

THE RED CROSS CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

by A. Modoux

Red Cross Origin and the Problem of Peace

The Red Cross was born over a hundred years ago on the field of battle. Aid to the wounded was the first mission it undertook. From the outset it thus restricted the scope of its ambition. By its desire to achieve that objective before anything else, the International Committee of the Red Cross acted with wisdom. So long as its work had not attained a certain degree of importance, so long as it was not universally recognized, the Committee decided its mission should be kept within certain limits and not get out of hand. The International Committee certainly had no desire thereby to justify war as a necessary evil. Its aim was essentially to combat war by limiting the distress it caused, for although its supreme objective was to ensure peace in the world, the Red Cross could not itself, with the forces at its command, have any illusions that it could stem the tide of war. It therefore endeavoured first and foremost to attenuate its harmful effects. As Louis Appia, one of the Red Cross founders, said, "Let us declare aloud our keen regret, our grief, at not being able to do more; let us protest against the great collective iniquity known as war, which is but one of the forms of evil in the world".

Gustave Moynier, the first President of the International Committee, stated in one of his publications on the Red Cross: "Through our efforts to relieve the suffering of those who fall on the field of battle, we have indirectly served the cause of societies for

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peace whose aim is to spread fraternity among the nations and to quell by every possible means the spirit of rivalry and hate which divides them ”.

From the very beginning therefore, whilst attempting to limit the scope of the nascent Red Cross, the founders perceived even at that stage that by propagating fraternity on the field of battle through their activities and efforts they were at the same time preparing the ground for that sentiment to take root in many hearts.

The First Appeals for Peace

Of course, many years passed before it was generally admitted within the Red Cross movement that humanitarian efforts were just as effective in time of peace as in time of war and that by its work for the benefit of mankind the Red Cross was increasing the chances of peace.

Not until 1919 did significant allusions and basic texts on the contribution the Red Cross could make to lasting peace appear in appeals and resolutions of International Conferences. From that time onwards, under the pressure of events, and also because its members were more clearly aware that their moral commitment extended beyond periods of war, the whole movement was motivated by the idea of a campaign for peace and stated in clear terms the part it wished to assume in the building of a peaceful world.

On 19 July 1921, sharing the longing of all mankind, the International Committee and the League of Red Cross Societies appealed to all nations to overcome the spirit of war so prevalent throughout the world. This particularly important appeal was worded in so forthright a manner that it could almost have been said to have jettisoned the circumspection which events had previously demanded and to which the Red Cross had been bound since its beginning. The appeal stated that the Red Cross must not only combat the evils of war but that it was bound by duty to itself and to all who placed their trust in it “ to contribute by impartiality and mutual assistance on a world scale to war’s elimination ”. Even more, in that appeal the two highest Red Cross authorities asked all men of good will, whatever their nationality, religion, profession or social

rank, "to carry out a steadfast and general campaign against the spirit of war". The two institutions stated that "Not content with working in time of peace, the Red Cross intends to work for peace".

Since then nearly every International Conference of the Red Cross has adopted resolutions on the contribution which the movement can make to the cause of peace. Of course, as the Red Cross must not become involved in the political organization of peace, the aim of that contribution is first and foremost to promote the spirit of peace and mutual understanding among the nations.

Between the two World Wars, going a stage further than the resolutions, the Red Cross displayed practical initiative by endeavouring to increase its contribution to peace. In particular, there were the Round Table meetings organized by the International Committee in 1933 and which, for the first time, enabled the Red Cross systematically to survey practical ways and means of increasing its contribution to the spirit of peace; the "Red Cross Truce", suggested by the Czechoslovak Red Cross, for the suspension of all polemics with other countries; and the Japanese Red Cross action for peace with the aim of promoting a *rapprochement* of nations.

Direct practical contribution to peace

Held in check by the upheaval from 1939 to 1945, this spirit was resumed after the Second World War with new strength, culminating in 1965 in the proclamation of the basic Red Cross principles at the XXth International Conference in Vienna. The principle of humanity, after stating that the purpose of the Red Cross is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being, went on to say that the Red Cross "promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace among the nations". In addition, through the important Resolution No. X which it adopted, the Conference encouraged the International Committee "to undertake, in constant liaison with the United Nations and within the framework of its humanitarian mission, every effort likely to contribute to the prevention or settlement of possible armed conflicts, and to be associated, in agreement with the States concerned, with any appropriate measures to this end".

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It was in that spirit that the International Committee, in close co-operation with the League of Red Cross Societies, convened in 1967 and 1969 two Round Table meetings to examine not only the contribution which the Red Cross could and should make to the spirit of peace but also practical ways and means of giving added force to that contribution. The outcome of those meetings was that the XXIst International Conference at Istanbul in September 1969 adopted two resolutions on peace. Resolution No. XX recommended *inter alia* that all Red Cross bodies take active measures to initiate the whole population, particularly youth, in Red Cross activities by training youth in a spirit of international brotherhood, solidarity and friendship with all peoples. It also invited the two International bodies of the Red Cross, in liaison with UNESCO and other specialised UN agencies to initiate an educational programme of peace. Resolution No. XXI was designed to enable the Red Cross to contribute directly in a practical manner to the promotion of peace. Pointing out that the danger to peace is at its highest when the parties between which tension exists have no contact, and arguing that when other communications are severed the Red Cross link must be maintained, the Conference recommended " that in cases of armed conflicts or of situations which are a threat to peace, the ICRC shall, if necessary, ask the representatives of the National Societies of the countries concerned to meet together or separately with the ICRC to study the resolution of humanitarian problems involved and in agreement with the governments concerned to examine what contribution the Red Cross could make to preventing the outbreak of the conflict or achieving a cease-fire or cessation of hostilities ".

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In fact, however, International Committee efforts for the maintenance of peace as required by this last resolution are by no means a novelty. In the sixties, the ICRC agreed to undertake tasks directly connected with the peaceful solution of conflicts, thereby demonstrating the importance it attaches to the problem of peace.

As an instance of this we might mention that in 1962 during the Cuba crisis, the UN Secretary General, in agreement with the

United States and the USSR, asked the International Committee to assist by searching ships bound for Cuba. In view of the gravity of the situation the ICRC gave its agreement in principle. The favourable turn which the events took finally made it unnecessary for the ICRC to perform this supervision. More recently—in September 1967—in response to a pressing appeal from the Organization of African Unity, the International Committee agreed to assist in facilitating the peaceful settlement of the “mercenaries” situation and thereby contribute to putting an end to the suffering which that situation caused the Congolese population.

In this connection we might also mention—since it was at the origin of the cessation of hostilities—the International Committee’s activities in San Domingo during the internal conflict there in the spring of 1965. Backing up the efforts of the National Red Cross and supported by the representatives of the United Nations and of the Organization of American States, the International Committee delegate succeeded in inducing the parties to the conflict to conclude a truce. This was intended first of all to permit the victims of hostilities to be taken to hospital, but it was prolonged and enabled the enemy factions to start discussions which led to the final cessation of the fighting.

Various ways of contributing to Peace

It has been observed that, on the whole, resolutions adopted on peace by the various International Conferences envisaged two distinct ways in which the Red Cross could contribute to the promotion of peace.

On the one hand there is the contribution which is the outcome of the traditional Red Cross activities for the relief of suffering, the maintenance of health, and respect for the human being. There is indeed no doubt that through its assistance work the Red Cross contributes to reconciling nations and thereby directly participates in the work of promoting peace. As has been stated several times by its founders, the whole humanitarian Red Cross mission is a protest against the outbreak of violence. Even though the Geneva Conventions and basic Red Cross principles apply first and foremost in war situations, they do not for that reason imply the acceptance or

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inevitability of violence. The importance of work carried out internationally for the benefit of the victims of wars and natural disasters can hardly be adequately emphasized. It is often through such actions that the Red Cross contribution to peace is brought to the attention of the public in general. The same applies to relief activities in internal disorders and civil wars when the humanitarian action which the Red Cross is able to undertake in favour of the victims is, here again, a factor for peace and unity in a country torn by hate and high feeling.

In addition, we must recognize activities specifically intended to promote peace. As long ago as 1930, Resolution No. X of the International Conference of that year encouraged the Red Cross to go beyond its traditional function and to undertake such activities. According to that resolution, "the Red Cross must endeavour to seek every possible outlet where its moral force and prestige can give added support to the movement throughout the world towards mutual understanding and conciliation".

These specific activities are not justified by law alone, but also by the fact that, indispensable as they are for the alleviation of suffering caused by war, humanitarian laws and Red Cross relief action have not put an end to armed conflicts and their attendant evils. Sometimes violence reaches such a pitch, feeling is so high and the requirements of humanity so flouted that it would seem that nothing short of restoring peace could relieve with lasting effect the suffering violence engenders. This fact fully justifies the extension of the traditional Red Cross activities to include work to promote peace and mutual understanding.

Undoubtedly its incursion into a field so fraught with pitfalls is likely to draw the Red Cross into the political arena. Hence the absolute need for it to remain faithful to its basic principles of neutrality and impartiality, without their being given such a narrow interpretation that any initiative to promote peace is hampered or made completely ineffective.

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