

The Declaration of St. Petersburg of 1868

125th ANNIVERSARY OF THE DECLARATION OF ST. PETERSBURG OF 1868

The frequent violations of the basic rights of the individual, the grave breaches of international humanitarian law, and the repeated assaults upon human dignity seen in the last few years have all highlighted the importance and relevance of humanitarian law, and have pointed to the urgent need for measures to strengthen and enforce its provisions. Several initiatives have recently been taken in this direction, including the holding of the International Conference for the Protection of War Victims. This Conference, convened by the Swiss government and held in Geneva from 30 August to 1 September 1993, brought together the representatives of some 160 States. They solemnly pledged, in a Final Declaration, to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law, and adopted measures intended to improve its implementation.

* * *

The celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Declaration of St. Petersburg was organized in the same spirit. The Declaration has assumed special significance at this point in time, as Hans-Peter Gasser shows in his article on pages 511-514; it revolutionized military thinking in the last century in that it was the first modern multilateral treaty specifically drawn up to limit the effects of hostilities on human beings. This was a particularly opportune moment to draw attention to an international initiative, prompted by humanitarian considerations, to restrict the development of new weapons of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering. The Declaration helped lay the foundations of contemporary international humanitarian law.

For all these reasons, the authorities of the city of St. Petersburg and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, with

ICRC support, wanted to mark the occasion of the Declaration's 125th anniversary.

On 1 and 2 December 1993 an International Symposium on humanitarian law was held in St. Petersburg for high-ranking members of the armed forces. The aim of the Symposium was to stress the crucial role played by the armed forces, particularly the high command and senior officers, in ensuring compliance with the humanitarian obligations arising from the 1949 Geneva Conventions, their 1977 Additional Protocols, and the rules of customary law.

An exhibition on international humanitarian law and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was mounted as part of the Symposium.

* * *

The official ceremony to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Declaration of St. Petersburg took place on 2 December 1993. Some 300 representatives of 32 countries (including ten belonging to the former Soviet Union) attended the event. Among them were the Deputy Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, the St. Petersburg city authorities, members of the diplomatic and consular corps, participants in the Symposium, and members of the Russian Red Cross Society.

The ICRC was represented by President Cornelio Sommaruga, Mr. Josef Feldmann, member of the Committee, and several senior staff.

In one of its forthcoming issues the Review will come back to the events marking the 125th anniversary of the Declaration of St. Petersburg and deal with the question of weapons causing superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering.