

Current Concerns

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Humanitarian Conviction Is an Inheritance from Dunant's Times

Address by Dr. Jakob Kellenberger, president of the ICRC, at the opening celebration of the Dunant Year 2010 on 8 May 2010 in Heiden, Switzerland

Between 1859 and 1864, extraordinary events took place, in rapid succession. In June 1859, Henry Dunant traveled through upper Italy on his way to a meeting with Napoleon III in business affairs. He should never get there. At Castiglione, where he arrived in the evening of 24 June, he witnessed immeasurable human suffering following one of the bloodiest battles since Waterloo. On 24 June, the battle of Solferino between the French-Sardinian and the Austrian troops had taken place. This battle in the context of the fight for the Italian unification had claimed 6 000 deaths and 40 000 injured people. Unfortunately, it did not remain the bloodiest battle in European history.

In 1862, Henry Dunant published his book "A memory of Solferino" ("Un souvenir de Solferino"). It focuses on the suffering of thousands of hurt and seriously injured military, for whom nobody cared. Reading the book will shake up many readers even today. The Geneva Society for Public Welfare, presided by the later ICRC president Gustav Moynier, assigned a "Committee of Five" to examine the proposals contained in the memories. Members of this committee were Henri Dufour, Gustav Moynier, Louis Appia, Théodore Maunoir and Henry Dunant. The first meeting of this committee on 17 February 1863 is considered to be the founding date of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Its first president was General Guillaume-Henri Dufour, whose order of the day to the Swiss federal army in the short Sonderbund ("separate alliance") war against some federal cantons is an impressive example of this man's moderate and humane attitude. Looking back in history, they certainly wished primarily that no wars would have taken place, and secondly, if wars were inevitable, that the responsible army leaders would have been people of his conviction. The international conference, which met in Geneva from 26 until 29 October 1863, decided in a resolution "each country shall have a Committee whose duty it shall be, in time of war and if the need arises, to assist the Army Medical Services by every means in its power. (Article 1) In peacetime, the Committees and Sections shall take steps "to ensure their real usefulness in time of war" (Art. 4). As a uniform distinctive sign, they shall wear a white armlet with a red cross. (Art. 8) One of Dunant's central proposals had already been realized. The "Württemberg medical association" emerging from the Württemberg charitable society on 12 November 1863 is considered to be the first national Red Cross Society. The desire for neutralization, i.e. taking the societies as well as ambulances and paramedics off from belligerent actions, forged links with the diplomatic conference, which was opened on 8th August on invitation of the Federal council in Geneva.

Dufour referred to the aim of the conference when he opened with the following words, "Nous ne voulons qu'une seule chose: la neutralization des ambulances et du personnel sanitaire entre les belligérants." (We only want one thing: the neutralization of the ambulances and the medical personnel between the belligerent powers). The conference ended on 22 August with the signing of the Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field by 12 countries. The neutralization of the medical services, of their facilities and thus of the wounded and ill soldiers in their care are at the centre of the agreement. The first paragraph of article 1 reads as follows: "Ambulances and military hospitals shall be recognized as neutral, and as such, protected and respected by the belligerents as long as they accommodate wounded and sick." Hospital and ambulance personnel shall have "the benefit of the same neutrality when on duty" (article 2). The first paragraph of article 6 is important for the further development of international humanitarian law, a sentence which seems natural today: "Wounded or sick combatants, to whatever nation they may belong, shall be collected and cared for."

Another concern central to Dunant is embodied in a contract on international law.

The then still young and small ICRC did not wait for the adoption of this convention before it took up its actions on the battlefield. In March 1864, it sent its two first delegates onto a war theater. It was the war between the Prussian-Austrian and the Danish troops over Schleswig-Holstein. The experienced army surgeon Dr. Louis Appia joined the Prussian-Austrian side and the Dutch captain Charles van de Velde the Danish.

Their order was to guarantee compliance with the principles of the conference of 1863. In Corinne Chaponnière's biography the order is described by "faire une enquête sur les ambulances volontaires et d'agir au besoin" (make an inquiry on the voluntary ambulances and act if necessary). Dr. Appia is said to having been the first ICRC delegate who wore the white armlet with the red cross in a conflict area.

"Agir au besoin!" – a good beginning for a few words on the man, who was one of the originators of the two most important conceptions in the conferences mentioned above: the establishment of national aid committees and the neutralization of ambulances and paramedics. Henry Dunant acted spontaneously, immediately helping the wounded and organizing assistance for them, but completely unaware of the human misery that he faced when he arrived at Castiglione.

He also acted by writing down "A Memory of Solferino" with its proposals. The effect of the book was extraordinary and is evidence of the power of a fascinating language in the service of strong and genuine feelings. The effect was also extraordinary, because the man from Geneva was a talented and untiring networker and propagandist of a good cause. It is most impressive to see how in September 1863 he won over the Prussian leadership in Berlin and the French in April 1864 to support his plans. It seems to me, he had a fine feeling for what was possible at his time with utmost commitment as well as what could be seen emerging in the distant future.

Henry Dunant was, as the recently published biography of Corinne Chaponnière shows, a complex personality. Above all, he was someone with the uncompromising will to implement his ideas for the welfare of innumerable people – up to this very day. He also was a man equipped with a sense of foreboding, who looked into the future and, perhaps even stronger, anticipated the future in his feelings. Those who think about European history of the first half of the last century understand his increasing pacifist inclinations, very well. One of his intentions was the adoption of a convention on the improvement of the situation of prisoners of war. A conference, held in Brussels in 1874, was however unsuccessful. It took until 1929 to accomplish such a convention. It justified, however, only a stipulated humanitarian right to take initiative, but no right of access. As early as in the war winter of 1914/1915, ICRC delegates visited prisoners of war for the first time. "Agir au besoin!"

Henry Dunant was a founding member of the ICRC, in which he served as a secretary until 1867, the year of his resignation, forced upon him as consequence of bad business in Algeria. The ICRC was primarily a platform for the spreading of his ideas for him and for the establishing of national aid companies, which was his main objective. He would certainly be very satisfied today if he knew that the most comprehensive humanitarian network emerged from the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement. The national societies play a very important humanitarian and social role in many countries. The Swiss Red Cross is a good example. Some societies are also active beyond national borders. It was not part of his concept that the ICRC, being at the origin of the movement and of the Geneva Convention, would once become one of the largest international humanitarian organizations active in theaters of war with a constant personnel of more than 12 000. This year – and we are only in the month of May – expenditures of more than 1.2 billion Swiss Francs are planned by the approximately 230 agencies. It was the reality of war and the necessity of a humanitarian actor, neutral and independent of all nations, with an increasing ability to accomplish protection and assistance operations under enormous pressure and under precarious security conditions which led to this development.

The readiness for action, merely caused by necessity, and the unyielding commitment for the adherence to humanitarian international law, the clarifying of its terms and its adaptation to the requirements of the time would probably meet with Dunant's approval.

In the meantime, the 10 articles of the first Geneva Conventions have become over 600 articles of the four Geneva Conventions and the three additional protocols. They constitute the so-called nucleus of humanitarian international law. The most recent agreement, in whose development the ICRC had a significant share, will come into force on 1 August: the agreement on the prohibition of the use of cluster munitions.

At this opening ceremony, today, other speakers will go into more detail with respect to the role of Heiden in Henry Dunant's life. Henry Dunant, who left his hometown Geneva for ever at the age of 39, had an eventful and difficult life. However, the increasingly lonely man who felt pursued and feared for the survival of his life's work, has always found people, who supported him in difficult times and who met him with acknowledgement: in Strasbourg, in Stuttgart and in Heiden, where he spent more than a quarter of his life. It was in Heiden, where he, in 1901– equipped with a switchboard – obtained the message of the Nobel peace prize award, together with the French pacifist Frédéric Passy. From Heiden, St. Gallen and Stuttgart his rehabilitation as a founder of the Red Cross took place. An important role therein played the article of the St. Gallen journalist Georg Baumberger published in the Stuttgart magazine "Über Land und Meer" (on country and sea) in August 1895, and the publication on the developing history of the Red Cross and the Geneva Convention, published in Stuttgart in 1897. Its author, Rudolf Mueller, had become acquainted with Henry Dunant as a student in 1877.

Violence, armed conflicts and other forms of violence, have changed fundamentally since Henry Dunant's death. It is no longer the international armed conflicts that are in focus, but the non-international ones.

Asymmetry between conflict parties has increased. Apart from weapons and control procedures, the necessity to develop humanitarian international law concentrates on the non-international armed conflicts today. The rules for the protection of the civilian population and for the command of hostilities are at the center of attention. Violence outside the range of application of humanitarian international law increases, and thus its humanitarian consequences also increase. The importance of the international human rights applicable in war and peace for violent situations has also increased, accordingly. Thus, suspending possibilities are all the more serious, including the fact that – in contrast to humanitarian international law – they do not bind non-national conflict parties, which is the predominant expert opinion.

Urban violence causes more victims in numerous countries every year than most current armed conflicts. The circle of the victims of armed conflicts includes however far more than death tolls and injured people. The circle of those concerned by conflicts also includes refugees and displaced people. They are victims of national conflicts, who lost their base of life; families, who miss their members or who have been torn apart by the conflict; people, who in the context of the conflict lost their freedom.

Armed conflicts and other violent situations are by far not the only causes of humanitarian crises. For understandable reasons, natural catastrophes and epidemics have lately been at the center of attention. However, the humanitarian consequences of armed conflicts remain enormous, we should not allow ourselves to be lulled in a false sense of security due to the decrease of armed conflicts and their often limited intensity. Among the most eagerly discussed so-called megatrends there are those, which have what it takes to produce tensions by aggravating the inequalities and are inclined to end up in riots or armed conflicts.

It is not only from the recent past that we know that the future might bring about things, inconceivable at present, be they good or bad. Humanitarian conviction, accompanied by the readiness to act determinedly, remains as important today as in Dunant's times. I like the way Heiden celebrates this Dunant year. •