

The Red Cross and Switzerland

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THE RED CROSS AND SWITZERLAND.

By Pierre Béguin (Short Waves Swiss Service).

At the moment Switzerland has the honour of receiving the diplomatic conference which is revising the international conventions of the Red Cross, in Geneva. President is the leading delegate of the Swiss group, Mr. Max Petitpierre, Swiss Foreign Minister.

The conference is extremely important. It will, of course, not re-establish peace on earth nor will it do away with the antagonisms separating the East and West, for it has very different aims. It must take measures which will protect the greatest possible number of human lives in the tragic event of another war. Certain measures already exist, but did not go far enough, as was shown during the last war, mainly because fighting methods had changed so much, had become more brutal, and touched many more people than before. You have only to think of the terrible fate of the partisans who after capture had no protection, to become convinced of the need for the revision of the previous Geneva conventions. The hideous fate of the civilians who spent years in concentration camps is also a convincing argument. We must prevent horrors like these from ever happening again, and that is what the Geneva conference, called and presided over by Switzerland, is trying to do. One fine thing about it is that all countries are represented at this conference, including the nations of eastern Europe and Asia. That shows a wish to establish and maintain once again the rights of the human being, apart entirely from questions of ideology. Even during the war it used to be said that however fierce the warfare and the conflicts, there are certain minimum relations between the people which cannot be broken down, which must be maintained against all obstacles. Victims of war are always innocent. They must be protected, they must be able to contact their families, be properly treated, even in prisoner of war camps. On that point, the whole world must agree, however great their antagonisms.

Switzerland has always had an important role to play in this respect. Because Switzerland is a neutral country, because the International Red Cross Committee is made up entirely of Swiss citizens and sits in Geneva, it has a better chance of looking after war victims in other countries.

Sometimes a suggestion has been made that this work should be handed over to an international organisation, say, along the lines of the United Nations. The idea seems attractive to some, but it seems hardly likely that it will take on. However powerful an international organisation may be, it always shows tendencies to belong to one group, or bloc, or another, if it must judge one of its members guilty of aggression. In such a case it would have no means of intervening in the affairs of a country which had been banned by the whole world and against which all were struggling by common agreement. To carry out a suggestion like this would compromise the protection of prisoners of war, which we want on the contrary to strengthen.

In this way, a neutral country, without any interest in the affairs of the big and powerful countries, can play an important and irreplaceable part. Its neutrality marks it out, and the task justifies its neutrality.

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