

SCIENTIFIC SYMPOSIUM ON THE PRECURSORS OF THE RED CROSS

(Geneva, 26-28 October 1988)

To mark the 125th anniversary of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the Henry Dunant Society organized a two-day symposium in Geneva from 26 to 28 October 1988 on the direct precursors of the Red Cross.¹

For three days, historians and people working on the theoretical and practical side of the Red Cross and other academic and private institutions sought to discover or rediscover women and men who, especially in the nineteenth century, had the same concerns as the "Committee of Five" for wounded and sick soldiers and for prisoners of war and a desire to see both the wounded and those caring for them declared neutral and standing relief societies created. In short, the purpose of the symposium was to ascertain the influence of that humanitarian sensibility which found tangible expression with the founding of the Red Cross in 1863.

The symposium was officially opened by *Mr. Pierre Wellhauser*, President of the Council of State of the Republic and Canton of Geneva. *Mr. Maurice Aubert*, Vice-President of the ICRC and chairman of the symposium's first session, paid tribute to the Henry Dunant Society and expressed the wish that by drawing attention to the precursors of the Red Cross and their achievements, the symposium would heighten awareness of the fact that humanitarian law and the Red Cross principles were based on an ideal to which all peoples aspire. "Let us hope", he concluded, that all governments will realize this fact more clearly and will in all circumstances consent to give respect for humanitarian principles priority over political considerations".

During this initial session on general humanitarian issues, *Mr. Guy-Olivier Segond*, Mayor of the City of Geneva, gave a summary account of the **development of humanitarian law** through the ages—from early African and Indian civilizations up to the American Civil War. He showed that humanitarian principles, customs and rules existed before the first Geneva Convention of 1864, but that Henry Dunant's genius consisted in replacing national rules created in wartime, for armies already engaged in combat, by an international

¹ The agenda for this Symposium was published in the *IRRC* of July-August 1988, pp. 400-404.

treaty ratified in peacetime and based on values which were not merely Christian or European but universal, thus enabling people around the world to retrace the roots of modern humanitarian law in their own history.

Mr. Bruno Zanobio, professor of medical history at the University of Milan, in Italy, spoke most appositely on ballistic and other technical innovations which changed military tactics in the nineteenth century, created new problems in **military medicine**—especially **surgery**—and led to new requirements in organizing military medical services.

Mr. Giuseppe Armocida, also from the University of Milan, took the opportunity to recall the admirable figure of **Louis Appia**, co-founder of the Red Cross, who devoted himself to war surgery. Prompted by his extensive experience in tending the casualties of revolutionary movements in Europe he constantly sought better ways to treat the wounded. His surgical treatise “The mobile surgeon, or a practical study of wounds caused by firearms” became a classic.

Though still embryonic in the mid-nineteenth century, the humanitarian idea was gradually taking shape during the Sonderbund War in 1847, the Italian Wars, the Crimean War and the American Civil War. The symposium examined this chain of events and their effect on the development of humanitarian law.

In 1847, Switzerland’s existence was threatened by the Sonderbund War. Seven Catholic cantons broke the federal pact of 1815 and formed a separate alliance. The parliamentary assembly of Switzerland turned to **Guillaume-Henri Dufour**, made him a general and gave him the task of putting down the secession and re-establishing peace. This he successfully accomplished. *Mr. Dominic Pedrazzini*, head of general services at the federal military library and historical service in Berne, described the humanitarian philosophy and practice of this great military leader, who never exceeded “the bounds of moderation and humanity” and made it a point of honour to limit the effects of war.

Much less well known is the initiative taken by citizens of Zurich at the beginning of the Sonderbund War. *Mr. Werner G. Zimmermann* from the Zurich State Archives described the activities of the **City of Zurich Society**, which was founded to transport seriously wounded soldiers. It was only short-lived, and was dissolved in 1848, but nevertheless heralded the future relief societies.

The Crimean War, in which the Ottoman Empire and later France and Great Britain fought against Russia from 1853 to 1856, was the major ‘eye-opener’ of the symposium for it revealed that the ravages of that war were caused not so much by the war itself as by sickness—sometimes in epidemic proportions—inadequate medical staff and equipment and the disorganization of the armies’ medical services. Individual men and women were to rise against these deficiencies, which caused more victims than the war itself.

To begin with, there was **Nikolai Pirogov**, a humanist and man of science who revolutionized war surgery when he used antiseptics and anaesthesia by ether and chloroform for the first time before and during the Crimean War, especially during the siege of Sebastopol.

What is less well known is that Dr. Pirogov took charge of the nurses from the Order of the Exaltation of the Cross who were working in the area. He doggedly championed the use of women nurses in military hospitals and for the transport of the wounded.

He also strongly defended the idea that the organization of medical services in armed conflicts was of prime importance. He endeavoured to improve the often hopeless situation of sick and wounded soldiers by developing a more rapid system of taking them to hospital. As he wrote, "It is not the doctors but the administrators who play the key part in help for wounded and sick soldiers on the battlefield". A tribute was paid to Dr. Pirogov and his pioneering work by *Dr. Dmitry D. Venedictov*, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR.

The other great figure of the Crimean War, **Florence Nightingale**, was the subject of two talks, one given by *Dr. Barry Smith*, Professional Fellow in History at the Australian National University in Canberra, and *Sue Goldie Moriarty*, who has edited Florence Nightingale's correspondence.

The two speakers tried to bring out the personality of the "Lady with the Lamp" and to distinguish between legend and reality. A little-known fact is that Florence Nightingale had acquired a reputation in Great Britain long before the Crimean War, when she ran a hospital for poor women in London. Though an angel of mercy towards her patients, she displayed remarkable determination and stubbornness when faced with the sluggishness and even hostility of the military authorities. During the Crimean War, she managed, like Pirogov, to overcome the strenuous objections of the medical authorities and gained access for women nurses to military hospitals. Against all odds, she succeeded in setting up hospitals, dispensaries, and convalescence centres.

In several ways she anticipated the work of the Red Cross when she supervised the distribution of relief supplies and medicines independently of the military and government authorities, ran autonomous nursing services and set up a rudimentary tracing service to inquire into the whereabouts of missing soldiers and inform families of deaths.

But it was also pointed out that Florence Nightingale resolutely remained national in her ideas: paradoxically, she preferred to work under her government's auspices rather than those of some international institution for medical care and relief. Finally, she was sceptical about Henry Dunant's idea that the wounded and sick and the medical personnel caring for them should be accorded neutral status.

Other precursors of the Movement were presented on the second day which was chaired by *Professor Jean-Claude Favez*, Rector of the University of Geneva, and *Mr. Philippe Grand d'Hauteville*, head of the Geneva branch of the Swiss Red Cross. *Mr. Jacques Meurant*, editor of the *International Review of the Red Cross*, spoke about Prince **Anatole Demidoff**, the Russian philanthropist who was so moved by the isolation and precarious living conditions of prisoners of war that he set up what amounted to a "European humanitarian network" for those taken prisoner during the Crimean War. Thanks to the help of official and unofficial agents in Paris, London, Istanbul and St. Petersburg,

he was able to obtain and forward information on the identity, physical and mental state and living conditions of the prisoners, provide them with relief supplies and, above all, give them news of their families. Visits by his agents to prisoner-of-war camps also made it possible to improve the conditions there.

Finally, the accomplishments of Demidoff and his staff in the various places of detention are evidence that the basic provisions of the present Third Geneva Convention already incipiently existed in the practical measures taken by the authorities at the urging of Demidoff and his friends.

There is no doubt that the initiative taken by Demidoff, who devoted himself with equal zeal to the welfare of his own compatriots and that of prisoners of war from countries at war with Russia, both strengthened Henry Dunant's conviction that it was necessary to provide protection for prisoners of war and tempered Gustave Moynier's scepticism about taking a more comprehensive attitude in this respect.

The work of the **Grand Duchess Helena Pavlovna** and her colleagues serves as a good example of the hitherto unknown scale on which women became involved in treating the wounded and sick during the Crimean War. Her accomplishments were described by *Walter Gruber* of the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany. Those of the Paris-based order of the **Daughters of Charity** of Saint Vincent de Paul who also worked on the battlefields of Algeria, Italy, Mexico and the United States between 1847 and 1863, were related by *Renée Lelandais*, herself a member of it.

An extremely important but little-known initiative was that of medical inspector **Dr. Lucien Baudens** who was sent to Crimea by the French medical service. There he studied the workings of army medical services confronted with epidemics, the effects of new weapons and the working conditions of the military doctors on the battlefield.

Having seen the lack of means to distinguish the doctors from the rest of the military on the battlefield, thus often making them the victims of deadly errors, Baudens wrote "These mistakes would be made impossible if the nations agreed among themselves that doctors and hospital staff would bear a distinctive sign—the same in all armies and all countries—which would make them easily recognizable as such to both parties".

Baudens' report, which contained such a wealth of information and suggestions, came to nothing but, as *Dr. Jean Guillermand*, former medical officer in the French army, pointed out, it must be considered "one of the early manifestations of a demand whose justification was to be fully acknowledged some years later, after other conflicts such as the Italian wars and the American Civil War had shown the urgent need for it to be met".

The needless suffering and death of wounded and sick soldiers during the Italian wars and American Civil War did not escape the attention of world opinion. So what was to be done? **Dr. Ferdinando Palasciano**, a surgeon in the Bourbon army, rebelled against the ban on gathering or treating wounded members of the enemy army. For him, the fact that someone was wounded overrode all other considerations. In 1861, in a paper entitled "Neutrality of

the wounded in wartime” delivered to the Pontaniane Academy in Naples, Palasciano said that it was absolutely necessary, in any declaration of war, that governments mutually acknowledge the principle that wounded or gravely ill combatants are to be considered neutral throughout the period of treatment. But as *Professor Andrea Russo* of the University of Naples pointed out, Palasciano felt it was the responsibility of governments to increase the number of military personnel in order to guarantee proper treatment for the wounded and sick. He felt that the mere setting up of voluntary relief societies, as decided at the 1863 Conference, was insufficient to solve the problem.

Also in 1861, **Henri Arrault**, a French pharmacist, wrote a pamphlet entitled “On perfecting equipment for ambulance services”. In addition, he drafted a “Reciprocal agreement between sovereigns” intended to “eradicate the circumstances which can prevent surgeons from carrying out their sacred mission, sometimes forcing them to abandon their patients”. Under his proposed agreement, military surgeons would have “immunity” as would objects such as dressing stations. It is curious to note that Arrault’s far-reaching proposals, like the work of Palasciano, seem to have been unknown to Henry Dunant. In fact, after the 1864 Diplomatic Conference which produced the first Geneva Convention, Arrault felt wronged on seeing it and protested to the International Committee because the provisions of the Convention were virtually a literal repetition of the provisions he himself had drafted. The “war of the two Henris” was related by *Mr. Georges Lubin*, who published the correspondence of George Sand, the French writer. Lubin described the conciliatory role played by Sand in the controversy.

Another name which should be added to the list of little-known forerunners of the Red Cross is that of **Count Félix de Breda** described by *Mr. Eric Schmieder*, Director General of the French Red Cross. Though he himself had never taken part in large military campaigns, the Count thought about the role which voluntary medical workers could play in coming to the aid of the many wounded strewn on the battlefield. The project for organizing military medical staff which he submitted to the French President Louis Napoléon in 1851 had no immediate effect, but it influenced Henry Dunant and Moynier.

It is equally strange but apparently true that Dunant also did not know the work of **Francis Lieber** on the codification of the law of war in connection with the American Civil War. *Mr. Frank B. Freidel* of Harvard University gave a talk on the life and work of Francis Lieber. Lieber was a specialist in the customary law of war and author of a handbook of political ethics. He was invited by Henry W. Halleck, chief of staff of the Union army, to draw up a list of rules of conduct for the armed forces. These rules were to become “Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the field” which President Lincoln sent to the army in his General Orders No. 100. These instructions were followed to a certain extent during the American Civil War by the Union and Confederate armies and later served as an inspiration for those who drafted the Hague Conventions in 1899 and 1907.

Mr. Patrick F. Gilbo, the official historian of the American Red Cross, spoke to the symposium on the life and work during the Civil War of “the angel

of the battlefields”—Clara Barton. Having decided to help soldiers “because she could not be one herself”, she comforted and cared for wounded and sick members of the Union army, especially on the battlefields of Maryland and Virginia.

Several private associations did outstanding work during the American Civil War in helping the wounded and sick. *Jane Turner Censer* of the American University in Washington described the work of two rival commissions. One, the **US Sanitary Commission**, was secular and staffed both by paid employees and by volunteers. Its purpose was to ensure that the soldiers were properly housed, fed and clothed and that they received adequate medical care. The other, the **US Christian Commission**, was staffed entirely by volunteers who went to the assistance of soldiers on the battlefield.

Another humanitarian association was the **Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem**. Professor *Walter Gert Rödel* of the University of Mainz recounted how it had existed since the second century caring for the sick and poor, and in the nineteenth century had extended its activities to the wounded in battle.

The symposium would not have been complete without the presentation of some little-known facts about the Battle of Solferino. Who knows, for example, that in the evening of 24 June 1859 **Don Lorenzo Barzizza**, a Lombard priest, was assigned by the French General Lavalette to organize assistance for the thousands of wounded on the road to Castiglione? Father Barzizza performed real miracles; working day and night, he set up twelve emergency hospitals practically out of thin air and organized medical assistance, comforted the dying and seemed to be there wherever help was needed.

And who could forget the noble figure of **Valérie de Gasparin** with her compassion and high-minded spirit? *Mr. Gabriel Mützenberg*, President of the Geneva Evangelical Society, described the woman who launched an appeal to help the Crimean War casualties, who wrote to Henry Dunant not long after Solferino “I would dearly love to shake your hand; you are a strong-willed and courageous young man”. Dunant, having found in Valérie de Gasparin an understanding person to whom he could speak of the carnage of Solferino, had asked her for help, donations and volunteers in order to assist the dying and sick. The Countess hastened to forward to the French and Swiss press excerpts from Henry Dunant’s messages describing the human distress he had seen in all its horror. These messages foreshadowed *A Memory of Solferino*: “I have been looking after the wounded of Solferino in Castiglione for the past three days and by now I have done what I can for over a thousand of the poor wretches. We have gathered 40,000 wounded but there are not enough doctors—there are only several peasant women, prisoners in reasonably good shape and myself who are doing our best to replace them” (*Journal de Genève*, 9 July 1859).

Such **information** and **comments** from the **Geneva press** were the subject of a talk given by *Mr. André Durand*, former ICRC delegate general, who spoke about the position of the major Geneva newspapers on the Sonderbund War, press reports on the Crimean War (especially sanitary conditions and medical services) and finally on the Italian Wars and the appeals made by Appia and Dunant.

At the end of the final day, which was chaired by *Mr. Félix Christ*, head of the press section at the Swiss Red Cross, and *Mr. Youssef Cassis* of the University of Geneva, *Mr. Roger Durand*, President of the Henry Dunant Society in Geneva, summed up the symposium with its many discussions and attempted to disentangle the complex origins of the Red Cross.

The symposium clearly showed that Henry Dunant did not invent humanitarian assistance for the victims of war and that those whom one can consider as his forerunners had already voiced good ideas, some of which were decisive in improving care for wounded soldiers, according neutral status to medical staff and bringing assistance to prisoners of war. These people had understood what Henry Dunant understood and had acted on that understanding. But they remained isolated individuals and were not able, or did not know how, to make themselves heard. Many individual initiatives were taken but not followed up; some were curbed by government authorities, others were simply forgotten.

So why is it that the ball finally got rolling in Geneva in 1863? To begin with, Henry Dunant and the others in the Committee of Five were the first to **prepare in peacetime for humanitarian action**.

Second, Dunant was also the first to have the idea of enshrining protection for the victims of war in a **multinational agreement**, an audacious idea for the time but one which finally won support because it was based on the Red Cross, an institution representing no party, no ideology and no religion and one which was able to deal with all states.

The Committee of Five also thought efforts to make conflicts more humane should continue on a **permanent basis**, as evidenced by its work after 1864.

Another important point is that Dunant and Moynier always acted **outside official channels**; in their private initiatives they sometimes clashed with the Geneva government.

Finally, Henry Dunant and the other founding fathers remain of capital importance because they were, as Roger Durand pointed out, possessed to a varying extent by a consuming and virtually pathological passion, by a force of conviction which their forerunners had possibly not shared and by a spirit of independence which in the end always worked to their institution's favour.²

J. M.

² The Henry Dunant Society will shortly publish the official records of the symposium.