, manuscripts and documents in an exhibition organized by the Henry Dunant Institute from 5 September to 4 October 1987.

Having completed in 1807 his training as a military engineer in France, he was sent in 1810 to Corfu where the construction of fortifications required an officer with his skills. There, he was promoted to the rank of captain and placed at the head of a sapper unit. Wounded and captured by the British, he was later returned to France in an exchange of prisoners.

In 1815, Napoleon's defeat and the entry of Geneva into the Swiss Confederation prompted Dufour to resign from the French army and settle in Geneva.

In 1817, he became commander of the military engineers of Geneva and began teaching at the city's academy. During the same period, he set up a training academy for officers in Thun.

He was promoted to the rank of colonel in 1827 and trained Prince Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. They remained friends until the Prince's death.

Appointed chief-of-staff in 1831, then commander-in-chief of the confederate army, he was called upon to intervene when social and political disturbances erupted sporadically in various Swiss cantons, particularly in Neuchatel (1831, 1834, 1848 and 1856) and Basel (1831).

In 1847, seven Catholic cantons rejected the federal pact of 1815 and formed the separate Sonderbund alliance, threatening Switzerland's very existence. Dufour was elected general to defeat the secessionist forces and restore peace and unity among the cantons. The moderation and wisdom with which he accomplished this dual task won the admiration of all over Europe.

In a letter addressed to the deputies of the Swiss Diet on 22 October 1847 he had already defined the lines of conduct he intended to respect and enforce: "... in carrying out my duty, I shall never stray from moderation and humanity;... I shall never forget that this is a dispute between confederates;... I shall endeavour to maintain order and discipline within the ranks, to ensure respect for public and private property, to protect the Catholic faith and clergy in churches and other places of worship, in short to mitigate the ills invariably associated with war..."

Even more significant were the following instructions he gave to his officers on 4 November 1847: "... If a body of enemy troops is repulsed, give to the wounded the same care as you give to our own men; treat them with all the forbearance due to one who is stricken... Disarm the prisoners, but refrain from any hurt and from reproach... After the battle restrain the fury of your troops; spare the vanquished; nothing bestows greater honour on a victorious army and, in a civil war, nothing can give greater encouragement to the opposing forces to submit. To act in a contrary manner can only exasperate our opponents and push them to the extreme limit of resistance. However strong we are, the despair of the enemy must be feared".¹

Mention should also be made of the following "Proclamation to the Army" delivered on 5 November 1847: "Soldiers, you must leave this battle not only victorious but also above all reproach. People should say of

¹ Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*, volume 1, *From Solferino to Tsushima*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1978, p. 52.

you: they fought courageously when they had to, but remained human and generous throughout.

“Thus, I am placing under your protection every child, woman, old person and clergyman. Whoever lifts a hand against a harmless person shall dishonour himself and defile his flag. Prisoners, especially the wounded, deserve your consideration and compassion, particularly as you have often found yourselves together in the same camps”.

All of these principles were later included in the Geneva Conventions.

In 1862, Henry Dunant presented Dufour with the manuscript of his book *A Memory of Solferino* in which he proposed the creation, in time of peace, of “relief societies for the purpose of having care given to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers”.

The prestige conferred on General Dufour by his “humanitarian victory” over the Sonderbund forces, his military experience and especially his reputation as a peace-maker led Henry Dunant and Gustave Moynier to seek his participation in carrying out Dunant’s noble-minded ideas.

Dufour doubted the successful outcome of such an undertaking and thus wrote to Dunant on 19 October 1862: “An association such as the one you envisage would undoubtedly be desirable, but serious obstacles stand in its way. It could hardly be more than temporary and local. Devotion is found only in a crisis...”. Despite his scepticism, he unhesitatingly agreed to support the cause championed by Dunant and Moynier “not because he believed in its future but because he believed it to be right”.²

On 17 February 1863, the “International Committee for Relief to Wounded Soldiers” was created with General Dufour as its president.

The Henry Dunant Institute exhibition illustrated the steps taken by the Committee to convince government and military officials to accept Dufour’s ideas. It shows the particular efforts he made, as the intermediary between the Committee and the Swiss authorities, prior to the convening in October 1863 of the international conference that marked the birth of the Red Cross.

The Committee continued to meet during the following year, focusing its attention on the creation and promotion of relief societies for wounded soldiers in various European countries.

On 8 August 1864, when the International Conference for the Neutralization of Army Medical Personnel in the Field was held in Geneva, chaired by General Dufour, nine Societies had already been established.

² Pierre Boissier, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

The adoption, at the Conference's conclusion, of the "Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field", the first Convention of the "Law of Geneva", marked a watershed in the history of the Red Cross.

The Institute's exhibition, prepared with taste and care, enabled the public to rediscover the activities carried out on behalf of the Red Cross by General Dufour of whom it was once said: "He is a soldier, but he draws the human being out in the soldier. He wages war, but he transforms it into a prelude to peace".³

³ Two works have recently been published on G. H. Dufour: *Aimez-moi comme je vous aime*, 190 letters written by Dufour to A. Pictet, edited and presented by Jean-Jacques Langendorf with a foreword by Olivier Reverdin, Karolinger Press, Vienna, 1987 and *Guillaume Henri Dufour ou la passion du juste milieu*, by Jean-Jacques Langendorf, René Caecelberghe Press, Lausanne/Lucern, 1987.