

Red Cross Solidarity

by H. Beer

*Once we venture beyond ourselves it is impossible not to encounter others.*¹

J.-G. Lossier

From Charity to Solidarity

It comes natural these days to associate the concept of solidarity with the universality of the work of the Red Cross. Serving the same ideal, respecting the same principles, carrying out similar activities, Red Cross Societies are linked to each other and belong, as it were, to a single body, the International Red Cross.

The solidarity, born of the very structure of the Red Cross movement, is also a powerful incentive, for it manifests itself in the active co-operation of all Red Cross members for the benefit of the whole. The urge which Red Cross men and Societies have to help each other beyond national boundaries has become so strong over the years that it is not too presumptuous to adopt it as a Red Cross principle. By giving the concept of charity a universal dimension for the benefit of suffering mankind, solidarity is akin to the principles of humanity and universality of which it is both the emanation and the moving force.

The concept of solidarity appeared, however, belatedly in the official texts of the deliberative bodies of the Red Cross. The relief societies formed from 1863 onwards were essentially moved by a feeling of charity which inspired their action in favour of the wounded and sick lying helplessly on the battlefield, but they were

¹ Cf. *Fellowship, the Moral Significance of the Red Cross*, ICRC, Geneva.

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not conscious of the compact which already existed between them nor of their common responsibilities. Neither in 1863 nor in 1869, at the first International Conferences of the Red Cross, did the Societies' representatives deem it necessary to strengthen the ties that united them, nor did they recognize any reciprocal obligations.

And yet, the notion of solidarity was already present in the mind, though not in the vocabulary, of the originators of the Red Cross. The first to think that National Societies might be able, in addition to the work they would have to undertake in wartime, to "render great service . . . in periods of epidemics, floods, disastrous fires, etc." was Henry Dunant; he expressed the hope that the "humanity which created them would move them to act on all occasions when their action would be useful" ¹.

The Geneva International Conference of 1863 had already considered that, in case of war, the Committees of belligerent nations could "call upon the Committees of neutral countries for assistance" ²; it had recommended that Committees and Sections of different countries should meet in international assemblies "to communicate the results of their experience and to agree on measures to be taken in the interest of the work . . ." ³. It had also declared: "The exchange of communications between the Committees of the various countries shall be made for the time being through the intermediary of the Geneva Committee" ⁴.

Henry Dunant, and Gustave Moynier after him, had faintly foreseen what the Red Cross might become; they had kindled a beacon that lit up the future, but, in 1866, leaders of Red Cross Societies and voluntary Red Cross workers believed that their first duty lay on the battlefield. The amelioration of the condition of wounded soldiers was an immense responsibility falling upon the shoulders of the Red Cross, and one which it had to discharge with limited resources and only a small number of volunteers. That was a task which could not bear additional commitments.

Similarly, how could the Red Cross, weak and diffident as it was at the time, have made an extensive joint effort to ensure that

¹ H. Dunant, *Fraternité et charité internationales en temps de Guerre*, Paris, 1866.

² Geneva Conference 1863, Art. 5.

³ Geneva Conference 1863, Art. 9.

⁴ Geneva Conference 1863, Art. 10.

it was heeded at Sadowa in 1866 or during the Schleswig-Holstein conflict and to intervene effectively when lack of communications and ignorance of the true facts regarding the war had erected barriers that were as insurmountable as the frontiers of States?

How indeed could the concept of international solidarity have entered anyone's mind when that notion was not part of the concerns of the various States, and when international relations were reduced to struggles for influence and to alliances continually being set up or denounced by States with their jealously guarded prerogatives?

The world of the eighteen-sixties and seventies was in the grip of profound forces making for deep-seated rivalries between States. This was especially true in Europe, where periods of economic prosperity and depression succeeded each other and where new States sought to establish their power within their own frontiers and without. The struggle for domination had begun between the main European powers, differentiated by their political regimes, economic systems and profoundly dissimilar collective mental habits.

In inter-State relations, questions of might were predominant and were animated by economic nationalism moving hand in hand with political nationalism.

True, progress in communications and the swift diffusion of media for the expression of thought were to encourage, at the end of the XIXth century, international intellectual contacts.

Counterbalancing the dangers caused by the upsurge of nationalism and the intensification of economic rivalries, other forces arose: international pacifist associations, philanthropic movements and Churches constituted pressure groups which enlightened public opinion and put pressure upon governments in order that they should renounce power politics and place the notion of a higher motive, the interests of the human community, before the satisfaction of national interests.

However, those movements were too disparate and not sufficiently organized to have such influence on public opinion as to engender a spirit of concord between States, or even between those same associations and movements which had not united, let alone practised solidarity in action.

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How then could those Relief Committees or Sections, small in number as they were in 1864, be expected to undertake action in common, when all the prevailing factors of the time combined to confine them within the enclosed national frame of States all too prepared to tear each others' throats?

The efforts exerted by several Relief Societies during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 should therefore be viewed as constituting a particularly decisive event. Red Cross solidarity was for the first time visibly in action on the battlefields of France.

This first act of Red Cross solidarity⁵ was also the first step towards the taking of united action by the Relief Societies.

In 1871, the Red Cross succeeded in projecting itself out of Europe and in drawing the whole world into its orbit. While Gustave Moynier was meditating at that time on the future of the Red Cross and acknowledging the immense services it had rendered and the confidence it had inspired, he found, notwithstanding, that much still remained to be done; the Societies were not all equally developed and were in danger of foundering if they stagnated instead of seeking to become constantly better. In what way could the Societies be aroused to healthy emulation?

That outstanding Red Cross personage, Moynier, had descried the universal destiny of the Red Cross because he believed in its geographic expansion and because its development was the natural concomitant of the social progress from which it was derived.

But that advance was not to be accomplished in disorder; it was to be put into effect and made easier by a tighter union of the National Societies and through the collective affirmation of their solidarity.

Two years before the Third International Red Cross Conference of 1884, Moynier wrote: ". . . If all the Societies undertake quite explicitly to lend each other assistance, each one would be spurred on by the stimulus of its own responsibility; they would all feel that they should constantly be ready, either to aid sister Societies or to utilize the relief supplies that might be sent to them from outside. By banding together, they would be encouraged to do better

⁵ Cf. V. Segesvary, *The Birth of Red Cross Solidarity*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, and Editions l'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1971.

and, from their commitments, would receive an irresistible impetus, without in any way depriving themselves of their autonomy.”⁶

The 1870–71 war thus demonstrated the timeliness of a general understanding between the Societies and furnished the favourable elements for an international agreement. Fate decided, however, that many wars and tribulations had to be undergone and countless meetings organized in order to cement together the International Red Cross and to spread the network of Red Cross solidarity throughout the world.

Ideas advanced slowly and it was only the tragedy of the First World War that irreversibly opened people’s minds to international “Red Cross responsibility”. It was true that the Balkan wars and the Russo-Turkish war had given rise to the formation of new Red Cross Societies and to the appearance of the first Red Crescent Society, with the help of the committees in neutral countries. It was also correct that the Third International Red Cross Conference, examining the lessons to be drawn from the experience of those conflicts, had already laid down the foundations of co-operation between States for the peacetime organization of transport columns for the wounded, of recruitment and training of auxiliary medical personnel, and of storage of relief supplies⁷. However, it was no less true that, shackled by a Europe which was a patchwork of States, the Red Cross, the instrument whereby the suffering caused by rabid nationalism could be cured, had not then attained worldwide status, had not become aware of its responsibilities in time of peace as in time of war, and was not imbued with a sense of having a mission to prevent wars and scourges.

In other words, the Red Cross had not reached the stage where solidarity, taking the place of the notion of charity performed by individual persons, would be manifest in joint service to the community. There had to be, unhappily, a world war with millions of dead in order for the idea of solidarity to be accepted by public opinion, for all nations to feel committed to the struggle against all sources of suffering, for it to be revealed to the Red Cross Societies that they formed *a single* Society working for the benefit of suffering humanity.

⁶ G. Moynier, *The Red Cross : Its Past and Future*, Paris, 1882, pp. 240–1.

⁷ H. Dunning, *Elements for the History of the League*, Geneva, 1969, p. 8.

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With the founding of the League of Red Cross Societies in 1919, and the institution of the International Red Cross in 1928, Red Cross solidarity was to achieve the status of a genuine system of international ethics.

Solidarity in action

The founding of the League of Red Cross Societies was closely linked to that of the League of Nations. There is a striking parallel between the two: the creation of these two international bodies was in response to the same concern to arouse and develop solidarity between nations and member societies, in order to co-ordinate their efforts against the evils to which man is heir, whether they be wars or the consequences of wars, and to establish a climate favourable to peace through better international understanding. In this connection, it is significant that President Wilson was the guiding spirit of the League of Nations just as H. P. Davison was of the League of Red Cross Societies, and that the first Societies to become members of the League were those of the five nations that formed the basis of the League of Nations.

The First World War had engendered a pressing need to do everything that had to be done to prevent the recurrence of the horrors of war; and for that, all countries had to be united within a flexible organization, motivated by the spirit of peace and eager to alleviate misery. That, too, was the overriding wish of H. P. Davison who was able to see for himself in Western Europe, Poland and Russia the tragic consequences of war for the civilian populations. Having been an actual witness of the hardships suffered by migrants and refugees, fully conscious, too, of the power represented by the Red Cross Societies, Davison was indefatigable in his efforts to get them working together in peacetime, within a federation that would unite at one and the same time their ideals and activities.

In this way, the solidarity that had been put into practice in time of war would be continued in periods of peace, for combating epidemics and disease, aiding displaced persons, and so forth.

The career of the League of Red Cross Societies was again curiously linked to that of the League of Nations. The non-participa-

tion of the United States in the work of the League of Nations and the premature eclipse from the international scene of Woodrow Wilson, the man who had been its originator, was a heavy blow to the organization. It was the same with the departure of Davison who, in his pursuit of an ambitious dream, had hoped to make of the League a vast organization capable of ensuring the protection of health and the development of social welfare, somewhat on the lines of the present World Health Organization. Quite a number of projects, far too ambitious no doubt, had to be abandoned, and Davison's hopes of seeing the League of Nations work hand in hand with the League of Red Cross Societies, could not be entirely fulfilled.

But these growing pains were inherent in the advent of a new institution which, similar to a foreign body embedded in a cell, aroused different reactions, some favourable, others less so, on the part of other institutions, and they were in no way to abate the spirit of solidarity born of the war, or hinder the international work of the member Societies of the young federation.

Europe, reeling under the shock of the holocaust of 1914-18, was the scene of long columns of exiles and displaced persons wearily trailing from one country to another. Typhus epidemics were ravaging Central Europe, and the Soviet Union, still in its infancy, was sorely tried by famine. However, it was in this sphere that the first manifestations of international solidarity were to give to the League the opportunity to win its first laurels.

Henry Dunant's wish, expressed in 1866, was about to be realized, but not without difficulties, for although the war had elicited an immediate international response, a long period of time was necessary to mobilize the support of governments and public opinion to organize a relief service as a barrier against world-wide disasters. Moreover, in 1919, the majority of the twenty-six National Societies which at that time constituted the League had little or no experience in matters of disaster relief, and therefore had, from the outset, to tackle the problem from the national rather than from the international aspect. Nevertheless, in co-operation with the ICRC, they took part in the antityphus campaign organized in Europe in 1919; from 1921 to 1924, they helped to alleviate the effects of famine in Russia; in 1923, they assisted the victims of

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earthquakes that had shaken Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Japan and Persia.

Disaster relief was not the sole sphere of Red Cross solidarity. The spirit infused by the Cannes Conference had lost none of its impetus: health had become an international, and not solely a national, problem. The sponsors of the League of Red Cross Societies, who, from its birth, had considered themselves as "citizens of the world", wished National Societies to act in an international perspective, for it was also to destroy national and other barriers and to counter economic and social inequalities that Davison and his disciples had created the League, "a platform for the whole world", destined to unite all the nations on earth. This design, as said before, was in truth over-ambitious, but it left profound traces behind it. The nations did not unite, but the National Societies gathered together in a team spirit to combat disease and to improve the well-being of peoples. Examples of this solidarity abound: the founding of public health nursing services in 1920, the management of schools of nursing, the organization of lectures, courses, and meetings where National Societies share experience, draw up common programmes and together examine situations requiring international aid.

The pioneering efforts in the campaign against tuberculosis, maternal care and child welfare, first aid instruction, and nurse training, demonstrated the enthusiastic and generous solidarity among National Societies, imbued with Wilson's idea that the advance towards a better world was irresistible. The idea of associating youth in the Red Cross movement, in 1929, was not foreign to the spirit of Red Cross solidarity. Who better than the Junior Red Cross could support the League's pioneering work in the years between the wars? The international mutual assistance programme of the Junior Red Cross is a living example of the solidarity existing among the Youth Sections of the federation's members.

The impressive aspect of this vast wave of solidarity was due also to the desire of beneficiary National Societies not to be permanent debtors. Many of them in countries straining under weighty problems resolved to join with others more fortunate than themselves in mutual assistance programmes, by some small contribution which was, for the lesson it taught, of inestimable value.

From 1919 to 1939, the League was active in many different fields, soliciting, developing and enriching the National Societies, which continued to increase in number. In 1919, the League comprised 28 members: 15 in Europe, 1 in Africa, 7 in America, 3 in Asia and 2 in Australasia. In 1934, there was twice that number.

At first dominated by European and American membership, the League's character of universality was irresistibly intensified after the Second World War, especially after many African and Asian countries had become independent. Today, there are 115 Member Societies, 31 of which are in Africa alone.

This in itself gradually made Red Cross solidarity, which had formerly been only incidental, a constant factor in the League's activities. It was fully maintained during the Second World War, in particular through the Joint Relief Commission. Entrusted with the job of transmitting, in spite of innumerable difficulties, to the Societies of the countries affected by the war, the gifts in cash and kind sent by sister Societies, the Commission succeeded in sending relief to 18 European countries. From 1940 to 1945, it ensured the distribution and forwarding of over 165,000 tons of goods representing an approximate value of 319 million Swiss francs. The total value of gifts provided by National Societies during the war was estimated at one thousand million francs.

Co-operation and Solidarity

After the conclusion of the Second World War, a new era opened for the Red Cross. Wise after the failure of the international system that prevailed between the two world wars, thrown into a new world that was not to know genuine peace any more, but obliged to find a way of living held in balance by fear, the Red Cross sought a new balance and was obliged to adapt itself, after 1945, to a world split into two powerful blocs with conflicting ideologies.

The continuation of its mission and the preparation of its future were a further challenge to Red Cross solidarity. For those who had the privilege of working for the Red Cross during the war, it was at once significant and comforting to find that the schisms opened by the war and the wild demonstrations of nationalism did not affect Red Cross work in any way. Indeed, it found in that

distracted world in search of new paths further reasons for expanding its action. The first post-war international conferences were held in Oxford in 1946 and Stockholm in 1948, attended by representatives of former belligerent countries. For the first time, in full accord, the delegates of governments and of Red Cross Societies attempted to codify the duties and rights of the League so as to allow it to translate the fundamental Red Cross principles into acts. Solidarity thus became at last a recognized principle of Red Cross action.⁸

It is common knowledge that both at Oxford and Stockholm questions of fundamental importance were discussed: establishment of peace, violations of the Geneva Conventions, use of non-directed weapons, atomic peril, work of National Societies on behalf of prisoners of war and civilian internees, role of a neutral and independent Red Cross intermediary in political conflicts. Few were the decisions which were not unanimous, thereby demonstrating that Societies of countries violently opposed to, or not recognizing, each other had resolved to be firmly solidary with each other, in order to underline Red Cross unity and renew co-operation in all the fields where enormous needs were felt.

The post-war achievements were a lesson in solidarity; indeed, they were, too, a lesson in courage, for many National Societies did not hesitate, in their desire to co-operate in certain activities, to stand up to hostile reaction or criticism on the part of their countries' authorities.

In the ambiguous role that National Societies had to play, being at the same time independent voluntary organizations and half-nationalized auxiliaries of the Government, their solidarity in certain actions was sometimes a source of internal conflict and severe handicap. Very often the leaders of those Societies, pressed by their governments, had the courage to stand up to those authorities and remind them of their undertakings on signing the Geneva Conventions and accepting the fundamental Red Cross Principles.

⁸ Solidarity is not, however, considered to be a fundamental principle of the Red Cross. J. Pictet, in his work on the Red Cross Principles, classifies it among the organic principles, which may be regarded as rules for applying the fundamental principles guiding the Red Cross in the choice of the means by which it can achieve its aims, and for directing its steps in all the different situations with which its manifold activities may bring it face to face. Cf. J. Pictet, *Red Cross Principles*, Geneva, 1956, p. 93.

Red Cross solidarity may be understood better in the field than within the four walls of conference halls. It was practised most spectacularly during the actions for the benefit of the most wretched of unfortunates, the refugees: in Palestine, from 1948 to 1950; South Korea, from 1950 to 1952; in 1949, at the time of the repatriation of 25,000 Greek children; in 1954, in Vietnam; in 1956, in Austria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, etc. All these actions continued to expand, calling upon the League to make heavy sacrifices and sorely testing Red Cross solidarity, as was the case from 1959 to 1962 in assisting and resettling Algerian refugees in Morocco and Tunisia, and as is the case today, since 1966, in the Republic of Vietnam.

By their dread unexpectedness, natural disasters render public opinion sensitive and touch off a spontaneous, neighbourly reaction in favour of the victims. From the airlift that carried relief to flood victims on the North Sea coast in 1953, to the huge relief operation undertaken for the victims of the 1970 Peru earthquake, the League launched on average an appeal every three weeks. From 1957 to 1965, 74 relief operations roused international solidarity and enabled gifts to an estimated value of 270 million francs to be sent to victims. To this sum must be added the imposing volume of relief supplies despatched by National Societies within the framework of relief actions led by the ICRC in time of conflicts. One need only mention the action on behalf of victims of the Nigeria conflict, in which 35 National Societies and numerous private organizations sent aid evaluated at 32 million francs.

It is only to be expected that a score of Societies from so-called wealthy countries should figure among the donors in every international Red Cross relief action. But are not the contributions made, in cases of extensive disasters, by the smaller National Societies of less favoured countries more significant? Should a Society which itself receives aid from outside reduce further its slender resources in order to help others at the expense of its own work? From the practical viewpoint, this is a moot point, but one cannot, in the name of Red Cross solidarity, prevent, but only encourage, a Society's desire to go to the assistance of others. Never has the expression "sister Societies" been so meaningful as in these moving instances of Red Cross solidarity.

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But it is not only the thousands of millions of Swiss Francs provided by the Red Cross which demonstrate solidarity in the real sense of the word. There is also the swiftness with which decisions are reached, the possibility of taking action without waiting for authorization or confirmation, the National Society machinery for the reception of relief which gets better every day within the disaster belt. All these factors have given the Red Cross a privileged position recognized today by the United Nations and other organizations. It is a position requiring much effort; it is gratifying, and at the same time it is a serious matter, because it is this expanding, spontaneous and generous solidarity which has made the Red Cross into the premier world relief organization.

More important still is the co-operation between National Society members. Red Cross solidarity draws its strength from the contacts between men of different races, ideologies and tongues; it acquires all its moral value when those men unite in constructive work. Examples abound of National Societies joining their efforts in their struggle against some disaster. The action undertaken by the League in Morocco in 1959 to save from paralysis 10,000 persons poisoned by contaminated oil is unique in the annals of the League. It enabled doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and other workers from many countries to keep up their struggle for two years to snatch these unfortunate people from a lingering death and restore them to normal life.

By giving up their time, energy and enthusiasm to a common cause, by increasing their professional and human knowledge, these delegates constitute the best agents for Red Cross solidarity. On their return to their native lands, they become the enlightened apostles of the ideals and activities of the International Red Cross; and often, by eradicating prejudice and misunderstanding around them, they create a climate of international co-operation and understanding with which the Red Cross ideal is indissolubly bound.

As with relief, so it is with the development of National Societies. This task, mentioned in the Statutes of the League, has developed a great deal within the last few years owing to the large number of new Societies that have been admitted into the federation. Most of them belong to the "Third World" and need assistance in the varied activities of the Red Cross.

The working-out of a strategy for development on a world-wide scale and the active participation of National Societies in the integrated development at all levels of community services have knit together a network of international co-operation that does not distinguish between recipient or donor Societies but treats them all as equal partners within the Red Cross movement.

Although the structure of the Red Cross is difficult for someone outside it to understand, its peculiar characteristics allow it to act internationally and nationally at the same time. It is in this dual process that the work of the voluntary Red Cross members is accomplished both within and beyond their countries' boundaries, and it is from the true inter-action of these two elements which sustain and enrich each other that international Red Cross solidarity today draws its richest inspiration.

The Future of Red Cross Solidarity

Of course, it may be held that the Red Cross, despite its century-long activity, has not accomplished all that world opinion expected of it, as the unceasing succession of conflicts and disturbances since the end of the war shows. The world of today lives in the midst of violence, the most varied and unexpected forms of which are akin to real international crimes. Troubled hearts will interpret these events as the defeat of universal concord and of international solidarity for humanitarian ends. It should not be forgotten that narrow-minded nationalism is still rife in many countries and that this can limit and even dictate the national and international actions of Red Cross Societies.

Nevertheless, let us not be subdued by pessimism. Since the world began, it has been a prey to violent upheavals of varied intensity at various periods; the era of the atom bomb and of the technological revolution has only just begun, and the world has not yet assimilated its consequences or escaped the shoals that threaten it. Though the disasters, wars, genocide and all the assaults on the dignity of Man that have occurred in the twentieth century seem so appalling, it is comforting to consider that until the nineteenth century men knew nothing of what was going on outside their own

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countries and when news of some calamity reached them and struck their imagination, it was already too late to intervene.

The revolutionary changes in communications and transport, and the instantaneous transmission of news into homes and offices by television and teletypewriters have now made it possible for the population of the whole world, both in countries enjoying a high standard of living and those of the "Third World" to take part in the same events, the same problems and the same dramatic incidents. Consequently, the notion of collective responsibility has grown through a more extensive knowledge of the world. Faced with the tragedy of Nigeria, men of good will stood by their fellow-men, because they felt that they were directly involved.

Thanks to these prodigious technical means, aid can be immediately sent, and the "mass-media" revolution and changes in information techniques have stimulated further expansion of Red Cross solidarity.

But there are constant factors that can strengthen our trust in Red Cross solidarity. Since the inception of the Red Cross, its solidarity has established the moral significance of the action which is necessary for Red Cross development and is its moving force. In stimulating the act of mutual assistance, solidarity has not ceased to get stronger. More than ever, solidarity means communication between Red Cross men, it affirms man's dignity by increasing his responsibility. It means going beyond oneself, and it will always fulfil that need inherent in man's nature to be more than what he is, for himself and for others.

To doubt Red Cross solidarity would be to despair of Man.

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of Red Cross Societies