

Can the Red Cross contribute to safeguarding peace ? ¹

by Hans Haug

The enemy, our real enemy, is not the neighbouring country; it is hunger, cold, poverty, ignorance, routine, superstition, prejudice.

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I

Can the Red Cross help to maintain peace and should it not, alongside its humanitarian role, also fulfil a mission of peace? This is far from being a new consideration, raised by recent developments in the peace movement and by demonstrations in favour of peace.

Whether the Red Cross, by its very nature, is a factor for peace; whether its humanitarian work should finally result in eliminating war, are questions as old as the idea of the Red Cross itself. Very early on, Henry Dunant declared that it was not enough to relieve the suffering of victims of war but that war itself should be banned.

The Geneva Convention of 1864 for the amelioration of the condition of the wounded and sick of armed forces in the field was seen by Gustave Moynier as a decisive step towards the absolute condemnation of war. The foundation of the League of Red Cross Societies in 1919 doubly dedicated the Red Cross to work for peace: the Red Cross should perform its humanitarian work not only in times of war but also in times of peace and its humanitarian activities, carried out beyond all frontiers, should contribute to the improvement of living conditions

¹ Paper read on 22 September 1983 at Kiel to the Schleswig-Holstein section of the German Red Cross and the Swiss colony of Kiel.

of human beings, to understanding between peoples and, consequently, to the consolidation of peace. This dedication of the Red Cross to work for peace was so well recognized and supported in governmental quarters that in the Covenant of the League of Nations member countries agreed to encourage and promote the establishment and co-operation of "national Red Cross organizations having as purposes the improvement of health, the prevention of disease and the mitigation of suffering throughout the world".

Since the Second World War, all the International Red Cross Conferences have adopted resolutions on the theme "The Red Cross and peace". The texts adopted stress not only the importance of the work and activities of the Red Cross in creating and maintaining a climate favourable to peace, both within individual nations and in relations between nations, but they also call on governments to settle their differences by peaceful means, to renounce threats and the use of force in international relations and to bring about a general disarmament under effective international control.

The "Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross", proclaimed during the 1965 International Red Cross Conference in Vienna assume particular importance because they assign to the Red Cross the mission of "*pre-venting* and alleviating human suffering wherever it may be found" and of fostering "mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and *lasting peace* amongst all peoples". As long ago as 1961, during its Board of Governors meeting in Prague, the League of Red Cross Societies decided—on the motion of Professor A. von Albertini, then President of the Swiss Red Cross—to clearly affirm the dedication of the work of the Red Cross to the cause of peace, by featuring beside the original device "Inter arma caritas" the message "Per humanitatem ad pacem".

Nothing demonstrates more clearly the relationship that exists between the spirit of the Red Cross and the spirit of peace than the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Henry Dunant in 1901, to the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1917 and 1944, and jointly to the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies in 1963, on the occasion of the Centenary of the Red Cross.

II

Before studying more closely and determining with greater precision in what ways the Red Cross can contribute to maintaining peace and where the limits of the Red Cross peace mission should be drawn, we must attempt to define what we mean and understand when we talk

about peace. What does the word "peace" mean when linked with the activities of the Red Cross?

In current usage, the word "peace" is applied especially to the absence of armed conflicts between States or within States. Peace therefore means the absence of war and the refusal to resort to force of arms to resolve disputes. For some time now there has been a tendency to add to this classic concept of peace, often considered as "negative", a definition which brings out the *positive aspects* more clearly: peace does not signify only the absence of armed conflict but also a situation which offers all people *living conditions in keeping with the dignity of the human being*, a situation in which justice and liberty prevail or—to be more comprehensive and more precise—a situation in which *human rights* are ensured and respected without discrimination. Such a situation would not only enable armed conflicts between nations, or between parties of a single nation, to be eliminated, but it would open up a reign of trust, co-operation and even fraternal relations among men and nations. The former concept of "state of peace" as opposed to "state of war" would assume a new and wider dimension.

If, in the following considerations, I turn my attention to this global and positive concept of peace, it is because modern international law already includes it and gives it a concrete and ever-increasingly clear meaning. Contemporary international law does not limit itself to the prevention of war in the traditional meaning of this idea, or to ensuring mere coexistence of nations, but it aims for and encourages—as an international law of co-operation—economic and social development, "better standards of life in larger freedom" (Preamble to the UN Charter) and, finally, the universal application of human rights to all human beings. Now, a positive concept of peace is also a solid basis for fruitful Red Cross activity in favour of peace; for even if the Red Cross does not have the power to avert and directly prevent war, it can act to enable human beings to benefit from living conditions worthy of them and to ensure that human dignity is respected. The Red Cross can also help to spread understanding and trust and—despite all differences and opposition—to develop friendly relations.

III

Starting from this positive concept of peace, we should now examine the possibilities open to the Red Cross—the ICRC, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and their world-wide federation, the League—to work for peace. This humanitarian work with its many

different facets must be carried out within the framework of the principles of the Red Cross.

Certainly, *protection and assistance for victims of armed conflicts* retains a preponderant place. This work is based on the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, supplemented in 1977 by two additional Protocols. Responsibility for this protection and assistance work rests with the ICRC, but also with the National Societies of the countries concerned or of the countries called upon to help. The humanitarian work of the Red Cross which is carried out in times of war, that is to say when every effort is made to cause injury to the enemy and, if possible, to destroy him by the most powerful means, consists of preventing and relieving the suffering of the victims and of guaranteeing that human dignity is respected. Every care must be taken to ensure that the wounded and sick, prisoners and internees, civilians taking no part in military activities and the population of occupied territories are spared, protected and treated humanely. Here, it is essential to adhere strictly to the principle of *impartiality*: to provide aid and protection without preference or prejudice due to nationality, membership of a belligerent party, race, religion, social status or political opinion. It is in this spirit of unconditional humanity that the ICRC has operated, or endeavours to operate, in the course of current conflicts, for example in Lebanon, in the war between Iran and Iraq, in Nicaragua and El Salvador. National Red Cross Societies have worked in the same spirit of humanity and with the same respect for the principle of impartiality; as an example, I would mention the work of the Nicaraguan Red Cross before and after the overthrow of the Somoza regime, and the activity of the Lebanese Red Cross in their strife-torn country.

It has been said that the Geneva Conventions and the Red Cross create *oases of humanity* in armed conflict. These oases of humanity—a field hospital, a hospital ship, an artificial limb centre for the disabled, a prisoner or refugee camp—can also constitute the *seeds of peace*. Max Huber, the great president of the ICRC during the Second World War, considered that “the indirect peace mission of the Red Cross” consisted of “maintaining by charitable action the idea of humanity in a period of inhumanity” and of setting up “amid the collapse of so many human relations, a spiritual bridge to peace”.¹

The adoption in 1977 of the two Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions, the drafts of which were drawn up by the ICRC, marked an important step towards restricting the use of violence in wars. The

¹ Quotation from « Der Rotkreuzgedanke », *Vermischte Schriften*, Vol. IV, Zurich, 1957.

Protocol relative to international armed conflicts reiterates the famous phrase in The Hague Convention of 1907 respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, stipulating that belligerents do not have an unlimited choice of means to injure the enemy. The Protocol expressly prohibits the use of weapons, projectiles, materials and methods of warfare which could cause "superfluous injury". The two Protocols, including the one dealing with non-international armed conflicts, prohibit attacks against civilian population and civilian property essential to survival; the force of arms can only be directed against military objectives. In case of operations against military objectives, all necessary precautionary measures must be taken to avoid injuring civilians and civilian property, or at least to ensure that the damage inflicted on civilians and civilian property is not excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage expected. The Protocol relative to international armed conflicts also prohibits "indiscriminate attacks", that is to say attacks using methods or means of combat which cannot be directed at a specific military objective or whose effects cannot be limited and which, in consequence, reach military objectives and civilians or civilian property indiscriminately. Finally, in the conduct of war, the Protocol forbids the use of methods or means intended to cause or likely to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment.

Obviously, the Geneva Conventions and their additional Protocols correspond to the deepest-felt aspirations of mankind, and, although their provisions are concerned only with war and are applicable only in case of war, they are opposed to the *spirit of war*, to the spirit and the desire for destruction. The main point of these provisions, those of the 1977 Protocol in particular, is that they stand in the way of "total war", of the use of weapons of wide-scale destruction and the risk of universal annihilation. However, this barrier can provide effective protection only if the Protocols are ratified by all States, not only by the small or medium-size powers, but also by the great and the super-powers. It is here that the Red Cross, the ICRC and the National Societies have a role to play because they cannot simply abandon to oblivion or ineffectualness the agreements they have helped to hammer out. The Red Cross must do everything in its power to persuade large numbers of States to ratify the 1977 Protocols, thereby conferring on them a binding nature.

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One of the most difficult, and at the same time the most important missions that the ICRC has endeavoured to perform for decades has been to improve conditions for *political detainees*. Up to the present time, delegates from the Committee have visited, in some 80 countries, over 300,000 persons deprived of freedom because of their political activities or opinions, and have provided reports on their situation. Although the Committee lacks the backing of any international law to help them in carrying out this task, and although it often meets with opposition on the grounds of national security, it has been able to achieve in numerous cases—thanks mainly to its attitude and reputation for neutrality and discretion—an improvement in the conditions of detention and the treatment of detainees, and the cessation of inhumane practices, such as torture. This is an important contribution to the defence of human rights and dignity and it is also—indirectly—a contribution to peace.



It is not only the activities of the Red Cross on behalf of war victims or political detainees that should be considered as a contribution to peace, but also its work outside the fields of battle and the areas of troubles, *its everyday humanitarian and welfare work* carried out by the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. It is difficult to describe all that these Societies do in a few words: they help the wounded and sick, they look after disabled or elderly persons and needy children or adolescents. Nearly all National Societies organize courses, teaching first aid and care for the sick, and many of them devote part of their time to working in blood transfusion centres or training nursing staff. Relief in cases of natural disasters or epidemics forms part of the basic tasks of the Red Cross. In the developing countries, the National Societies have to cope with overwhelming needs and tasks in their struggle to alleviate the misery and poverty of millions upon millions of human beings.

The everyday and routine work of the Red Cross contributes to the maintenance of peace by improving the living conditions of many people, particularly the underprivileged or those exposed to danger, by remedying acute or chronic distress. In large sections of the community, the Red Cross arouses and encourages the desire to help and to serve, resulting in gifts of money or in kind, in blood donations and in aid of the most widely varying kinds. Here, too, it is vitally important to uphold the ideal of the Red Cross and to make sure that *the institution*

is at the service of all and open to all. This is the way to bring together men of different nationalities and backgrounds, with different customs and ideas, different views of life and the world, and to give them a chance to begin understanding one another.

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The *worldwide solidarity* which the Red Cross practises is extremely important. It shows itself in a particularly impressive way during large-scale and sudden *catastrophes* such as earthquakes, floods and typhoons, when the Red Cross receives for its relief operations large donations of all kinds from governments and the public never-ending generosity. Among recent examples, mention should be made of the relief and reconstruction operations in aid of the victims of the catastrophic earthquakes in Guatemala in 1976, and in Algeria and Italy in 1980. Recently, too, aid to refugees has been considerably increased, both in the countries first receiving them in Asia and Africa, and in the countries of asylum, in North America or Europe. Although such relief operations create problems and even give rise to tension, they strengthen the bonds that exist between men and peoples who are strangers to one another, forming stepping stones to bring them together, to foster mutual understanding and thus contribute to peace.

Even more today than in the past, solidarity should also manifest itself in *co-operation for development*. In many countries the population explosion, economic and technical backwardness, unemployment, inadequacies of public services, catastrophes and conflicts cause massive poverty and misery which people living in comfortable circumstances should do all they can to remedy. The disparities between developing countries and industrialized nations, or between the different strata of the population in both, do not represent merely different standards of living but a yawning chasm between the superfluous abundance of wealth and the deadly deficiencies of extreme poverty, a chasm which must be reduced not only for humanitarian and economic reasons but also in the interest of peace.

For the League of Red Cross Societies and its most affluent and fortunate members, the first priority is to assist National Societies in developing countries, who are for the most part poor, by co-operating with them, by supporting them with advice and material aid so that they become increasingly able themselves to shoulder the considerable humanitarian and social tasks of the future.

IV

While it is important for the Red Cross to know the ways and means at its disposal to perform efficient work in aid of peace, it is just as important for it to know its *limits*. These limits are not due only to its own lack of power; they are above all imposed on it by its *neutrality*, a fundamental principle of the Red Cross. This stipulates that, in order to gain and continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Red Cross may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. The principle of neutrality does not apply only to the ICRC but also to the National Societies and the League. It goes well beyond the principle of neutrality of States, as recognized in international law. Nothing actually prevents a neutral State, even if it applies permanent neutrality, from taking a definite stance in political or ideological disputes.

Respect for the principle of neutrality within the Red Cross organizations cannot be taken for granted, mainly because numerous Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies do not enjoy sufficient *independence* to enable them to take decisions and act without any government influence. During Red Cross Conferences, one sometimes has the impression that some Societies are spokesmen for their governments. Another reason for questioning the neutrality of the Red Cross can be detected in the desire of some Societies or eminent individuals to open new outlets for the work of the Red Cross for peace, and to add direct action to indirect influence.

During the World Red Cross Conference on Peace held in Belgrade in 1975, on the instigation of the Yugoslav Red Cross, delegates discussed a "Programme of Action of the Red Cross as a Factor of Peace", a programme which was subsequently finalized. In the spirit of this plan, the *direct contribution* of the Red Cross to peace should consist of efforts to prevent hostilities, to bring about the conclusion of armistices or even the settlement of conflicts. This programme also envisages increased co-operation with the United Nations, both in humanitarian matters and in the preparation of documents with a view to condemning aggression, racial discrimination, apartheid and detention on political grounds.

There is no question of our stating that the Red Cross should never, under any circumstances, take direct action for peace. The ICRC has already participated in approaches made to obtain a suspension of hostilities or an armistice. Red Cross Conferences have adopted resolutions encouraging the Committee to endeavour to avert the threat of

an armed conflict, or to help put an end to hostilities. But it should be emphasized that, as a general rule, direct action by the Red Cross, including the ICRC, is bound by strict limits and that the Red Cross should, first and foremost, beware of interfering in trials of strength between States, of intervening in the search for political solutions to conflicts, of associating in the condemnation of illegal, criminal or indeed any kind of acts or behaviour. That, in this respect, the strict observance of the principle of neutrality is an absolute necessity, is for the obvious and readily understandable reason that this is the only way to preserve the unity of the worldwide community of the Red Cross and to ensure it continues to enjoy the confidence of all. Unity and confidence are indeed the conditions that enable the Red Cross to perform its humanitarian mission, a mission which, as we have tried to demonstrate, should be regarded also as a contribution to peace.¹

The need for imposing a limit on the (direct) action of the Red Cross for peace is clearly apparent from two recent examples which shed light on several aspects. One of these examples concerns disarmament and the other the promotion of human rights.

The Red Cross has concerned itself for a long time, and quite rightly so, with the *problems of disarmament and arms control*. On several occasions, it has appealed to the community of States. On 23 May 1978, for instance, to the United Nations General Assembly, convened in extraordinary session to discuss the problems of disarmament, the ICRC launched an appeal denouncing the fact that arsenals had accumulated a potential for destruction such as could annihilate humanity and transform our planet into a desert. The Committee urged the Powers to establish a climate of confidence which would make it possible to curb the arms build-up and the massive delivery of weapons to all parts of the world. The ICRC stigmatized the waste of resources urgently needed in the fight against poverty, particularly in the developing countries, by using them to make weapons.

¹ In his *Final Report on the Study of the Re-appraisal of the Role of the Red Cross* (Geneva, 1975) Donald D. Tansley writes: "Such action as the naming of aggressors and injustices will not be viewed as non-political, impartial, neutral and humanitarian, regardless of the good intentions of those advocating that type of Red Cross action for peace. Any such action can only damage and probably destroy the useful protection and assistance activity..." (page 40). In its comments on the *Report on the Re-appraisal of the Role of the Red Cross*, the ICRC expresses the following view: "By entering the arena of conflicting interests and opinions which divide the world and align peoples against one another, the Red Cross would be rushing headlong towards its own destruction. However slightly it might venture upon this slippery path, it would not be able to stop." (*International Review of the Red Cross*, March-April 1978, p. 82).

During the second extraordinary session of the United Nations General Assembly on disarmament, the Red Cross launched another appeal. This time it came from the International Red Cross, bearing the date 14 May 1982 and the signatures of the presidents of the ICRC, the League of Red Cross Societies and the Standing Commission. In this appeal, peace is described as an active process of co-operation between peoples and States based on liberty, independence, national sovereignty, equality, respect for human rights and an equitable distribution of resources. The appeal stresses the need to settle conflicts peaceably and to fulfil international obligations. Governments are urged to put an end to the arms race and to take all the necessary measures to reach general and complete disarmament under efficient international control.

Sceptical though one may be as to the effectiveness of such appeals and proclamations, they are nevertheless necessary in that they comply with the requirements of ethics and reason. They also correspond to the principles of the Red Cross and, particularly, to the principle of neutrality because they avoid taking any definite position for or against anyone in disputes on measures concerning arms limitation. During the International Red Cross Conference at Bucharest in 1977, the Red Cross was therefore not able to back up the Soviet Union's motion condemning the neutron bomb, any more than it could today censure the stationing in Europe of medium-range missiles, for example by approving the "zero option". If it took this step, it would immediately be accused of taking sides and infringing its rule of neutrality.

Recently, voices have been raised within the Red Cross movement asking that the National Societies, the ICRC and the League undertake to promote not only knowledge and implementation of international humanitarian law applicable in armed conflicts, but also *human rights*. It has been pointed out, quite rightly, that the conventions relating to human rights are derived from the same source as the Geneva Conventions and their additional Protocols, namely the concept of human dignity, and that they seek to achieve the same end, the protection of the human being. It has been emphasized that respect for human rights would constitute a valid criterion for an order based on justice and that the application of human rights without any discrimination would be the foundation of peace within nations and among nations.

Even if these demands merit attention and support, the limits to be observed are, here too, vitally important. The conventions on human rights encompass a multitude of legal notions—the right to liberty, right to judicial guarantees, political rights, economic rights, social and

cultural rights—which are the very bed-rock of the general social and political order. In addition, the concept of human rights is different in the East from what it is in the West, and in the North from the South. Individualistic concepts frequently conflict with collectivist or nationalistic concepts. If the Red Cross intended to apply itself to human rights in all the complexity of its many facets, it would have to involve itself in political, social and ideological controversies and this would lead it to violate the principle of neutrality and to jeopardize its unity.

However, there do exist human rights which are within the province and competence of the Red Cross and which justify its full commitment. These are the universally recognized fundamental rights, which also appear in the Geneva Conventions and their additional Protocols, such as the right to life, the prohibition of slavery and bondage, the right to physical and mental integrity, the prohibition of torture, of cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, the prohibition of taking hostages and of collective punishments. It could also be assumed that the right to life implies the right to adequate food and lodging, and basic care. This is a matter of the safeguard of humanity and human dignity in the most fundamental meaning of the term, of “respect for the human person” which the Red Cross principle of humanity defines as the aim and mission of the Red Cross. When the Red Cross undertakes to defend *these rights* and helps to ensure their respect, nobody can reproach it with violating neutrality. On the contrary, it is fulfilling its mission and contributing to create the conditions necessary to establish peace.

V

In conclusion, I would like to stress an important point with regard to the work of the Red Cross for peace. We have defined peace as a state of non-belligerence, and also as a situation offering each and all living conditions worthy of man. Thus understood, peace is first and foremost the concern of States and the international organizations they have set up. But the activity or passivity of States and the organizations depends on the will of peoples and individuals; their general behaviour is the reflection of the attitude and mentality of each one among us. Peace is therefore *our concern and our mission*; each one of us is responsible for it. In ourselves and in our entourage, we must fight the currents and forces that endanger and disturb the peace. We must endeavour to overcome lies, injustice, suppression of liberty, prejudice, envy, jealousy,

greed, mistrust, lack of understanding and the hatred of foreigners and others.

Let me mention as examples three great thinkers, men worthy of serving as models.

Max Huber, in one of his last works entitled *Prolégomènes et problèmes d'éthique internationale*,¹ quoted as the main elements of a moral philosophy propitious to the formation of a "spiritual and moral homogeneity" in the community of peoples the concept of honesty, self-criticism, the spirit of justice, non-violence and respect for human rights. But such a moral philosophy could influence and determine the conduct of States towards each other only if the States themselves were wholly inspired by the same ethics, from the highest structure to the basic cells of the nation, which are its individuals.

Albert Schweitzer, in his speech on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize,² in Oslo in 1954, declared that the success or failure of peace depended on "what goes on in the mind of each individual and finally constitutes the mentality of peoples". All progress towards an improvement in human existence came from the spirit of humanity and a moral philosophy based on respect for life. Albert Schweitzer emphasized that only insofar as the idea of peace was implanted in men's consciences could the institutions created to safeguard peace do what one demanded and expected of them.

Finally, Karl Jaspers, in his speech on receiving the German Booksellers' Peace Prize³ in 1958, said that there was no peace without liberty, nor liberty without truth. The policy of peace was a matter of world politics but peace started in the home of each one of us, world peace began by peace within nations. Jaspers went on to say: "The condition of peace is a collective responsibility for which each of us takes a share, by his way of living in freedom and truth. The question of peace is not, primarily, a world-wide issue but a matter confronting each one among us."

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Can the Red Cross contribute to safeguarding peace? If we consider the humanitarian work of the Red Cross and meditate on the words of Huber, Schweitzer and Jaspers, we can perhaps reply in the affirmative,

¹ Published in *Die Friedenswarte*, Vol. 53, 1956, and in *Vermischte Schriften*, Vol. IV, Zurich, 1957.

² Albert Schweitzer, *Das Problem des Friedens in der heutigen Welt*, C. H. Beck, Munich, 1954.

³ Karl Jaspers, *Wahrheit, Freiheit und Friede*, R. Piper, Munich, 1958.

albeit with reserve and modesty. The possibilities open to the Red Cross to serve peace depend on human and personal efforts to promote human dignity, to defend and propagate humane feelings, ideas and action. Grasping these opportunities is the concern of all those who feel associated with the ideals and the work of the Red Cross.

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