

The Red Cross as a power

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THE RED CROSS AS A POWER (From the "Swiss Review of World Affairs")

We have become accustomed to the thought that since the end of the second World War only two really big powers are left — the United States of America and the Soviet Union. To be a big power today, a country must be a world power. And in this group only two countries remain, because they alone possess all the modern technological means required for the purposes both of war and of peace in our time. In addition to the two world powers, to be sure, there are still a number of powers that can properly be referred to as "big" in terms of area, population, economic potential or cultural influence. But they lack, and in all probability will continue to lack, the attributes which mark the world or super-powers today.

We are witnessing a process in which old-established powers are dropping down to second place even while new supra-national or inter-state powers are moving up to first place. Their influence, indeed their existence, is not based on the usual or traditional criteria or big powers, but on the fact that they embody certain moral and legal principles, and on their capacity to control or direct relations between states.

Foremost in this category is the United Nations or world security organization with all its specialized agencies. Despite its shortcomings it has grown to such importance that today's community of nations is hardly any longer conceivable without it.

As a second power of this type we may consider the Red Cross a large complex of national and international organizations, all oriented toward a common aim. Far less in the spotlight than any of the powerful states, and commanding much less attention than the big supra-national power in New York, the Red Cross yet represents an organization which one can no longer imagine absent from the world scene.

The precariously contained danger of local or general wars in different parts of the world, the frequency of conflicts bordering on civil war, the ever-present possibility of catastrophes of a military or civilian nature which as a result of the latest scientific and technological developments may assume tremendous proportions, as well as the all-too-frequent violation of human rights, call for measures designed to preserve humaneness and to mobilize all possible preventive and constructive forces.

In the past hundred years the most successful efforts on behalf of the protection of man against the danger which for the most part he himself has created have been made in that area of international law, organizations and activities which are summarized under the title of "the Red Cross." A further increase of these efforts is imperative today. Undoubtedly strong impulses in this direction will result from the world-wide observation of the centennial of the Red Cross in 1963.

Two different fields of activity belong to this "fourth big power," the Red Cross. The first is the creation of rules in international law which bind governments and armies to certain minimum standards of humaneness in warfare. They are contained primarily in the Geneva

Conventions; primarily responsible for the formulation of these Conventions — whose force rests on their being signed and ratified by the governments — is the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. This Committee also is charged with supervising the application of the Conventions on the international level even while the individual governments remain immediately responsible. The Committee must see to it that in every case all victims of war get all the protection possible under the rules of the Conventions. The International Committee discharges its task by way of negotiation, agreements with the immediately involved military and civilian authorities, and by the delegation of representatives who defend the Red Cross principle "Inter Arma Caritas" in the field, often at the risk of their lives.

The second major field of Red Cross activities is the organization, direction and equipment of auxiliary forces which in the event of war or catastrophe will aid the injured and sick and all those exposed to some danger. This field is entrusted primarily to the National Red Cross societies — or the Red Crescent or Red Lion societies, as they are called in some countries — which in their turn are organized in the League of the Red Cross Societies. The International Committee however is also engaged directly in various relief projects.

One illustration of the activity of the International Committee in an area of inter-state relations is the tremendous job it is doing in handling communications between individual persons in time of war or catastrophe. Gathering and passing on information on prisoners of war and missing persons, as well as messages to and from prisoners, is the world-wide task of the Central Tracing Service. Well known to millions during the war under the name Central Agency for Prisoners of War, it is less frequently heard of today, in time of peace. Yet it continues its work without interruption, having long since extended its efforts to civilian persons, especially refugees.

Red Cross care of prisoners of war and political prisoners has received much publicity. Less known outside the circle of the governments and armies involved is the tireless work carried on on behalf of the future development of that part of international law that is sometimes referred to as the "Red Cross Law." Unlike certain other parts of international law it has been realized to a large extent because a special organization — the International Committee — watches over its application. New rules are generally agreed upon at the Red Cross Conferences that meet every fourth year and that are attended by government delegates and representatives of the various organizations of the Red Cross. The next such conference — the 20th — will meet in Geneva during 1963.

How a national Red Cross Society works may be illustrated by the example of the Swiss Red Cross Society. Other national societies are discharging similar tasks, certain marginal activities always being distributed among government departments, military authorities and the private Red Cross organization. The Swiss Red Cross Society looks after the recruiting and training of hospital personnel for the event of catastrophes, epidemics and war, and after the organization of special groups for specialized tasks. It is also charged with the organization of the blood donor system for the armed forces and the civilian population, and with the development of scientific research in this field.