

Books and reviews

PRELUDES AND PIONEERS

The precursors of the Red Cross

1840-1860

The Henry Dunant Society, which organized a highly interesting symposium devoted to its namesake in 1985,¹ celebrated the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Red Cross in 1863 by inviting eminent figures from all walks of life to take part in a new intellectual pursuit: the discovery of the precursors of the Red Cross. The essays subsequently written on this previously unexplored subject have now been published in a book beautifully illustrated by Michel Rouèche.²

The challenge of portraying in a vivid and coherent manner the aspirations, activities and personalities of 18 precursors identified by the Henry Dunant Society has been successfully met in this work. Against the tragic backdrop of the Sonderbund War (1847), fighting in the Crimea (1853-1856), the War of Italian Independence (1859), and the United States Civil War (1861-1865), to mention only the major conflicts referred to, compelling portraits are painted of men and women who spared no effort and sacrificed their own health to alleviate the unbearable suffering of wounded soldiers left unattended on the battlefield.

Why was the Red Cross set up in 1863? How were its ideals shaped? Who really first had the idea of creating National Red Cross Societies and granting neutral status to the wounded and those who tended them? Did the Committee of Five know of the activities of the pioneers of humanitarian work, some of whom later claimed, for themselves and their countries, the honour of having conceived the ideas that gave birth to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement? These are among the questions discussed in the essays.

¹ See *De l'utopie à la réalité*, proceedings of the Henry Dunant Symposium held in Geneva from 3 to 5 May 1985, ed. Roger Durand, Geneva, Henry Dunant Society, Henry Dunant Collection, No. 3, 1988, 432 pp.

² *Préludes et pionniers — Les précurseurs de la Croix-Rouge, 1840-1860*, eds. Roger Durand and Jacques Meurant with Youssef Cassis, Geneva, Henry Dunant Society, Henry Dunant Collection, No. 5, 1991, 420 pp. (Several of the essays are in English.)

The authors give various reasons for the abundance of initiatives taken during the nineteenth century to assist conflict victims. First of all there was the widespread suffering caused by innovations in the field of ballistics and the rampant spread of epidemic diseases. Several essays devoted to scientific discoveries and medical care and surgery in the armed forces at the time show that the number of soldiers seriously wounded in battle rose alarmingly owing to the invention of large-calibre, cylindrical and conical bullets with greater striking force and penetration, which caused internal organs to burst, shattered bones and were difficult to extract, and owing also to the increasingly rapid rate of fire of high-explosive shells. In addition, those who survived the rigours of battle ran a high risk of succumbing to fatal diseases such as cholera, typhus, gangrene and scurvy. In the Crimea, for example, 20,000 of the 309,000 troops sent by the French army died of wounds and 75,000 of illness.

This tremendous loss of lives became known to the victims' families not only through new methods of communication, such as the telegraph, but also through the press, which published letters from the front revealing the devastating nature of the fighting and the inadequacy of the care given by the armed forces' medical services. Although freedom of the press was not yet the rule everywhere, an essay analysing articles published in the Geneva newspapers from 1847 to 1863 shows that European public opinion was ripe for the Red Cross. This readiness was heightened by the fact that armed forces had recently begun compiling detailed statistics on casualties, leaving little to the imagination as to the death tolls of major battles.

Henry Dunant's generous ideas also fell on the fertile soil of growing social conscience during the nineteenth century. As Pierre Boissier wrote in his work on the history of the ICRC: "...the nineteenth century was a period of tremendous charitable impulses. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Tolstoy, Dickens, Balzac, Hugo, Zola, Dunant and many others besides brought humble people into literature and revealed their poverty and wretchedness. Engels and Marx pleaded the workers' cause. Others militated in favour of better conditions for women. Pacifist associations proliferated. [...] It was as if society was suddenly stricken with remorse for its victims".³ The growth of philanthropy in Geneva at the time also testified to this surge of solidarity and compassion.

Who are the precursors of the Red Cross identified by the Henry Dunant Society? Doctors, first of all, whose profession brought them in close contact with suffering on the battlefield. Foremost among them were Nicholai Pirogov, Lucien Baudens and Ferdinando Palasciano. Pirogov, a renowned Russian surgeon who in 1847 was reportedly the first to perform an operation under anaesthesia, took the praiseworthy initiative of organizing medical care for soldiers in the Crimea. He enlisted the help of nurses, which was a novelty in conservative nineteenth-century Russian society where women were

³ Boissier, Pierre, *From Solferino to Tsushima - History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*, Geneva, Henry Dunant Institute, 1985, p. 345.

expected to take a passive role. Lucien Baudens, a French medical inspector who had seen his fellow countrymen cut down by Russian artillery fire while they were assisting wounded Russian soldiers, suggested the idea of drafting an international convention recognizing neutral status for medical personnel wearing a distinctive sign. Ferdinando Palasciano, a Neapolitan surgeon, also advocated in 1861 the principle of neutral status for the wounded in the battlefield, although he opposed it for army surgeons, who in his opinion would prefer to share the same fate as officers in the field.

The precursors also include women, some well known, such as Florence Nightingale in England and Clara Barton in the United States, others more obscure but no less praiseworthy: the Sisters of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, whose patroness was the Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna; the Daughters of Charity, who performed humanitarian work, often at the risk of their own lives, in such far-flung regions as Algeria, the Crimea, Mexico, Italy, Lebanon, the United States and Poland; and Countess Agénor de Gasparin, whose ardent faith inspired her writings and endeavours to gather assistance.

As underscored in several essays, the presence on the battlefield of women to tend the wounded was an innovation. Many of these women, some of whom worked as members of religious orders, and others who acted on their own initiative, corresponded with the families of the soldiers they tended, informing them when necessary of the sick or wounded man's death. The solace they provided is described in many texts of the period.

Humanitarian organizations were set up time and again at the outbreak of hostilities, only to fade into oblivion as soon as peace was restored. In Switzerland, for example, General Dufour, who in 1847 was given the task of dissolving by military means the separate alliance concluded by the Catholic cantons (the "Sonderbund"), praised a Zurich association set up to manufacture ambulances and transport the wounded. This short-lived initiative was considered by General Dufour, who supported the principle of humane treatment during hostilities, as a prototype of humanitarian action in situations of conflict.

Another humanitarian initiative was taken by the Russian philanthropist Anatole Demidoff, who set up a network of correspondents to help prisoners of war in the Crimea. These correspondents maintained contact with military and political authorities in several European countries, with whom they exchanged information on the identity and place of detention of prisoners and negotiated better conditions for them. The correspondents even succeeded in obtaining permission to visit certain prisoners. This experience underlay Demidoff's belief that the 1863 Geneva Conference, which he was himself unable to attend, should discuss the problem of prisoners of war. Although the Conference did not take up the matter, Henry Dunant later endeavoured to obtain protection for both wounded and able-bodied prisoners of war.

A key role was played during the American Civil War by the U.S. Sanitary Commission and the U.S. Christian Commission. The Sanitary Commission, an efficiently run secular organization made up of professionals, strove to assist in what it saw as the government's task of feeding, clothing and caring for the members of the armed forces. The Christian Commission, set up under the auspices of the Young Men's Christian Association, comprised volunteers who endeavoured to bring not only material assistance but also spiritual consolation to the troops. Despite some rivalry between the two Commissions, both products of the American tradition of voluntary social work, together they brought invaluable assistance to soldiers during the Civil War. At the same time, another precursor, Francis Lieber, drafted a code of conduct for the armed forces, which was adopted in 1863 by President Lincoln.

The Protestant-affiliated Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, which was devoted to caring for the sick and wounded in the hope of spreading the faith, supported the Red Cross from the very beginning, particularly at the 1863 Geneva Conference.

As detailed in the essays, many people and institutions during the mid-nineteenth century carried out activities similar to Henry Dunant's initiative at the battle of Solferino in 1859 or made proposals like his, sometimes even earlier, in an effort to alleviate the suffering caused by war. Many of the precursors were in contact with one another and some disagreed or even quarrelled. It still surprises people to learn, for example, that Florence Nightingale's opinion of Henry Dunant's proposal was not exactly favourable and that Henry Arrault waged a fierce battle, with the support of his friend George Sand, to obtain for himself and his country, France, recognition for having been the first to propose neutral status for ambulances and their crew.

Over and beyond such personal differences of opinion, history shows, as pointed out by Roger Durand, President of the Henry Dunant Society, in his excellent synopsis, that Dunant's proposal to the 1863 Geneva Conference included three ingredients that guaranteed its success:

- the idea of setting up permanent, voluntary relief societies already in peacetime (this idea was opposed by Florence Nightingale but supported by the French military officer Count Félix de Breda);
- the belief that such societies should cooperate with public authorities (although it was subsequently recognized that National Societies must retain a certain degree of independence so as to uphold the fundamental principles of the Red Cross, particularly neutrality and impartiality);
- the aspiration towards an international movement which, the founders believed, should not be confined to Europe.

The Geneva founders of the International Committee thus had a comprehensive view of the movement they were to launch. Acting in a private capacity, they did not, according to their own account, have a clear idea of their precursors' work although they did maintain generally friendly, and

occasionally somewhat tart, relations with some of them, and used the examples set by those whose work they had heard of to demonstrate that their own ideas were not unrealistic.

It was unfortunately impossible, within the scope of these essays, to explore the activities of all the precursors. Nevertheless, the work answers various questions of interest to anyone intrigued by the subject. Perhaps one day it will be followed by another volume devoted to the work of pioneers from continents other than Europe and North America with whom Henry Dunant sought to establish contact his life long. The Henry Dunant Society will certainly publish any additional findings it may make on precursors throughout the world, thereby further documenting the history of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Given the Society's vitality, intellectual curiosity and eagerness to explore untapped sources of information, such a possibility does not seem so very unlikely.

LIST OF ESSAYS

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Renée Lelandais Les Filles de la Charité sur les champs de bataille, 1847-1863

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CONCLUSION

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Marion Harroff-Tavel

“I HAVE DONE MY DUTY”*

Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, 1854-56

In October 1854 in the Crimea, the war being waged against Russia by Turkey, Great Britain and France was at its height. Public opinion in Britain

* “*I have done my duty*” — *Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, 1854-56*, edited by Sue M. Goldie, published by Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, xii + 326 pp.