

A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

Fifty years of the "Bulletin"

Glancing through the 196 numbers of the *Bulletin international des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*¹ certain major themes stand out significantly. Some of these were already described in its first issue of October 1869, then can be met with again throughout the years until this last number of October 1918 devoted almost entirely to wartime activities in 28 belligerent or neutral countries and to interventions on behalf of victims. The account which follows, however incomplete it may be, will at all events describe the successes, hopes and preoccupations of a decisive period in the history of our movement.

The Geneva Convention

One can first of all see the efforts made by the ICRC to spread knowledge of the rules of international humanitarian law and to increase the number of countries signatories to the first Geneva Convention. Furthermore, the Bulletin draws attention on several occasions to bringing the Convention up to date, the necessity of making known the great step forward involved in men's minds at the beginning of the century in the signing by different States of international law texts, by which they renounce part of their sovereignty in time of war.

¹ As has been mentioned before, it appeared every quarter and was originally called the *Bulletin international des Sociétés de Secours aux militaires blessés*.

In 1914 it gave several pages to the fiftieth anniversary of that Geneva Convention and published the names of participants in the 1864 Conference and a list of signatory States. This was also done for the Convention of 6 July 1906 and the subsequent ratifications and accessions.

The National Societies

Gradually committees were formed, conceived according to Henry Dunant's ideas. The development of relief societies, the successive origins of many of them and the dissolution of others and the increasingly closer relations they maintained with the ICRC were all given their due place. In October 1876 came the simultaneous announcement of the founding of a Society in Rumania, the dissolution of the United States' Relief Society and the creation of a new Society in Constantinople, the previous one having disappeared. Local branches were started everywhere which proved the popular appeal of the Red Cross and that it was extending its field of action, very limited at the outset, to every form of human suffering.

No more faithful a catalogue either can be found of the recognition of new National Societies by the ICRC, as official circulars are produced, sometimes accompanied by the comments of the Bulletin's editor.

Aid to the wounded

Much prominence is given to new techniques in practical relief work. These included, for example, the improvement in methods of transporting the wounded, the invention of new stretchers, the creation of new types of ambulance, the specialization of stretcher-bearers' tasks and the training in various countries of a corps of first-aiders. Most of these " finds " certainly appear anachronistic to us today, but they were none the less examined, discussed and even adopted by the armed forces.

In April 1900 attention was given to a new German stretcher with one wheel. " The single wheel has been criticised for giving a wounded man the feeling of a lack of stability; the author considers that criticism should rather be levelled against the defective articula-

tion of certain types of wheeled stretchers than the system itself, which he has moreover greatly improved ”.

In January 1912 a stretcher on bicycles was presented. It was invented by a doctor of the Dutch medical service to be suspended between two bicycles “ by means of well articulated pieces, a single frame which is solid as well as light and extremely easy to assemble and take apart ”.

In January 1913 attention was given to the transporting of wounded in fighting at sea. Having published a memorandum on the question of transporting these wounded between warships, hospital ships and the shore, an American doctor is “ one of the first to attempt to introduce Red Cross medical formations expressly organized for such purposes in fighting at sea ”.

Attention was given in January 1900 to the lighting of battle-fields to seek out the wounded and give them care at night. “ For this purpose resort was made to electric lighting by means of large reflectors on carts, with powerful dynamos or batteries carried on mens’ backs ”. One doctor suggests a simpler and more economical method of using “ acetylene lamps on the battle-field ”, which the Bulletin described as being “ a step forward ”.

In January 1913 a long analysis is given in the “ *Messenger russe de la Croix-Rouge* ” of a proposal made by a Russian naval medical officer. This was “ the classification of the wounded on the battle-field ” the idea of which had been put into practice for the first time by Pirogor, the famous Russian surgeon. During the siege of Sebastopol he had “ organized the sorting of the wounded, corresponding to the urgency of carrying out surgical operations ”. This classification “ was made by labels attached by medical personnel to the wounded on the battle-field or after the first dressing. . . The adoption of this system of vouchers in all armies would in particular facilitate aid to the wounded ”.

The red cross emblem

Regular accounts are given of funds administered by the International Committee. In 1913 it was learnt that the Red Cross “ *Empress Maria Feodorovna* ” International Fund was set up “ to award prizes to the inventors of the best methods of ameliorating

the suffering of wounded and sick military ", at the same time as the institution of a Florence Nightingale Medal to be distributed in future to " nurses who have distinguished themselves exceptionally by their devotion to sick or wounded in time of peace or of war ". The task of a special committee was to put this into effect and inform " the International Committee of the selection of a designer and of the medal to be struck for distribution to those meriting it ". Previously, the Augusta Fund had also been the subject of several articles.

In the same context, different competitions were organized by the ICRC and other institutions on a variety of subjects, such as, " the art of improvising aid methods (1881) ", the plan of a " transportable ambulance hut " (1885) and " the abusive employment of the emblem and name of the Red Cross (1889) ". Prize-winning descriptions were also published. There is also frequent mention of the emblem and the protection it brings to those who have the recognized right to wear it. Qualitatively selected texts of rules adopted in various countries on the protection of the red cross name and emblem are reproduced in full. In October 1912 there appeared, for example, the text of the Italian regulation on the subject.

In January 1914, the Bulletin referred to two cases connected with this question. There was the prohibition made by the Geneva courts of the utilization of a red cross on the doors and sign-boards of chemist shops and of the " red cross emblem in the watch-making industry " as regards which the Trades-Union of Swiss manufacturers of silver, metal and steel watches had approached the ICRC in Geneva. One can moreover realize, by the number of articles concerning this question of the emblem raised in many countries, the amount of time and efforts needed by the National Societies, as well as the ICRC, to succeed in having the emblem recognized and that a half century was required for it to be widely respected.

The Red Cross and war

Since the signing of the first Geneva Convention occasions were not lacking for the Red Cross to be faced with the realities of war and to this the Bulletin gives regular testimony. Each time they

were, for the Societies of the countries involved as well as for the International Committee, a source of new experience and they contributed, as can be seen in nearly every number, to accustoming armies in the field to the intervention of Red Cross auxiliaries and to respect for the Geneva Convention.

In 1870 the Bulletin published information on the International Agency opened in Basle by the ICRC when hostilities between France and Prussia were known: a centralizing information office first of all, then a warehouse for material. In Geneva also the work continued and the article describing it ends with these words: " Although war is our element, we observe it from too near not to have a horror of it and our aspirations far from being bellicose are eminently peaceful ".

The world was, however, to pass through constant crises until the cataclysm of 1914. Further conflicts such as the Turko-Russian war in 1877, the Serbo-Bulgarian war in 1885 and the Balkan wars of 1912-13 obliged the ICRC to set up information agencies, the first in Trieste, the second in Vienna under the direction of the Austrian Central Committee and the third in Belgrade. Meanwhile, it studied and made efforts to improve humanitarian law and also encouraged the founding of new committees whose recognition it subsequently announced in circulars in the Bulletin.

In its number of October 1914 it described the unleashing of a drama of which the episodes were to become extended until 1918 and given considerable space in its columns. By its size and duration, by the number of its victims and its diverse aspects, the First World War was to give the ICRC fresh impetus and demand tasks of it which it was soon to be the only one able to fulfil.

The International Prisoners of War Agency was then started. On the pillars of the Musée Rath in Geneva on a large white screen inscribed in red were the words: " International Committee of the Red Cross—Prisoners of War Agency ". The Red Cross then became, according to Romain Rolland " one of the purest lights illuminating the night of these fateful years ".

By the end of October 1914, there were some 400 people working for the Agency daily or part-time, including those working at home. " This ", wrote the Bulletin's editor, " is one of the institution's characteristics worthy of note and admiration, this enthu-

siasm for devotion, to be useful to others, this need to co-operate in what can be repaired or softened in the fearful maelstrom of destruction and pain which has been unleashed on Europe ”.

Until its transformation in 1919 into a Review, the Bulletin, apart from the usual news of National Societies' activities, themselves stretched to the limit in a vast and effective effort of relief, published reports on visits to prisoner of war camps carried out in the belligerent countries by delegates of the ICRC, the texts of protests made by the governments concerned regarding acts contrary to the Geneva Convention. These acts included the bombing of ambulances protected by the emblem of the red cross or the red crescent, attacks on hospital ships, the capture of medical personnel treated as prisoners, etc.

From 1916 onwards protests became more frequent and in particular concerned the torpedoing of hospital ships. In its July 1917 number, a long " Study on law and fact " was devoted to this problem following on " the decision taken by the German Government to attack and sink, without warning or distinction, all hospital ships sailing outside a fixed area in the Channel and the North Sea ". Evoking " the principles as well as the spirit of the Geneva Convention applied to naval forces ", the author concludes: " It is therefore with entire reason that the International Committee has branded this decree in the name of the principles of the Convention which it is charged with defending ”.

History's witness

The Bulletin represents a unique and irreplaceable source of documentation on the history of the Red Cross. In a more general sense, it invites the following reflections.

How, first of all, can one not remark the courage of the certain taking up of positions such as the one which has just been mentioned concerning this German decree. A Committee, which has no other moral authority than to speak on behalf of mankind, dares accuse an all-powerful government of violating a humanitarian Convention! On different occasions also during half a century, one is struck by the decided tone, by the assurance of certain declarations and all the more so when one thinks that the ICRC was less known

than it is today and that it had not yet acquired the moral authority which it has at present.

One is impressed by the importance, the power even of individual action in the last years of the previous century and in the first of those following. There are the great personalities who intervene with the authorities, talking as equal to equal, enthralled by their subject and all devoted to the Red Cross ideal. Through tenacity they often succeed in advancing the cause they are supporting and arousing increasing response at a time when people were believing so strongly in continuous progress. Biographical notes written about them in the Bulletin show that their strength lay in a belief; by fighting for mankind they felt themselves to be following the steps of history.

The appearance of a regular ICRC publication did not prevent National Societies from creating their own periodicals which since then have continued to increase. It can be seen, however, that international and national publications can well exist side by side. Later the division of the world has already been seen by divergences in language, soon made evident by the fact that it was no longer sufficient to produce a review in French, but that consideration had to be given to other tongues, whilst allowing it to keep the role of meeting point for searching, redefining and asserting humanitarian thought, confronted by a world which is changing at an ever faster rate and whose foundations are being re-examined all the time.

Besides, the thousands of pages in the Bulletin reveal fine examples of good-will, full of patience and attention. They testify to renewed efforts of friendship, never discouraged by conflicts which are always breaking out, by more and more victims and conflicts which have become universal. The Bulletin therefore remains one of those rare publications in which only an ideal, in the real sense of the word, is shown giving encouragement to actions of aid and inspiration to give service to others as an object in life.

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