

Knowledge of the Geneva Conventions

by J. de Preux

It is foolish for anyone to seek to be wise in isolation.

In a world which is said to be given over increasingly to violence, ambition and strife—and to all that flows therefrom—we ask ourselves “What is the Red Cross?”

Should we visualize the Geneva Conventions as some verdant island-sanctuary that is preserved in the way that natural riches or cultural assets are preserved? One is put in mind of show-cases in which precious curios are displayed, with a “Do not touch” sign.

One thinks also of travellers on an express train moving at dizzy speed; scarcely has the eye had time to glimpse an orchard, a bell-tower, a tree—so promising in their beauty—than the scene has changed and the travellers are miles away. Paradox or antithesis? Let us opt for antithesis.

It is customary to say that if the Geneva Conventions are not applied, it is because they are not known: a major shortcoming, it is true, but one that can easily be remedied.

The case would be quite different if the reason for not applying the Geneva Conventions were that they had not “kept up with the current”, that the movement which they seek to foster had failed to ally itself with, or be integrated in, the general movement that tends to carry all before it.

War-wounded: go slow! Prisoners of war: no passing! Civilians: make a detour! Time is needed to observe all these directions. But where is one to find the time? There is no “time-bank”. Medicine has made vast strides and prolonged human life; hence there is time.

Yes, it's true: there is time. Yet there is no time to wait, for he who waits runs the risk of never arriving. That is why it is folly to try on one's own—in isolation—to be wise.

We shall thus be told that, above all, we must not miss the current. If mankind accelerates, it is necessary likewise to accelerate, while imposing concurrently respect for the Geneva Conventions.

Man strives to go faster, farther, higher; so be it, provided that he observes the Geneva Conventions: caring for the wounded, respect for prisoners of war, protection for civilians. But then the same problem recurs, and he realizes that he cannot merely aim at going faster, farther and higher, for time is lost when he tends the wounded; he slackens his pace, if only momentarily, when he treats prisoners of war with respect; he has to halt as he stoops to protect civilians. Posed in these terms, the problem is insoluble.

That is why, in the world of today, the Geneva Conventions have inevitably assumed a certain contradictory character.

In the era of superstition—at times fanatic—some ministers of the cloth were described as useful “guard-rails”. In the present era of speed, the Geneva Conventions might perhaps aptly be called “control-barriers”. The symbol of speed is light, and light fascinates to the point of dazzling the eye. Hence one must learn to protect oneself, even from light. But, to be effective, the injunctions embodied in the Geneva Conventions must not be looked upon as a jewel in a case, to be worn on gala occasions and the rest of the time locked up in the safe. Instead, for those who are called upon to observe them, they must become “everyday wear”. That is not too great an expectation.

We must guard against thinking of those injunctions as crash-helmets for use on exceptionally risky operations. Present-day life represents a risk that is perpetually in motion. What is needed is “to get into the habit” of living with the Geneva Conventions. Wounded troops, prisoners of war, civilians “under occupation”. They are to be found everywhere. By the same token one’s own person is involved. That is the difficulty which one must first seek to overcome, and therein lies the antithesis. Once one has found some release, it should prove possible to afford a like release to others.

In this way the Geneva Conventions will not be a mere verdant islet, a tourist attraction, nor the lubricating oil for the cog-wheels of a machine that is already straining the limits of man’s reflexes.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS

We thus come back to original sources. The Geneva Convention of 1864 was concluded because of the indifference shown by a quarter-master general's staff towards the mass of wounded troops—an indifference attributable to the circumstances of the time. Today the Geneva Conventions are a necessity by reason of the indifference to which technical overdevelopment has brought mankind.

“What profiteth a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” For the sceptics among us, we might add: “. . . and himself with it”.

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