

Preface

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Preface**

Zeitschrift: **Annual report / International Committee of the Red Cross**

Band (Jahr): - **(1947-1948)**

PDF erstellt am: **11.07.2024**

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PREFACE

The XVIIth International Red Cross Conference, held at Stockholm from August 20 to 30, 1948, considered a General Report, as on June 30, 1947, which the International Committee of the Red Cross¹ submitted on its work during the Second World War and the two years after the Armistice.

The present Report deals with the following period of eighteen months, from June 30, 1947, to December 31, 1948.

Although hostilities had ceased, the legacy of the War and the outbreak of fresh conflicts obliged the ICRC to continue with unabated vigour. It goes without saying that this work conformed to the principles and methods enunciated once more before the Stockholm Conference, and which we recall briefly in what follows.

The first paragraph of Article 6 of the Geneva Convention of August 22, 1864, expresses a principle of high moral significance and the consequences of its adoption were to be far-reaching :

Wounded or sick combatants shall be collected and cared for without distinction of nationality.

This fundamental principle was to be expanded and developed in the later Conventions.

The principle of absolute impartiality is not less important than actual aid. Assistance is for all, even the enemy. Whatever antagonisms may exist—even to the most violent form represented by war between States—the rule of respect for the human persons remain.

¹ To save space, the International Committee will be referred to under the initials "ICRC".

Since the Red Cross was founded, the extent and importance of duties assumed by the National Societies and the ICRC have gone far beyond the original aims and limits. Such development was essential for the National Societies, if they were to become active and effective agencies, giving in each country the services expected of them.

The primary duty of the ICRC is to act in time of war as a neutral intermediary between belligerent Powers. Serving in this way the victims of wars, it has not the obligations each National Society bears towards its own country. Hence, impartiality is for the ICRC a vital principle, which can only be applied if based on a policy of strict neutrality and a complete independence of other organisations, whether national, supra-national, political, social, or religious. It implies at the same time a willingness to give service to all, without distinction.

We have mentioned humanitarian activities and the role of neutral intermediary ; the ICRC is also responsible for maintaining the fundamental principles of the Red Cross, dealing with complaints about alleged violations of the Geneva Conventions, and examining questions whose study by a neutral agency appears desirable. It must take the initiative, when necessary, if existing rules of international law prove deficient. From the beginning, its work was not based either on municipal or international law, but on the single principle of respect for the human person. At all times it must seek to come to the assistance of the victims of war, or conflicts which resemble war, even when—as in the case of civil disturbances—International Law should fail. Hence the amount of work devoted in the months which preceded the XVIIth International Red Cross Conference, to the elaboration of a Draft “Convention for the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War”. Evidence of the need for a Convention of this nature had been tragically supplied, and the Red Cross Societies meeting at Stockholm readily approved the Draft and recommended its adoption by Governments.

Humanitarian principles will be the better observed in war-time, if in time of peace they have been consciously accepted in men’s minds. Red Cross organisations should therefore constantly proclaim the ideal which informs their work; they should also inculcate in the young by every means—and particularly in co-operation with international associations devoting themselves to education—the ideal that man, following the best traditions of our civilisation, should be humanity’s servant.

From a consideration of the developments within the ICRC, its constant relationship with other Red Cross bodies and its part in the development of International Law, we shall pass to a review of the work which arose out of the War, and in particular, the tasks originating from the prolonged captivity or detention of large numbers of prisoners and civilian internees. The work of the Central Prisoners of War Agency will thus have particular attention. The Report will finally tell how the ICRC reacted to fresh conflicts during the period under review, in Indo-China, Indonesia, India, Paraguay, Greece and Palestine.
