

**Zeitschrift:** Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Society of New Zealand  
**Band:** 13 (1948)  
**Heft:** 1

**Rubrik:** The work of the International Committee of "The Red Cross" during the Second World War : a deed and an idea

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 10.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

Alpine Winter air will be welcomed everywhere. The Engadine is not alone in preparing a warm welcome; all the Winter sports centres, all the regions where the ski reigns supreme will take every care of the comfort and well-being of their visitors this season while they try to improve or recover their sporting form. Those faithful to the Grisons will find again Davos, Arosa, Klosters or Lenzerheide; others familiar with the St-Gall district will return to the sympathetic Toggenbourg or the Prealps of Appenzell. Glaris, the central Switzerland grouped around the Rigi and the Stoos, the central Alps with Engelberg and the Gothard, the splendid Bernese Oberland with Grindelwald, the Brunig, Beatenberg, right up to Gstaad; the Upper and Lower Valais, with Zermatt, and Crans-Montana; the Vaud Alps, with Villars-Chesières and the Fribourg Prealps, the Jura and its charming little valleys; all this Winter country side, all these trails and slopes await ski-ers, skaters and sleighers. This year as in the past, a magnificent Winter season will complete the benefits of an incomparable Summer; Winter holidays remain without doubt, the most delightful of all holidays.

---

THE WORK OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF  
"THE RED CROSS."  
DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR.

---

This, and following numbers, will contain a summary of the activity of the International Red Cross during the Second World War thus giving readers of "Helvetia" an idea of the complexity of the work done by this committee. It may be added it consists only of Swiss nationals; the title International Committee is on account of the universal nature of its activity.

A DEED AND AN IDEA.

"Eight thousand visits to prisoners of war and internment camps. Thirty-six million parcels transported and distributed in the camps. Twenty-three and a half million civilian messages. News of prisoners of war given to their families, or vice versa, a hundred and twenty million times."

"Yes, but what about the Soviet prisoners of war, and the people in the concentration camps? What did you do for them?"

.....

Now that hostilities have ceased, questions are being asked about the activity of the Red Cross in general and of the International Committee in particular. Did the Committee really do all it could? Did it not fail to perform some of its duties? Is it to be judged by its achievements or by its failures?

The General Report on the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross during the second World War, which will be presented to the 1948 International Red Cross Conference, will make it possible perhaps, with the passage of time, to answer these questions. Yet if it is easy to evaluate a report of work done by a business concern or an administration, because its legal position, its functions and its resources are clearly defined, it is less simple in the case of an organism like the International Committee of the Red Cross, in which the various elements are ill-defined and usually little known.

In giving a brief account of the Committee's work therefore, it seems necessary, even before the General Report appears, to describe the position

which the Committee occupies in law and in the Red Cross as a whole.

If we confine our attention to the part played by the International Committee, it is not because of any failure to appreciate what was done for war victims by the National Red Cross Societies or other welfare organizations, official or private. Moreover, what we have to study is not so much the work of the organ itself as the work which the Red Cross was able to do by using it as an intermediary agent.

What then is this International Committee, so recently almost forgotten, to which, once war had broken out, millions of people suddenly turned, as to an all-powerful super-state, a supernatural power or, on the contrary, a universal agent, ready to perform any kind of service?

It is not all-powerful. At the risk of provoking final condemnation in the minds of some, let it be said at the outset that it has not in its power to prevent war. Nor can it hinder war from following its inevitable course. The Red Cross has no means of preventing guns killing or fire destroying. It cannot turn folly into wisdom, cruelty into kindness or hate into love. If that is what was required of it, it has failed.

What then is the Committee?

Let us go back to 1859, to the Italian campaign, to Solferino. There beneath a leaden sky soon to dissolve in a downpour of rain, two mighty armies were suddenly locked in one of the bloodiest conflicts in history. The carnage went on for fifteen hours. The battle-field was covered with dead; there were tens of thousands of wounded, doomed to die in their turn for lack of attention. There were too many. The hospitals of the neighbouring towns, still occupied by men wounded in previous battles, were full to overflowing. So, too, were the movable field-hospitals. A few people of the district, chiefly women, gave unstinting aid. But what could they do, without medicaments or bandages?

Passing through Solferino, a tourist, Henry Dunant of Geneva, witnessed this scene of horror. He was greatly moved. He bent over a wounded man, over another, and another. He continued thus for days, for weeks, without repose. Realizing the scale of the disaster and the total inadequacy of the help that was being improvised, he tried to organize relief. Preaching by example, he roused people of goodwill, formed them into groups, allotted them their tasks. He informed his friends in Switzerland and elsewhere, and begged for medical supplies. But above all, he created a new spirit; surprised at first, then won over, the women who had preferred to succour those whom they considered their liberators, learned from Dunant that suffering has no nationality, but is merely human, and began to tend the enemy wounded as well.

When he returned to Geneva, Dunant was haunted by these events. The memory of those tens of thousands of wounded made him think of other tens and hundreds of thousands, all those of future wars, who would also die for lack of attention. What he had tried to do showed him what might be done. They had saved three thousand men, five thousand perhaps... But there had been forty thousand! How many might not have been saved if the service which had been given spontaneously or in response to his appeals, had been organized beforehand, and if medical equipment and supplies had been forthcoming.

Then he wrote "A Memory of Solferino." In it he related what he had seen and what the women of Solferino and Castiglione had done. He portrayed the horror and the sublimity of the morrow of battle. He ended with two suggestions. Would it not be possible, in peace-time, to form societies whose aim would be to see that the wounded were cared for in war-time? And was it not desirable that a Congress should formulate some international principle, embodied in a convention and accepted as sacred, which should serve as a basis for these societies?

This little book, sent at first only to the author's friends and a few people of importance, was to go round the world. It was to give birth to a double



event; an international Convention and a world-wide movement for charity in war; in other words, to the Red Cross.

Yet what Dunant did, others had done before him. His idea of neutrality in the presence of suffering was not entirely new. Beginning with Cyrus, King of Persia, in B.C. 550, history reveals many cases of kings or generals who ordered their troops to care for the enemy wounded, and of bilateral agreements by which two belligerents, at the outbreak or in the course of hostilities, pledged themselves to respect each other's hospitals, doctors and wounded or sick soldiers. It abounds in stories of individual or collective service done to help those wounded in war. Dunant himself, still impressed by the quite recent achievement of Florence Nightingale, quotes many examples in which he seeks encouragement for his ideas. As for his two suggestions, in the form in which he wrote them, they seem like a pious wish, almost naive, hardly more than the cry of "It ought not to be allowed," which springs from sensitive hearts.

Why this success? Because the development of ideas, by spreading belief in the value of the individual, had prepared the ground? No doubt, but also, and especially, because Dunant's idea was not an isolated idea; behind it was the deed done by the author himself. Moreover, the latter having conceived the idea, put himself entirely at its service, in order to make it the motive power of other deeds, similar but on a larger scale, better organized, more efficacious. By pen and by word of mouth, he renewed, he prolonged the deed. He set before men's eyes, together with the wounded of the Italian campaign, all the wounded of future campaigns. And as at Solferino he called forth service, organized relief and allotted tasks, so now he roused pity for the wounded of the future, and compelled men to bend over them, as on the battle-field he had compelled lookers-on to add their efforts to his own.

At Geneva, as soon as the manuscript of the book was read, his friends were fired with enthusiasm. The matter was brought before the Welfare Society, who appointed a committee composed of their chairman Gustave Moynier, General Dufour, Dr. Appia, Dr. Maunoir and Henry Dunant, to study the latter's suggestions and if possible, to give effect to them.

Such was the zeal of Moynier and his colleagues, such Dunant's powers of persuasion as he travelled about Europe to plead his cause, that on October 29th of the following year, 1863, this modest "Geneva Committee for Aid to Wounded Soldiers" was able to assemble an informal international Conference representing sixteen nations; and a year later the Swiss Federal Council, won over to the new ideas, called together another conference, this time of diplomatists. The first approved the Geneva Committee's proposals and decided on the formation, in all the countries represented, of national societies for aid to wounded soldiers; the second resulted in the signing, by the plenipotentiaries of twelve European States, of the Geneva Convention of August 22nd, 1864 "for the Relief of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field." For the first time in history a multilateral treaty proclaimed in advance, and permanently - no longer only on the occasion of a particular conflict - the neutralization of field dressing-stations and military hospitals and of medical staff, and the obligation to care for wounded and sick soldiers without distinction of nationality. An international symbol was created which conferred legal protection even on the battle-field; a Red Cross on a white ground.

Two years had sufficed for the "Would it not be possible?" and the "Is it not desirable?" written by Dunant at the end of his book, to be translated into acts in the life of nations and into principles of international law.

Such is the power of faith.

---