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When Jean Henry Dunant received the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901, he was praised for “the supreme humanitarian achievement of the nineteenth century.” This praise was merited, for Dunant had led the creation of both the international Red Cross and the First Geneva Convention. The Red Cross has since saved countless lives and relieved human suffering around the world. The Geneva Convention established that those treating war wounded, wearing a red cross, would not be attacked. With this Convention, Dunant began the creation of international humanitarian law to reduce the suffering caused by war. Despite Dunant’s vital contributions, he has been largely forgotten. This article briefly tells the story of this dedicated humanitarian leader and of his great achievements.

Keywords

Red Cross, Geneva Convention, International Humanitarian Law, Battle of Solferino

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When Jean Henry Dunant received the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901, he was praised for “the supreme humanitarian achievement of the nineteenth century.” This praise was merited, for Dunant had led the creation of both the international Red Cross and the First Geneva Convention. The Red Cross has since saved countless lives and relieved human suffering around the world. The Geneva Convention established that those treating war wounded, wearing a red cross, would not be attacked. With this Convention, Dunant began the creation of international humanitarian law to reduce the suffering caused by war. Despite Dunant’s vital contributions, he has been largely forgotten. This article briefly tells the story of this dedicated humanitarian leader and of his great achievements.

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The Battle of Solferino

The battle of Solferino, fought near the Italian village of the same name on June 24, 1859, was Europe’s bloodiest in more than half a century. Italian and French armies were attempting to push the hated Austrian Empire from northern Italy. By the end of the battle more than 6,000 soldiers were dead and 30,000 lay wounded. *Neither side was prepared to treat the wounded.* The retreating Austrians seized every possible horse and cart, leaving little to move the suffering men from the muddy battlefield to the scarce shelter in nearby villages. The French army had only one doctor for every thousand men and was desperately short of medical supplies. Countless men who may have been saved died slowly in great agony where they fell.

Henry Dunant, a young Swiss businessman from Geneva, had arrived at Solferino shortly before the battle. He had traveled there in an effort to see the French Emperor, Napoleon III, whom he had heard was encamped there with his army. Three years earlier Dunant had begun a corn farming and exports business in Algeria, a colony of France at the time. The colonial authorities in Algeria were unwilling to grant Dunant the water rights for a large plot of land, and he decided to find Napoleon III to appeal to him directly.

Dunant was one of many who arrived to view the battlefield that evening. Upon hearing the cries of the wounded, he quickly organized help. Although only 31

at the time, Dunant was a natural organizer who was able to unite individuals to work together. In addition to his business ventures, a few years earlier he had helped to found the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Geneva. While still in his 20s he had traveled to France, Belgium, and Holland to help start YMCA chapters in these countries, leading the YMCA to become an international organization.

Feeling the suffering at Solferino, Dunant spent the next eight days organizing care for the wounded. He gathered local women and anyone else to make bandages, dress wounds, fetch water, cook food, and transcribe last letters for the dying. He sent his carriage driver to buy food, spending his own money. *Setting a vital precedent*, he persuaded his helpers to treat all the wounded equally, even the despised Austrians. The Austrian wounded initially had been located in a separate area and shunned. When the women nursing the wounded saw Dunant treating the fallen from both sides, many followed his lead. Dunant cried out, *Tutti Fratelli (All Are Brothers)*, borrowing a phrase used by local women. To Dunant, *all the wounded were simply fallen soldiers, no longer enemies.*

A Memory of Solferino

Three years later in October 1862, Dunant published *A Memory of Solferino*, a short memoir of the battle that French historian Ernest Renan has referred to as the greatest work of the century. This little book, now largely

forgotten, had effects as far-reaching as any publication of the century, as it led to the creation of both the *International Red Cross* and the *Geneva Conventions* on war. The first is a volunteer organization, while the second is a body of international law regarding war. Durant learned, however, that both are necessary and had to complement one another if those wounded in war are to receive the treatment they need.

In *Memory*¹, Dunant told first of the battle and then described the unbearable suffering of the wounded. It was this suffering that he hoped would move his readers:

Another wretched man had had part of his face -- nose, lips and chin -- slashed off by a sabre cut. He was unable to speak, and lay, half-blind, making heart-rending signs with his hands and uttering guttural sounds to attract attention. I gave him a drink and poured a little fresh water on his bleeding face. A third, with his skull gaping wide open, was dying, spitting out his brains on the stone floor. . . I was able to shelter him for the last few moments of his life. . . An old sergeant, with several stripes on his sleeve, said to me with the utmost suddenness, with conviction, and with cold bitterness: "If I had been looked after sooner I might have lived, and now by evening I shall be dead!" And by evening he was dead.

Dunant's limited ability to help the wounded added to his personal pain.

The feeling one has of one's utter inadequacy in such extraordinary and solemn circumstances is unspeakable. . . It is, indeed, excessively disturbing to realize that you can never do more than help those before you -- that you must keep waiting men who are calling out and begging you to come.

Thereafter describing the horror, Dunant proposed a course of action:

Would it not be possible, in time of peace and quiet, to form relief societies for the purpose of having care given to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted, and thoroughly qualified volunteers? . . . Since new and more terrible methods of destruction are invented daily. . . the prospect of future wars, the avoidance of which, sooner or later, seems hardly possible; in view of all this, why could not advantage be taken of a time of relative calm and quiet to

investigate and try to solve a question of such immense and worldwide importance, both from the humane and Christian standpoint? . . . The work itself would consist of bringing aid and relief to the battlefield whenever battle was joined, and subsequently to continue to care for the wounded.

Finally, he proposed that European rulers should:

formulate some international principle, sanctioned by a Convention inviolate in character, which, once agreed upon and ratified, might constitute the basis for the relief of the wounded in the different European countries.

Dunant saw little hope that war would be ended in the foreseeable future, but he believed it was possible to reduce the suffering of the wounded. Doing so became his dream and his task.

Dunant's Crusade to Create the Red Cross

Dunant was a child of a devout Calvinist Christian family that had always stressed helping others in need. He had observed his parents help the sick, poor, orphans, and prison parolees. At age 18, following his parents' example, Dunant joined the Geneva Society for Alms Giving, through which he volunteered time to care for the poor and sick. On Sundays he would visit a Geneva prison with reading materials for the prisoners. However, the organization he proposed in *Memory* was not specifically a Christian institution. Rather, he hoped to create an organization to care for the wounded that would be accepted by people of all faiths, by everyone concerned with human suffering.

Dunant personally paid to print the first 1600 copies of *Memory*. He mailed copies to European kings, generals, government ministers, and to many other influential individuals. He hoped that *Memory* would shock these readers and begin movement to organize the relief society he envisioned.

He was not disappointed. Praise for *Memory* and for his proposals quickly poured in from across Europe. Larger second and third printings were produced early in the next year, 1863. In a footnote added to the third edition, Dunant suggested that *the voluntary organization he proposed also could provide relief during peacetime disasters*. This suggestion became, in time, a major part of the Red Cross's work.

In Geneva, in which the Dunant family was well known and respected, *Memory* received its most active reception. In February 1863 Dunant was invited to present his proposal to Geneva's Public Welfare Society,

¹ A *Memory of Solferino* is available online at http://www.icrc.org/WEB/ENG/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/p0361?OpenDocument&style=Custo_Final.4&View=defaultBody2

an organization with members that included many of the city's most influential citizens. Following his presentation, a five-person "International Committee for Relief to the Wounded" (Dunant and four other prominent Geneva citizens) was created to discuss the practicality of such an organization and to begin the preparations for an international conference in order to establish it.

Dunant traveled tirelessly to promote this new organization to care for the wounded. Neglecting his own business, he spent his money and time scurrying about between European capitals to plead for its need. He added, going beyond that which had been agreed upon by the International Committee, that there also was a need for warring armies to recognize medical personnel and medical aid facilities as neutral and to agree not to attack them. This was such a radical new idea that many raised questions: How could medical personnel and aid stations be identified to be protected? And might not hapless medical volunteers come onto the battlefield and interfere with military movements? By proposing this neutrality beyond the mandate of the Committee, Dunant created a rift between himself and Gustave Moynier, the vice-chair of the Committee. Dunant was more an idealist, while Moynier, perhaps more a pragmatist, worried that such a concept was unworkable and might actually undermine the proposed organization. While Dunant eventually won on this issue, the hard feelings between the two unfortunately continued for the rest of their lives.

In one important action, Dunant visited the International Statistical Congress meeting in Berlin, at which many influential individuals participated from across Europe. By this time, his growing fame had led to an invitation to present his ideas at the meeting. He asked the attendees to urge their governments to send representatives to a meeting to be held in Geneva on the establishment of the relief organization. He also sought access to government leaders and pleaded in person for them to send delegates. Each one he convinced made it easier to persuade the next, partly because no European leader wanted to be overshadowed by the others in showing concern for this humanitarian effort. As the king of Saxony told him, "I shall do whatever I can, for I am convinced that any nation that refused to cooperate in this humanitarian movement would be ostracized by European public opinion."²

The conference was held in October 1863. Sixteen governments sent representatives to the meeting that lasted four days. While the agenda was the care of the wounded, that issue also led to complaints about the new dum-dum bullets that expanded when they hit flesh, creating far

worse wounds than those caused by conventional bullets. The implication was that weapons that cause unnecessary suffering should be banned. The Russian representative also proposed that the treatment of prisoners of war should be discussed. No agreements were reached on either of these issues; however, once they had been raised, they did not disappear and in time agreements were reached on both.

The conference ended with an endorsement to form national relief societies for the care of wounded soldiers, with an International Committee in Geneva to coordinate the societies' activities. Four years later in 1867, the title of *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC) was adopted for the coordinating committee, and its title continues today. The conference agreement also stated medical personnel should be regarded as neutrals and protected, volunteers should be used to provide assistance to the wounded, and a white armband with a red cross (the Swiss flag with the colors reversed) should be worn by medical personnel and relief workers to show their neutrality. Finally, the conference attendees agreed a formal diplomatic conference should be held to create an international treaty to guarantee these protections for the wounded and for those treating them.

A First Test of the Red Cross

Before the diplomatic conference could be held, a short war between Prussia and Denmark in early 1864 provided the International Committee with an opportunity to test its ideas and to learn other ways in which it could provide relief in wartime. Ladies' groups were organized in Geneva and in other countries to prepare bandages. The Committee decided to send a representative to each side to urge both armies to respect the neutrality of medical personnel from the opposing side. For the first time, the representatives wore a red cross armband to signify their neutrality and new role.

By being present during this short war, the Committee representatives learned other useful services the relief organization could perform. It could prepare lists of prisoners of war so that a prisoner's nation and family would know his fate.³ They could carry letters from prisoners to the other side to be sent to their families. They could observe whether the prisoners of war were being treated humanely and make public any inhumane treatment. When the Prussians bombarded the town of Sønderborg, the issue arose regarding whether the representatives should report

2 Bernard Gagnebin. *Encounter with Henry Dunant*. Geneva, Switzerland: Librairie de l'Université GEORG & Cie, 1963, pp. 40-41.

3 In this war, however, the Danish commander distrusted the Red Cross representative's motives, perhaps fearing he would share military information with the enemy, and would not allow him to cross to the Prussian side to compile a list.

wartime abuses and atrocities, or focus solely on its mission of caring for the wounded. Dunant wanted to expand the International Committee's mission to include this reporting, but other Committee members, including Moynier, feared that doing so would endanger their standing as neutrals.

The First Geneva Convention

In order to create the necessary international treaty, the Committee asked the Swiss government to host a diplomatic conference. It quickly agreed and the conference was scheduled for Geneva in August 1864. All European nations, including the United States, Mexico, and Brazil, were invited to send representatives. With the American Civil War in progress, the United States did not send a delegation. However, an American official already in Switzerland was asked to attend as an observer. Charles Bowles, an American banker and a member of the Sanitary Commission (which later became the *American Red Cross*), was sympathetic to the aims of the conference and also attended as an unofficial American observer. During the meeting Bowles described the work of the Sanitary Commission and of its volunteers in the American Civil War. A draft treaty had been prepared prior to the conference, and after two weeks of meetings the *Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field*, now known as the First Geneva Convention, was ready.⁴ The Convention required that nations who ratified it recognize the neutrality of ambulances, hospitals, and medical personnel; those who help the wounded were to be "respected and remain free." It required that wounded, "to whatever nation they may belong" be treated. The Convention also required that the wounded who were no longer capable of military service be returned to their home countries. To guarantee their neutrality, hospitals and ambulances were required to display "a distinctive and uniform flag" and medical and evacuation personnel wear an armband; and that both flag and armband should bear a red cross on a white background.⁵

Although Dunant was a principal organizer of the conference, he was not an official delegate and was present

only as an observer. However everyone knew he had been its inspiration and driving force and had spent 50,000 francs of his own money, a huge sum, to promote the conference. Twenty nations ratified the Geneva Convention within two years. Many others did so in the years that followed, including the United States in 1882.

Dunant's Troubles

Despite his immeasurable achievements — creating both the International Committee of the Red Cross and the First Geneva Convention — the remainder of Henry Dunant's life was troubled. His devotion to promoting the Red Cross and Geneva Convention led him to ignore his own businesses. His business in Algeria collapsed, and in 1868 Dunant declared bankruptcy. Still worse, the Geneva Trade Court condemned the company directors, including Dunant, for deceptive practices regarding the bankruptcy. Moynier, now president of the International Committee, insisted that Dunant resign, which he did.⁶ Shortly afterward, he also was forced to resign from the board of the YMCA, which he had helped establish. Disgraced, Dunant left Geneva and never returned. He lived in poverty and with great indebtedness for much of the rest of his life. Living in Paris, and despite his own poverty, he continued to promote humanitarian causes. During the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) he founded the French Welfare Association to provide field dressings for soldiers. He gave a controversial speech urging that the Geneva Convention be expanded to cover the treatment of prisoners of war. The prisoners, Dunant urged, should be assured of adequate shelter, food and clothing, and should be allowed to correspond with their families.

Shortly after that time, poor and broke, he moved to Heiden, a small town in Switzerland, and was no longer a public figure. He lived off assistance provided by his relatives. Dunant spent the last 18 years of his life in a nursing home in Heiden. Having never married, he died in 1910, essentially alone. As he had requested, no funeral was held and no eulogies were read. His ashes were scattered at the Heiden cemetery.

The Growth of the Red Cross Movement

Despite his personal failings and hardships, Dunant's contributions are incalculable. The Red Cross and Geneva Convention, both of which he established, have expanded and shaped the modern world far beyond what Dunant could possibly have hoped for and foreseen. Immediately

⁴ The text of the First Geneva Convention is available online at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/lawofwar/geneva04.htm>.

⁵ Prior to the Geneva Convention, several nations had codes of conduct for combatants. In medieval times, most of these applied only to those of the same faith. In 1863, President Lincoln issued the Lieber Code (formally, *Instructions for the Government of Armies in the Field*) to the Union Army. Written by Francis Lieber, a German-born immigrant, jurist and political scientist who taught at South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina) and Columbia University, the Lieber Code prohibited killing of prisoners of war (except when the survival of the unit was endangered) and called for the well-treatment of civilians and their property in occupied territories, although it provided for stern measures for resistance (imprisonment, destruction of property for those who aided the enemy, and for the execution of guerrillas not fighting in uniform).

⁶ Moynier served as President of the ICRC for 46 years, from 1864 through 1910.

after the Convention, national Red Cross societies began to spring up quickly. The American Red Cross was created in 1881, largely through the work of Clara Barton, who was famous for the nursing care she provided to the wounded during the Civil War. *As of 2016, the Red Cross and related Red Crescent societies can be found in 190 nations.*

In 1876 during a war with Russia, the Ottoman Empire did not want to offend its Muslim soldiers by displaying a cross. As a substitute, it used a Red Crescent (the shape of a new moon with the points to the right). The ICRC asked Russia to respect the Red Crescent as it would the Red Cross, and Russia agreed. When the Geneva Convention was revised in 1929, *the Red Crescent was officially recognized as an alternative to the Red Cross. It is used today by 32 nations with predominantly Muslim populations. Israel, a predominantly Jewish state, has preferred to use neither the Red Cross nor the Red Crescent; rather, it requested that a Red Crystal (the shape of a square sitting on a corner) be added as a third official designation.* In 2005 the Red Crystal was adopted by the ICRC as a third symbol used to designate medical neutrality.

Today, the war-related missions of the ICRC have expanded far beyond its original goal of caring for the wounded. Its main tasks include:

- Monitoring compliance of warring parties with the Geneva Conventions;
- Organizing nursing and care for those wounded on the battlefield;
- Investigating the treatment of prisoners of war;
- Helping with the search for missing persons in an armed conflict (tracing service);
- Organizing protection and care for civil populations; and
- Acting as a neutral intermediary between warring parties in an armed conflict.

In keeping with Dunant's suggestion in his footnote in the third edition of *Memory*, national *Red Cross and Red Crescent* societies regularly provide relief following natural disasters.

Expanding the Provisions of the Geneva Convention

The laws of war created by the first Geneva Convention have been broadened substantially in a series of later international conventions on war. Collectively, *these conventions are referred to as International Humanitarian Law (IHL)*, also often known as the Laws of War or the Laws of Armed Conflict. Acting on concerns raised at the First Geneva Convention, the Hague Convention on the Laws

and Customs of War on Land in 1899 outlawed expanding bullets such as the dum-dum bullets and required humane treatment for prisoners of war.⁷ This convention also required that soldiers who surrender not be harmed, it established the right of the Red Cross to visit prisoners and to investigate their welfare, and it also created international laws for the protection of civilian populations. The bombardment of undefended towns from balloons was forbidden, and the rights and property of civilians in captured territories were to be protected. That same year, the *Adaption to Maritime Warfare of Principles of the Geneva Convention* extended neutrality to hospital ships.

While they share a common purpose of reducing unnecessary suffering during war, a central difference between the Geneva and Hague Conventions is that the Geneva Convention focuses on the victims of war, whereas the Hague Convention addresses the conduct of war.

The Hague Convention outlines the rights and duties of belligerents in the conduct of operations and limits the choice of means of doing harm.⁸ The first Hague Convention, in addition to banning expanding bullets, prohibited the bombardment of unprotected cities from balloons, and was updated in 1907 to include the bombardment of cities "by whatever means," as from airplanes or naval vessels. The Hague Convention of 1907 required also the protection of cultural objects by occupying armies.

The Geneva Convention has been revised four more times, with each revision updating the conditions of the earlier conventions and expanding their legal requirements. In a few important developments, the Second Geneva Convention (1907) applied the principles of the treatment of injured to those wounded at sea or shipwrecked. The Third Convention (1929) detailed requirements on the treatment of prisoners of war. It required that they be registered with the Red Cross; provided adequate food, shelter, and medical care; not be tortured; allowed to send and receive mail; and allowed to receive food parcels. Subsequent to World War II, the Fourth Convention (1949) expanded upon the protection and treatment of civilians under enemy occupation; it effectively merged the Hague and Geneva Conventions. In 1977 a protocol was added to extend the provisions of the Geneva Convention to civil wars within a nation.

Today, 195 nations, almost every nation on earth, a party to the Geneva Convention (which is now the

⁷ The Russian government had assembled an international conference in St. Petersburg in 1868 that adopted the Declaration Renouncing the Use, in Time of War, of Explosive Projectiles Under 400 Grammes Weight (e.g., exploding bullets). Russia called for the Hague meeting in 1899, although the meeting was hosted by the Dutch government.

⁸ Pictet, J. (1985). *Development and principles of International Humanitarian Law*, 2. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.

Fourth Convention). The 1977 protocol has been ratified by 163 nations as well.

Beyond the Geneva and Hague Conventions, International Humanitarian Law includes several treaties that outlaw specific weapons.

- The *Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects* (1980) consists of five protocols that (I) prohibit weapons that produce non-detectable fragments; (II) restrict, but not eliminate, the uses of mines and booby-traps; (III) prohibit attaching civilians with incendiary weapons; (IV) prohibit blinding laser weapons; and (V) require the warring parties to clear unexploded ordnance at the end of hostilities.
- The *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of AntiPersonnel Mines and on their Destruction* (1997), also call for the *Ottawa Treaty* and the *Mine Ban Treaty*, completely bans all antipersonnel landmines.
- The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000), an amendment to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), forbids enlistment of anyone under the age of 18 for armed conflict.
- The *Convention on Cluster Munitions* (2008) prohibits the use of bombs that scatter submunitions or "bomblets."

The laws regarding the conduct of war, in a movement begun by Henry Dunant, have become the standard for all humanity. Of course, they have been broken repeatedly since the First Convention was adopted in 1864, and the newer, specific treaties have not yet been adopted by many nations. On the other hand, the laws of war also have saved the lives of perhaps millions of enemy wounded and prisoners. While many cities were massively bombarded during World War II in clear violation of the convention, countless civilians have survived, have been protected, and have been treated well due to the civilian protections required by the convention.

Dunant's Honors

Dunant received the first Nobel Peace Prize, awarded in 1901, for his founding of the International Red Cross movement.⁹ When the Nobel Committee notified Dunant that he would be receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, it stated:

There is no man who more deserves this honour, for it was you, forty years ago, who set on foot the international organization for the relief of the wounded on the battlefield. Without you, the Red Cross, the supreme humanitarian achievement of the nineteenth century, would probably have never been undertaken.

The prize money, 104,000 Swiss Francs, was placed in a Norwegian Bank. Dunant never spent any of it during his lifetime. Dunant willed some of the money to the nursing home where he had stayed to provide care for a poor person of the region who otherwise could not afford care. He left money to charities in Norway and Switzerland, and other funds went to pay some of his long-standing debts.

The ICRC has designated Henry Dunant's birthday, May 8th, as the official day to celebrate the Red Cross movement. Every two years the ICRC awards the Henry Dunant Medal, its highest honor, for outstanding services and acts of great devotion, principally of international significance, to the cause of the Red Cross [and Red Crescent]. The nursing home in Heiden, where he lived during the years before his death, is now the Henry Dunant Museum.

For further information:

A number of biographies of Henry Dunant have been written in English, French, and German. Two English-language biographies are: Libby, V. K. (1964). *Henry Dunant: Prophet of peace*. New York, NY: Pageant Press, Inc.

Morehead, C. (1998). *Dunant's dream: War, Switzerland, and the history of the Red Cross*. London, England: HarperCollins.

See also:

Gagnebin, *Encounter with Henry Dunant*. Geneva, Switzerland: Librairie de l'Université GEORG & Cie, (Translated into English from the French Edition).

⁹ However, to highlight both the need to reduce suffering in war and to end war, the prize that year also was given to Frédéric Passy, a leading French pacifist.