

125th ANNIVERSARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Events marking the 125th anniversary of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement will continue until October 1989. The International Review of the Red Cross has asked leading figures in the world of humanitarian endeavour—National Society officials, people who have played a significant role within the Movement in recent years and others outside the Movement who have a profound commitment to its principles and work—to share with us their experiences and tell us what the Movement has meant to them in trying circumstances and how they see its future.

The Review is pleased to present in this issue the account of Dr. Dmitry D. Venedictov, M.D., President of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR. He gives his views on the history and development of the Red Cross in the USSR and around the world and discusses the prospects and priorities of a Movement which today is called upon more than ever to “help develop humanist ideas, peace, mutual understanding and co-operation among peoples...”.

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The Red Cross in the USSR and the World: History and Prospects

by Dr. Dmitry D. Venedictov

Public attention is being focused worldwide on the 125th anniversary of the International Red Cross, a milestone in the evolution of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

When celebrating an anniversary, it is customary to look back into the past for a clearer understanding and appraisal of the present, and to gain insight into the future. This is particularly important as regards the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which is one of the most significant manifestations of humanism, symbolizing the recognition that society must uphold human dignity as the supreme universal value, and the desire to avert or relieve human suffering and safeguard human life and health.

The Movement grew out of compassionate and charitable feelings towards war victims on the battlefield, and has developed in parallel with the struggle of humanity against violence, arbitrary action and the evils of war.

Quite rightly, the International Red Cross has been closely identified with an outstanding Swiss citizen: Henry Dunant. The publication of his book, *A Memory of Solferino* (1862), drew broad attention to the plight of the victims of war, the suffering it engenders and the need to bring relief and proper assistance to the wounded and sick on the battlefield.

Similar views were already held, however, by precursors in several countries. Dr. N. I. Pirogoff, an outstanding Russian surgeon and social worker, gained renown throughout Europe for his work setting up military health services, organizing women—the first Sisters of Charity—to attend wounded and sick soldiers and developing war surgery, and for his analysis of war, which he described as a “traumatizing epidemic”.

The Movement’s development since then has been steady and complex. Its entire history from its inception 125 years ago testifies to a noble and energetic struggle to relieve suffering, improve health and defend the rights of humanity.

This development has taken place during a period of unprecedented political and social upheaval and change marked by two world wars, the advent of socialism in many countries, the collapse of colonialism, and the gradual conquest of outer space. It has been accompanied by internal change that has little by little broadened the scope of the Movement's activities and extended its role. Thus, despite periods of withdrawal, inactivity and failure, the Movement has nonetheless managed to win major victories.

Considerable historical merit goes to the Movement for having conceived and brought about the adoption of a series of treaties and international agreements for the protection of the victims of armed conflicts, and international legislation limiting the means and methods of warfare and ensuring the adequate protection of civilians.

The Movement has protested against the use in war of gas and other types of chemical weapons, and particularly dangerous explosive bullets that cause untold suffering. It has also protested against the unjustified sacrifice of civilian populations. After the tragic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought the Second World War to an end, the Movement was among the first to recognize atomic weapons as a growing threat to the very survival of humanity, a view enshrined in many of its decisions and resolutions. It was also among the first to appeal to governments to prohibit the use of atomic energy for military purposes, and invite them to reach an international agreement restricting its use to peaceful ends.

In recent decades, the Movement has played an increasingly important role as a force for peace. Over 80 resolutions adopted by its various bodies since 1921 reflect its steadfast concern with strengthening peace, checking the arms race, eradicating war as the principal threat to human health and survival, enhancing mutual understanding between men, and promoting the spirit of humanism and peace, especially among the young.

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The Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR plays an active part within the Movement. The Alliance's activities uphold the humanitarian tradition begun with the foundation of the Russian Red Cross Society in 1867, four years after the creation, in Geneva, of the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded.

The public drive to help wounded and sick soldiers in fact began in Russia several years earlier, during the Crimean war (1853-1856), when

N. I. Pirogoff first sent the Sisters of Charity, whom he himself had organized, to attend war victims in the besieged city of Sebastopol.

Following Russia's "Great October Revolution", culminating in the creation of the world's first socialist State, whose 70th anniversary we recently celebrated, the Red Cross became a mass movement in the country, embracing the entire population.

At every stage in our country's development, the Soviet Red Cross has actively and tirelessly worked together with the State and public health authorities to promote peace, friendship and co-operation between peoples. It has played an important role in developing social and medical services, containing epidemics, organizing camps for children in poor health, promoting health education, launching the world's first airborne medical service, and assisting wounded and sick soldiers on the battlefield and in hospitals during the "Great Patriotic War".

From the birth of the Soviet State, the government and the Soviet Red Cross, supported by public opinion, have made every effort to ensure that humanitarian ideals prevail in the elaboration of international legislation restricting arbitrary action, violence and the evils of war.

The Soviet Red Cross maintains close working relations with the ICRC. One of their major fields of co-operation is the development and dissemination of the rules of international humanitarian law ensuring protection and assistance for the victims of conflicts and violence.

Soviet government and Red Cross experts took an active part in the conferences that produced the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols.

Soviet Red Cross representatives regularly participate in the Round Tables on Humanitarian Law organized by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law in San Remo. In 1987 the Soviet Union was the venue for the Fourth International Seminar on International Humanitarian Law in the Contemporary World, organized jointly by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law, the Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University and the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR.

Bilateral relations in the information field continue to develop. In 1987, the Alliance's Executive Committee and the ICRC signed an agreement on co-operation in the field of information, providing for the exchange of documents, films and video cassettes of interest to the Movement, joint film ventures, participation in international poster contests, the organization of seminars, etc.

An enlarged session of the Commission on the Red Cross, Red

Crescent and Peace on the theme “Information, dissemination and peace” is due to take place in 1988.

As the Movement expands and becomes more universal, it enjoys increasing authority vis-à-vis people and their leaders. The responsibility it bears in deciding on means of development and future activities also increases in proportion.

Since the end of the Second World War, more than 30 million people have been killed throughout the world in armed conflicts, and millions more have lost their homes, become refugees or been displaced. In the face of this, the Movement cannot and must not remain inactive. The protection of civilians and refugees, and the cessation and prevention of armed conflicts, require its particular attention.

In an era in which humanity is poised on the brink of nuclear suicide, the Movement’s role in preserving peace must be reappraised, and obsolete stereotypes discarded. While the Movement’s major goals—the protection of human life and health and the prevention and relief of suffering—remain unchanged, the meaning, definition and means of attaining those goals are constantly evolving. At present, we are setting great store by the Movement’s new efforts to establish peaceful dialogue among peoples.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement must help develop humanist ideas, peace, mutual understanding and cooperation among peoples, and put its ideals into practice by struggling to avert the nuclear threat.

In our opinion, many of the theoretical and organizational concepts underlying the activities of the Movement’s components, both nationally and internationally, must now be reassessed. This is particularly true of the fundamental tasks and principles guiding the Movement and shaping National Society activities throughout the world, not only in wartime and exceptional circumstances, but also in peacetime and the normal course of daily life.

The history and development prospects of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement must therefore be seen in the new light of the considerable authority it enjoys and the important role it plays in contemporary society.

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