

Swiss neutrality makes possible the worldwide humanitarian activities of the International Red Cross

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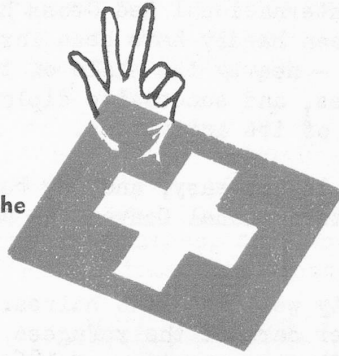
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SWISS NEUTRALITY MAKES POSSIBLE THE WORLDWIDE HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS.

Swiss citizens, residing in belligerent countries, occasionally are severely criticised on account of the Neutrality Status of their Homeland. It is realised that such criticism is due to ignorance. The Swiss people in New Zealand therefore are grateful to the "Christchurch Press", which in their issue of the 8th of June have given space to the following interesting article by R. C. Dolbey, Former Director of the Wounded and Missing Department, Red Cross, London. This friendly call from Great Britain bears the sympathetic headlines: "Friend of War Victims: Geneva Red Cross and War Prisoners".

The National Red Cross Societies in belligerent countries are well known for their devoted service, but their labours are limited, and their activities are localised by the very fact of their countries being at war. On the other hand, the International Red Cross Committee at Geneva, perhaps the last link between the warring nations and civilisation, has a task which is immense and international, but still not too well appreciated.

Among other things, the International Committee to-day is godmother and godfather to more than 3,000,000 prisoners of war of many races, beside being responsible for innumerable interned aliens of every country.

Without the hopes that the International Red Cross inspires in the minds of all these prisoners, whose lives will be spent for long enough behind barbed wire, their lot would be indeed miserable. So, a reminder of the constitution of the International Red Cross Committee may not be out of place.

ALL SWISS CITIZENS.

On the supposition of a permanent Swiss neutrality, it has been decided that the members of this committee, and its delegates in every country, shall be always Swiss citizens. They have the noble responsibility of maintaining a tradition of altruistic and objective detachment which must be unique in a world of nationalistic States.

The committee is hardest worked in war time, for on it falls the duty of seeing that in the interests of the wounded, the captured, and the homeless, the Geneva Conventions of 1929 are carried out.

The organisation was, from the first, given its familiar emblem, the national flag of Switzerland, a white cross on a red shield, with its colours reversed, as a tribute to Geneva, and to Henri Dunant, the founder himself.

Since those far-off days the International Red Cross has developed into a body whose prestige and achievement can hardly have been forecast by its original founders. Seventy-two States - nearly the whole of the civilised world - have now subscribed to its principles, and successive diplomatic conventions have extended and defined the scope of its activities.

The committee's practical task is not easy, and may best be judged by glancing at the field covered by the International Convention and the resolutions of the Red Cross Conference.

This field divides itself pretty well into two halves: on the one hand relief of the wounded, and on the other care of the refugees, civil internees, and prisoners of war. Since the first convention of 1864, a whole body of humanitarian legislation has been passed to ensure that the principles of the Red Cross Conventions, with regard to wounded soldiers, shall be observed by all combatants.

COMFORT TO PRISONERS.

The wounded soldier on the battlefield to-day knows that by international convention his captors are bound to respect him, and, most important, to give him exactly the same medical attention as they give their own wounded. Similarly, he knows that he will be protected from robbery and that his family will be informed of his condition and his whereabouts.

It is true to say that these conventions are generally well observed. They are already acquiring the validity of accepted practice, since in general outline they have been in force for more than half a century.

Some doubt exists still, among the relatives of missing men and prisoners of war, regarding the responsibility of the detaining Power, as the hostile Government is called, for sending information of the names of prisoners and their prison camps.

It would not appear to have been sufficiently stressed that the convention requires this information to be sent "as soon as possible", but not necessarily before the prisoner has reached his final camp. In the case of flying personnel, it was the experience of the British Red Cross that they were quite often flown by their captors to the special flying camps, and their names came through very soon. But in regard to the other forces the time occupied in removing them to their final camps was often very long, due, it is understood, to the difficulties of transport and the needs of the enemy army, and many other reasons.

It was customary to advise relatives to be as patient as possible, and not to lose heart as the weeks passed by, as in the majority of cases 10 weeks elapsed, and in many cases 16 weeks, before news came through from Geneva. Other sources of information were not prohibited from sending news, unofficially, through neutral channels, or from local Red Cross workers, but this was exceptional indeed.

PRISONERS OF JAPANESE.

As these delays occurred in Europe, where the distances are by comparison small, it will be seen that in the case of Japan, whose nearest prison camp may well be in Formosa, the normal period of waiting for news of Australian and British prisoners will be considerably longer, unless some more simple plan can be evolved.

In the case of prisoners in Italian hands, the valuable services of the Vatican brought earlier news than any other channel, at times, while we know that the daughters of the Church have brought endless comfort and relief to the wounded in their hospitals, in all countries.

But these delays, with all their distress and anxiety can be, in many cases, alleviated if the inquiries that the Red Cross Society makes among returned soldiers are full and thorough.

It is interesting to read that a Searchers' Bureau, the like of which has been so extremely active in Britain since Dunkirk, is to be set up in Australia under an experienced searcher from the Middle East.

It must be repeated, however, that care of the wounded and prisoners of war is only one aspect of the work of the International Red Cross Committee in Geneva. The committee devotes a considerable part of its time to the problem raised by the sad lot of internees, and the flood of refugees that the invasion of their countries has set adrift, in countless thousands. They again prove a vast responsibility for the International Red Cross.

CIVIL INTERNEES.

The question of civil internees raises further delicate problems for the committee, since, unfortunately, the draft convention drawn up at the International Red Cross Conference in Tokyo in 1934 had not been ratified at the outbreak of the present war.

The Governments of some countries have notified Geneva that they intend to apply the convention relating to prisoners of war to civil internees, and it is believed that most of the belligerents have now so notified Geneva, and are acting upon that principle. If this is so it clarifies what was otherwise a difficult situation. (And closely linked with the case of the internees is that of the refugees.)

Geneva has supplied to England the names of more than 100,000 prisoners, and a large number of the 2,000,000 French prisoners in enemy camps are known, through its good offices, to their wives and families in France.

In Germany, the energetic delegate of the International Committee, Dr. Junod, is acting in this capacity for his third war. The inspection and the reports upon the prison camps and prisoners in Germany are in his hands, and generally his reports show that our prisoners are being treated with humanity and regard.

FULL REWARD.

So the voluntary work of the International Red Cross goes on; and the reward of the sometimes very tired workers is this, and indeed it is a full reward; the heartfelt thanks of a mother, whether from Edinburgh, from Milan, or from the far Ukraine; the thanks of countless prisoners, the gratitude of some harassed refugee.

Yet, indeed, the work of the International Red Cross expects no reward; its ideals are enough. In its humanitarianism it carries on the best of the Christian and all religious traditions; in its internationalism it forecasts the fuller society of the future and looks, it believes, beyond the limited horizons of to-day.

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SUNDRY NEWS FROM SWITZERLAND.

The Manufacture of Artificial Wool: In order to replace goods from abroad, which it is no longer possible to import in sufficiently large quantities, Switzerland is doing her utmost to manufacture substitutes of various kinds, such as "fibranne" or artificial wool, extracted from wood and manufactured according to methods similar to those employed for the manufacture of rayon. The new installations which are now ready for use will enable Switzerland to produce about 30,000 kilos of fibranne daily. Although this quantity sounds prodigious, it should be borne in mind that supply does not, as yet, meet the demand, as the normal daily consumption of wool and cotton in this country reaches 135,000 kilos.

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