
Current Concerns
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The Battle of Solferino and the ICRC – How an Inner Attitude Became a Worldwide Movement

Increasing commitment of international youth

24 June 2009 is the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Solferino, a battle which should enter history like hardly any other military event before. Although not being involved in the battle at all, the Swiss traveler Henry Dunant played a crucial role there. Traveling through Lombardy, Dunant was witness to a dreadful massacre. Affected by the misery of the killed and injured, he took the initiative and founded an organisation, which was later rewarded worldwide and which is hard to imagine to do without today: The International Committee of the Red Cross.

thk. At that time, on 24 June 1859, almost 300,000 soldiers stood face to face on the battleground: Austrian troops on the one side and French troops supported by Sardinian and Piedmont's soldiers on the other. The battle took 15 hours, leaving tens of thousands of dead and wounded on the battleground.

When in the evening of 24 June, the Geneva businessman Henry Dunant arrived in Solferino he was a witness to this human disaster and wrote down what he saw in his book "A Memory of Solferino": "The stillness of the night was broken by groans, by stifled sighs of anguish and suffering. Heart-rending voices kept calling for help. Who could ever describe the agonies of that fearful night!

When the sun came up on the twenty-fifth, it disclosed the most dreadful sights imaginable. Bodies of men and horses covered the battlefield; corpses were strewn over roads, ditches, ravines, thickets and fields; the approaches of Solferino were literally thick with dead."(p. 11)¹

"The International Committee for Relief to the Wounded"

When Henry Dunant returned to Geneva a few days later, he wrote down the strong impressions of his experience in a moving and arousing description. Inspired by the idea that he wanted to draw a conclusion from the dreadful events he published his notes in 1862 and called the book "A Memory of Solferino", already mentioned above. He sent it to prominent personalities in politics and the military and thus launched the initiative, which later led to the establishment of the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded. In order to allow this committee to work unhindered, it needed an international consent, which all countries had to commit themselves to. Due to Henry Dunant's ceaseless efforts, the first Geneva Convention was passed as early as 1864, regulating the treatment of wounded soldiers on the battleground.

As soon as in the French-German War of 1871 the Red Cross was active. Dunant himself traveled to Paris in order to help caring for the injured. Since this time, the Red Cross has had an unrenounceable place in our societies.

Neutrality as a condition for genuine humanity

Neutrality, as Switzerland laid it down in its Constitution of 1848 as the fundamental principle, is also the strict obligation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as the society was called since 1876. For Henry Dunant, this principle had been a conviction in life even before he established his international relief organisation. Helping the wounded and victims of war may not differentiate between friend and enemy, but must always be humanitarian help. In Solferino, this inner attitude attracted the attention of those women, who cared for the wounded together with Dunant. Thus he wrote:

"But the women of Castiglione, seeing that I made no distinction between nationalities, followed my example, showing the same kindness to all these men whose origins were so different, and all of whom were foreigners to them. 'Tutti fratelli', they repeated feelingly. All honour to these compassionate women, to these girls of Castiglione!"

This spirit of neutrality and thus of genuine humanity are the basic concept of the ICRC and provide it with the opportunity of being present in armed conflicts in order to work in the spirit of genuine humanity. The ICRC was intentionally established in Switzerland, since only a neutral state can offer this irrefutable basis.

Above all, we have to be aware of this special meaning of the Red Cross when we point out to its irreplaceable value and remember the Battle of Solferino 150 years ago.

The Swiss Henry Dunant lays the foundation stone for Humanitarian International Law

The International Committee of the Red Cross considerably promoted the emergence and development of Humanitarian International Law in Henry Dunant's tradition and the awareness in people's minds. In the course of the decades, there were a variety of further developments of the Red Cross idea.

90 years ago, after the First World War in 1919, the league of the Red Cross Societies was brought into being, which was renamed into International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1991. The idea was – similar to the League of Nations – the establishment of an organisation that works on the improvement of the health, the prevention of diseases and the

relief of suffering worldwide. In 1864, Turkey signed the Geneva Convention and founded the first national organisation of the Red Crescent in 1868, which in 1929 was awarded the same status as the Red Cross in the sense of the Geneva Convention. The advancement of Humanitarian International Law and the adoption of the Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions can be traced back to the initiative of the ICRC. Exactly 60 years ago, i.e. in 1949, the four Geneva Conventions were adopted and ratified by almost all states on the globe. The conventions form the core of Humanitarian International Law, which offers the fundamental humanitarian guidelines for military conflicts until today.

Enormous commitment of the international youth

The year 2009 thus represents an anniversary year for the Red Cross in many respects: 150 years after the Battle of Solferino, 90 years after the foundation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 80 years of Geneva Convention related to the treatment of prisoners of war, 60 years after the revision and signing of the four Geneva Conventions. For this reason, different events take place, which are particularly intended to open the young generation's minds for the idea of the Red Cross and its humanitarian approach. "Our world - your move" is the motto for different events and celebrations.

The commitment of the youth concerning questions of humanity and international law are also an outcome of the different initiatives of Red Cross and Red Crescent. The numerous events around the 150th anniversary offer opportunities for teachers and lecturers, to directly introduce the learners to this worthy task in order to make a contribution to more humanity and peace into our world. •

¹ The complete book can be downloaded at [www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0361/\\$File/ICRC_002_0361_MEMORY_OF_SOLFERINO.PDF](http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0361/$File/ICRC_002_0361_MEMORY_OF_SOLFERINO.PDF)

Events in Solferino, 23-27 June

On 24 June, 1859, Henry Dunant, a Geneva businessman travelling through Italy, witnessed the horrors of war at the Battle of Solferino. He reached out to help the wounded soldiers, regardless of which side they had fought on, and organised volunteers to provide relief. It was there that the idea of the Red Cross and Red Crescent was born. Dunant suggested that relief societies be established to care for the wounded during wartime – an idea that would lead to the world's largest humanitarian network. A century and a half later, the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement continues to protect and care for the vulnerable in 186 countries worldwide.

From 23 June to 27 June, Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers from more than 150 countries came together, in Solferino, to discuss their vision for tackling today's and tomorrow's humanitarian challenges. The meeting will result in a declaration to be presented to the international community, Swiss officials and the leadership of the Red Cross Red Crescent on 2 July. The Swiss Red Cross is organizing a group of young people who will travel from Solferino to Geneva to present a declaration, outlining their vision of today's humanitarian challenges, to Swiss authorities and representatives of the United Nations and international organisations. A torch-lit procession, following the footsteps of those who took injured soldiers from the battlefield of Solferino to the first medical outpost in Castiglione, concluded the commemorations of Solferino. Thousands of supporters marched under one call to action: Our world. Your move.

Free and open to the public, the open air Humanitarian Boulevard will feature a series of activities and exhibits highlighting disaster response and preparedness, health and safety, and humanitarian values.

Geneva's famous jet d'eau will be lit in red on 24 June. Several key sites related to the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement will also be illuminated during a two week period, including the Hôtel de Ville and Musée Rath.

Source: www.icrc.org

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