

# International Red Cross and Peace <sup>1</sup>

by Jacques Freymond

The subject I shall deal with is one that traditionally comes up for discussion, to the point of growing stale. Innumerable resolutions and recommendations on "Red Cross and Peace" have been voted by delegates to International Red Cross Conferences. One might even say that this type of recommendation, which of course is addressed to all responsible governments, has become a feature of every Red Cross gathering.

This could be taken as an indication that previous recommendations were not followed and that members of National Societies were not satisfied with the results of their various actions in the fields of education and information.

How can we explain the failure of these attempts made by people who are held in general esteem? And what can we do, not so much to enhance the prestige of the Red Cross movement as to give it the impetus and moral influence which will enable it to take a positive part in action for the maintenance of peace or the prevention of war?

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First of all, we should recognize that humanitarian action cannot be isolated from its political context and that it therefore has a political content. This means that all humanitarian organiza-

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tions must define a long-term humanitarian policy based on a serious analysis of several factors: the political context, the main characteristics of an epoch, the political societies of our time, the world political system. This humanitarian policy in turn implies a humanitarian "strategy" distinct from tactical moves imposed by the variety of crises. Neglect of this work of reflection leads to contradiction, confusion and, what is worse, the degradation of humanitarian action to the level of an instrument of political interests.

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Our analysis must, of course, be centered on a definition of the concept of peace and war.

What do we mean by peace? Is it only the absence of war between States or nations? In a world as emotively integrated as ours, a world in which societies are all going through revolutionary processes that transform their economic and social structures, peace between nations has become highly dependent on peace within those nations. Local conflicts can no longer be localized, and they tend to develop into international civil wars. The universalization of "social wars", of "revolutionary wars", has led us to recognize the international dimensions of what is called "*social peace*".<sup>1</sup> Hence the necessity of a global approach to the problems raised by the preservation or restoration of peace. By *global* approach I mean actions conducted at every level of decision: international, regional and national, through an analysis of the political, economic and social factors.

It is quite clear that the Red Cross movement as such bears no direct responsibility for the maintenance of peace, which is the duty of the United Nations, regional political organizations, governments and citizens. But its contribution, although indirect, could increase in importance if all its members recognized the need for such a global and integrated approach, which would entail a redistribution of tasks within the International Red Cross. We shall return to this question.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jacques Freymond, "How the Small Countries can Contribute to Peace", in *Small States in International Relations*, ed. by August Schou and Arne Olav Brundtland, Nobel Symposium 17, 1971.

The main duty of the Red Cross is to render assistance to victims—victims of accidents, victims of natural disasters and other calamities, victims of war. By assistance we understand medical aid to the sick and the wounded; the distribution of relief of various kinds; co-operation in the restoration of normal living conditions, which may include different operations such as the resettlement of refugees and the reuniting of families. These tasks are usually conducted in co-operation with governments or intergovernmental agencies. They produce results that are not always equally successful, depending upon the extent of the disaster, the political climate in which operations are conducted, and the efficiency of the rescue teams.

However, there is a category of victim whose situation is still vague and therefore critical: the war victim. It is widely recognized that changes in the very nature of war have led to a profound transformation of methods of combat and of types of combatant. In a total war, in a political war as well as in a social war, *everybody* is involved. More sophisticated weapons have not led to any clearer distinction between military targets and places where only civilians live. On the contrary, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between soldiers and civilians, between combatants and non-combatants. What we now have to face is not only the indiscriminate killing of millions of people by area bombing and shelling; it is the death of women and children who happen to be in a street when a guerrilla fighter throws a bomb or in a plane which is being hijacked.

Here arises the delicate question which has not been answered up to now. Who are the people who should be protected and are entitled to protection? The soldiers who are captured? The “prisoners of war”? But how are they to be defined? By their uniform? By the fact that they are fighting in an organized force?

And what about guerrillas clad in civilian clothes, waging a solitary struggle in the bush and in the streets? Are those men soldiers? Are they terrorists? Or snipers? Have they sometimes not killed as many civilians as soldiers? And again, what about the pilot of a bomber who is captured after having destroyed as many civilian houses as military objectives and probably killed as many women and children as members of the armed forces? He is a

soldier, obeying the orders of his superiors. But what happens if the other side does not recognize him as a soldier and brands him as a criminal? Take another type of military action: the blockade of a whole country which is directed against the civilian population as well as against soldiers. How can a distinction be made between a "political" prisoner and a prisoner of war, at a time when indirect strategy is openly advocated?

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This brings us to the core of our subject: the application of the Geneva Conventions. These Conventions, the signing of which represented a landmark in mankind's slow progression towards a harmonization of relations between nations; these Conventions which should for the whole world be the symbol of an old ideal of a community of nations based on respect for the dignity of man; these Conventions are only too often ignored or used by governments as a protective shield in the name of national security and sovereignty.

Moreover, prisoners are used as tools in a political struggle, prisoners of war as well as political detainees; that is, persons who, having been made harmless and detained, have become victims. Although defenceless, they are still involved in the continuing fight, whether of their own choosing or against their will. It is quite clear that this conception of a total war, in which even prisoners pursue the struggle, strikes at the heart of some of the provisions of the Geneva Conventions by suppressing the fundamental distinction between the fighter and the man who has been put out of action, who has become a victim once he has fallen into the hands of the adversary.

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What can be done to re-establish the conditions necessary to humanitarian action?

In the last few decades, several attempts have been made to spread information on the content and meaning of the Geneva Conventions. National Red Cross, Red Crescent, Red Lion and

Sun Societies, the League of Red Cross Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross have conducted all over the world a systematic campaign among soldiers and civil servants, in order to make them aware of their responsibilities and duties in time of war. Handbooks have been prepared, not only for the armed forces but also for schoolchildren, in the hope that their behaviour might be influenced and that every man might be persuaded *to transform a reaction of pity into an act of charity which would have a political meaning*. For, indeed, *by carrying out an act of charity towards an enemy who is no longer able to fight, one clearly puts a limit to violence and demonstrates the will to respect in that person the dignity of man as the first condition for a return to peace*.

Generosity towards an enemy who is at our mercy of course implies some risk and a real burden. There is no guarantee that a prisoner has given up fighting. He might attempt to escape or to use jail or prison camp as a base for an indirect strategy of subversion and terrorism. Security measures have to be taken to maintain an army's fighting capacity and its freedom of manoeuvre, as well as to maintain law and order. But these security measures, taken by a military or civilian administration and handled by the police, can backfire. In wartime—whatever the type of war—the urgent necessity to put an enemy out of action can lead to repression loaded with unjust practices. Such action, which is not necessarily systematic, may result from a defence reflex. On their way from the battlefield or the scene of disturbance to a camp or jail, prisoners and suspects may be exposed to rough treatment and may on arrival find the jail overcrowded. A reaction of anger might then lead to a hardened attitude and to the beginning of a spiral of violence and counterviolence, since repression calls forth an upsurge of resistance.

Thus governments, armies and police forces should be reminded that long-term security, upon which social as well as international peace depend, cannot be brought about by repressive action which, because it is harsh, may become unfair and unjust. Everyone should realize that every kind of abuse is and will continue to be known and denounced, and that no censorship has ever been, or ever will be, effective. By tolerating repression in the hope of putting the adversary more quickly out of action one only deepens the rift

between and within nations, puts oneself on the defensive and opens the way to never-ending conflicts. Fairness and generosity have always been and still are pre-conditions of peace. The conviction that one is waging a just war or fighting for a just cause should never justify unfair treatment of a "victim". Whatever the "justice" of the war, a prisoner has to be treated as a human being. Political interest here coincides with moral reasons.

As an interesting example, I shall mention the instructions given to the Eighth Route Army by Chairman Mao Tse-tung: political work, as Mao Tse-tung summarized it in a 1937 interview to James Bertram, was guided by three basic principles, one of which was the principle of disintegrating the enemy troops while another was to treat prisoners of war leniently. "Our victory", stated Mao Tse-tung, "depends not only upon our military operations but also upon the disintegration of the enemy troops". And to Bertram, who expressed some doubts as to the effectiveness of that policy which would not be understood by the Japanese army, Mao Tse-tung replied: "That is impossible. . . We shall go on giving lenient treatment to captured Japanese soldiers and to those captured junior officers who have fought us under coercion; we shall not insult or abuse them but shall set them free after explaining to them the identity of the interests of the people of the two countries".

This gesture does not represent an exception. History abounds in examples showing the political value of spontaneous generosity towards a defeated adversary. The better a prisoner is treated, the sooner will he recover his freedom and the greater are our chances of recreating conditions for social and international peace.<sup>1</sup>

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What is now to be done?

First of all, we should convince governments, officers, soldiers, members of the police force in every country, as well as members of

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<sup>1</sup> During the War of Secession, the United States called upon Lieber to draw up a code of rules for armies in the field. This code, which was promulgated in 1863 under the title of "Code of War for the Government and Armies of the United States in the Field", preceded the first Geneva Convention by one year and thus laid the foundation-stone of humanitarian law. (See *Revue internationale*, May 1953; *Revue internationale*, English Supplement, September 1953.)

revolutionary groups, not only to read the Geneva Conventions but to understand their spirit and to apply them without reservation. This means that these Conventions, as they are now, must be applicable to every type of war and *revolution*, because the symbol of the dignity of man which they represent must remain untouched and must be respected throughout a period of revolution, as mankind's permanent hope for a better future. What is asked for is an "open jail" policy, by which I mean the possibility of permanent and objective control being exercised by Red Cross bodies (National Societies and the International Red Cross) regarding the treatment of all prisoners, in whatever form of warfare they may have been involved. Prison camps and prisons—and there are a great many examples—cannot be left in the hands of the military and penal administrations alone, without control by the community, and it is obviously in the interest of governments to obtain objective outside support.

This is only one example, but a very important one, of the measures which must be taken in order to restore and maintain, during this revolutionary period, an awareness of the moral conditions of peace. An effective *humanitarian policy is the main counterweight to total war*.

For those involved in humanitarian activities—National Societies, the League and the International Committee of the Red Cross—their duty is clear.<sup>1</sup> Whatever their position and their status, all must concentrate their attention on a reduction of violence and on the protection of the victims of *man-made* disasters and natural disasters. They must organize or reorganize with a view to educating and training their members morally and technically for their commitment to a global "Red Cross" action which would no longer distinguish between prison and prison camp, precisely because it would recognize the fact that war and revolution, international peace and social peace, can no longer be dissociated. For some of these institutions, this will mean a profound readaptation: there will have to be an increase in the number of permanent officers effectively trained for this new task, a reassessment of their relations

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution No. 1 adopted by the Council of Delegates, Mexico City, 8 October 1971, on the role of National Societies in the Development of Humanitarian Law. See *International Review*, December 1971.

## INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND PEACE

with governments, a re-thinking of the meaning of their neutrality, their impartiality, their independence and, above all, the reaffirmation that charity cannot be used as a substitute for a *humanitarian policy*.

For the Red Cross movement this will mean a re-examination of the present division of labour, at international level, so as to face more effectively man-made disasters, whether the result of revolution or war. This will mean closer consultations between the various Red Cross institutions in the elaboration of a humanitarian policy at various levels—national, regional and international. Any anachronistic competition or outdated claims to a monopoly of humanitarian action must be swept aside in a common effort to reassess the position of the Red Cross movement in the world of today: a common action which should relate both to the definition of a humanitarian policy and to the reorganization of the direction of the world movement.

That is a great and difficult task, considering that this elaboration of a humanitarian policy must be done in common by men belonging to different social systems, coming from various continents; a difficult task, too, inasmuch as what is necessary is not so much the improvement of the Geneva Conventions as their application during a period of revolution. But the work has to be done because it is one of the main conditions of peace.

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