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Henry Dunant's Vision and the Power of Humanity

by

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Abstract

During one of his many business trips in 1859, Henry Dunant, a Swiss businessman, came to witness the aftermath of *The Battle of Solferino*, one of the bloodiest battles of the early nineteenth century since the "Battle of the Nations" near Leipzig in 1813. Dunant was shocked as soldiers on both sides of the conflict lay injured and dying on the field. Henry petitioned the local people to help with the wounded, insisting that both friend and foe be attended to.

After the days of Solferino, Henry went on to write a book in 1862 titled, *A memory of Solferino*. For the first time in history, Henry brought attention to the idea of non-discriminately caring for and treating wounded soldiers and civilians in times of armed conflict. Henry's vision led to the formation of a committee of five in Geneva in 1863 known as the first international conference of the Red Cross.

In 1864, invited by the Swiss Government and inspired by Henry's vision, diplomats from twelve different nations met in Geneva, where they agreed on the "*Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field*". This agreement was the first treaty of international humanitarian law. The Geneva Conventions have been ratified by 194 countries to date and, along with the *Hague Conventions*, form the bases for the "laws of war".

In addition, the Red Cross has now grown into a universal movement, which comprises the *International Committee of the Red Cross*, more than a 180 National Societies and *The Societies' World Federation*, the *League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*. Their combined mission is to follow Henry Dunant's humanitarianism to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity.

Using some of the appropriate resources, the relevant background and long term importance of Henry Dunant's vision will be examined.

Introduction

The power of an idea can never truly be discovered until it is put into motion. This was the case for Henry Dunant (1828-1910) in 1859. Henry witnessed unnecessary suffering during the aftermath of the *Battle of Solferino* between the troops of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Franco-Sardinian Alliance, which led him to the idea of creating a neutral organization to prevent the suffering of future victims of war. This paper seeks to trace Henry Dunant's vision to point to the significance of the power of humanity today.

Henry Dunant was born on May 8th, 1828, in Geneva, Switzerland (Nobel, 2008). Henry came from a long line of wealthy Swiss families; his father, Jean-Jacques Dunant, a successful merchant and superintendent of an orphanage and a supervisor of prisons; his mother, Anne-Antoinette, the daughter of a City Councilor and Mayor of Avully in the Rhône Valley (Moorehead, 1999). His mother was also involved in educating Henry and instilling in him deep religious convictions and high moral principles. Early in his life, Henry was involved in various charitable activities such as being a member of the League of Alms providing spiritual and material comfort to the sick and poor, as well as a regular visitor to the prison to reform transgressors of the law. He was also involved greatly in the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and in the movement to unite Christians and Jews (Dunant, 1862). By the age of 26, Henry had followed in his father's footsteps and become a businessman accepting an offer to replace Baron Philippe de Gingins-la-Sarraz (1731-1783) as head of the *Compagnie Genève des Colonnes de Sétif*, a financial and industrial company in Algeria (Moorehead, 1999). By imperial decree from the French government, he was given a concession of 50,000 acres in North Africa to promote colonization. However, he proposed to raise money to grow corn and build a mill with part of this land which was not approved, and his contract was ultimately terminated (ibidem). This did not deter Henry and he decided to go into business for himself. Needing to obtain water rights for his business, he decided to discuss this endeavor with Emperor Napoleon III. of France (1808-1873), who was in charge of the land at that time. Henry set off to visit Napoleon's headquarters near Solferino, Italy; it was this decision that changed the course of his life forever.

The Battlefield of Solferino

In 1859, Austrian armies were occupying parts of Northern Italy in a struggle to silence the Italian independence movement. However, Emperor Napoleon III believed that by supporting the liberation of Northern Italy he could gain a valuable ally in Central-Europe and, on May 3rd, he declared war on Austria (Moorehead, 1999). On June 23rd, the Austrians were on the retreat just outside of Solferino when, by accident, they came across the Franco-Sardinian Army. The clash that ensued was one of the bloodiest battles of the early 19th century. By coincidence, it was on June 24th, 1859, that Henry Dunant arrived to witness the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino. He had never laid eyes on a battlefield before and what he saw shocked him. He noted that "*whole battalions were left without food,*" "*the thirst was so terrible that men fell to drinking from muddy pools whose water was foul and filled with curdled blood*" (Dunant, 1862). He claimed "*it took three days and three nights to bury the dead on the battlefield [. . .] the birds of prey will have no pity for those hands and feet when they protrude*" (ibidem). However, it was the living that occupied the thoughts of Dunant the most. "*Certainly, I was a tourist, but a tourist much concerned with questions about humanity*" (Moorehead, 1999). People were paying the survivors very little attention.

The majority of wounded soldiers went to nearby Castiglione. "*The crowding in Castiglione became something unspeakable. The town was completely transformed into a vast impoverished hospital for French and Austrians*" (Dunant, 1862)." Over 10,000 men filled the hospitals, churches, monasteries, and barracks with nothing but hay to sleep on and some were even left in the streets and courtyards with only a canvas draped over their heads to protect them from the sun (ibidem). Henry noticed that most army doctors had left for Cavriana, Italy and there was a shortage of medical orderlies. Henry gathered a group of local women organizing them into teams to bring fresh food

and water to the wounded and to dress their wounds. He directed small boys to fetch water in buckets from fountains and, by June 27th, he dispatched his coach to nearby Brescia to buy lemons, chamomile, sugar, shirts, consommé, sponges, cigars, pins, and tobacco for the wounded soldiers (Moorehead, 1999). Medical shortages led Henry to ask “*would it not be possible, in times 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?*” (Dunant, 1862).

Dunant never did have a meeting with Napoleon III., but instead he returned to Geneva to transform his vision into a reality. Three years later, in October of 1862, he published his memoirs in a book entitled, “*A Memory of Solferino.*” Less than a year after the publication, his book obtained great accolades for Henry’s brutally honest recollection of the events at Solferino. He was invited to discuss his ideas at a Public Welfare Society meeting on February 9th, 1863, in Geneva (Moorehead, 1999) and told his audience that he

was not simply sending volunteer nurses to the battlefield, but the improvement of methods of transporting the wounded as well as the care of soldiers in hospital . . . He dreamed of having a permanent committee . . . to draw up a covenant, signed by all civilized powers, which would agree to adhere to some basic code of behaviour in wartime.

(Moorehead, 1999).

The Creation of the Red Cross

A working party of five was established including Dunant and four others: Guillaume-Henri Dufour (1787-1875), a Swiss Army General, Gustave Moynier (1826-1910), a lawyer, Dr. Louis Appia (1818-1898), a German-born field surgeon, and the Swiss surgeon Dr. Théodore Maunoir (1806-1869), from the *Geneva Hygiene and Health Commission*. As a tribute to Switzerland, the group adopted the reverse Swiss flag as its symbol of protection and assistance. This committee of five went on to create the *International Committee of the Red Cross* by creating the fundamental principles of humanitarianism and health care provision, based on “Humanity,” “Impartiality,” “Neutrality,” “Independence,” “Voluntary Service,” “Unity,” and “Universality”.

Also, along with the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Henry’s committee of five organized and helped design what has presently become known as the Geneva Conventions.

In October, 1863, the *Swiss Federal Council*, by request of Henry’s committee of five, held an international conference as a gateway to developing measures to improve the medical services provided in times of armed conflict. Although this conference did not produce results, it was attended by eighteen official delegates from national governments across Europe, six delegates from non-Governmental Organizations, and seven others, indicating a great interest in this area.

In August of 1864, the Swiss Government again, invited governments of all European countries, as well as Brazil, Mexico, and the United States of America to attend; this time, an official ambassadorial convention. Sixteen countries sent a total of twenty-six diplomats to Geneva for the convention and on August 22nd, it adopted the “*Geneva*

Convention for Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field." The ten articles outlined in this treaty – for the first time – established the legally binding rules pledging protection of wounded soldiers and field medical personnel in times of armed conflict (Parry, 2003).

Today, wars are fought under similar laws; however, the Geneva Conventions have since been expanded and improved. In 1868, the Swiss Federal Council held a further assembly to adopt "*Additional Articles relating to the Condition of the Wounded in War*" (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2008). In June, 1906, a second official Geneva Convention was organized by the Swiss Federal Council and attended by 35 national diplomats with the view of revising the initial Convention of 1864 (ICRC). On July 5th, 1906, based on the proposals submitted by the International Committee of the Red Cross and *The Hague Peace Conference Report* of 1899, the assembly signed an updated *Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field* (ICRC, 2008). With 33 articles separated into eight chapters, the Geneva Convention of 1906 was more detailed and more precise. New requirements were added and, for the first time in history, the voluntary aid societies were explicitly recognized. Conversely, requirements which had proved to be impracticable were changed, such as the freedom of the inhabitants to attend to the wounded (ibidem).

In 1929, the Swiss Federal Council invited the convention to meet again. At this meeting, the assembly made further revisions to the existing convention and added the *Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War* (ibidem).

In April 1949, the assembly met once more to ratify the present-day Geneva conventions. There are four distinct treaties. The first is The Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field, a continuation from the initial Convention in 1864; the second is *The Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea*, adopted from The Hague Peace Conference of 1899 as an extension of the first convention; the third is the *Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*; and the fourth is the *Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War*, adapted from the Tokyo Convention of 1934. These four treaties set the standards for international humanitarian law (ICRC, 2008).

Of note is that The Geneva Conventions are humanitarian laws which are chiefly concerned with the treatment of non-combatants of armed conflict, and in no way outline the use of weapons which is covered by the Hague Convention of 1899 and 1907. Humanitarian law set out specific rules regarding protection and assistance to precise categories of vulnerable people (civilians, the sick and wounded, and those deprived of freedom) in situations of armed conflict ([MSF], 2000).

It is important to realize that human rights laws are not the same as humanitarian laws. Human Rights Laws are the general principles for the treatment of individuals by governments. These rights are often limited in periods of conflict and accord no specific rights to humanitarian agencies (MSF).

Today, the traditional humanitarian principles first outlined by Henry Dunant's committee of five, are decomposing at a disturbing rate (Parry, 2003). These humanitarian

principles which were “[...] *intended to guide activities of humanitarian agencies and to mark them out as a distinct form of intervention, solely to reduce suffering and protect life in conflict*” (Leader, 1998) are being manipulated based on political or military agendas. In the last twenty years, since the Cold War, the world has seen a trend of politicization of the humanitarian movement (Parry, 2003). However, humanitarian action cannot substitute for political action but must remain a separate entity. On March 9th, 2000, in Geneva, Jacques Forster, Vice President of the ICRC, presented at the Ninth Annual Seminar on International Humanitarian Law and stated,

humanitarian action is designed not to resolve conflicts but to protect human dignity and save lives ... it must be clearly dissociated from political and military measures the international community may take in search for conflict resolution.

(MSF, 2000).

Foster makes this statement well aware of how humanitarian aid is being withheld in situations where the aiding organization disproves of the political agenda of another party, and how aid is being provided to gain political ground.

It is a difficult task, however, to keep humanitarian agencies independent and impartial because many, if not most, humanitarian agencies rely heavily on large government grants (Sogge, 1996). Providing money to an organization usually requires the organization to behave or act in a certain way or else the funding will be cut off. If one were to study where and to what extent humanitarian spending is provided, it can be seen that spending does not simply follow an ethical geography of who requires need the most but, as well, pursues a political geography of political priorities (Parry, 2003).

Concluding Remarks

This leads us to the questions, what is humanitarianism, and what power does it have today? The military mission in Afghanistan has been portrayed as a “humanitarian” mission, primarily due to the contrary belief that other cultures, such as the Taliban, do not consider human rights, or are involved more in drug trafficking or the toleration of terrorists (Parry, 2003). But when someone says humanity, do you say invasion? When someone says aid, do you say apartheid? The broad use of human rights violations as justification for a humanitarian invasion of a state is one of humanitarianism’s most controversial issues. So-called humanitarian interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia all relied on the protection of human rights as primary grounds for military action (ibidem), but never did Henry Dunant mention “military action” in his principles of humanitarianism. As mentioned earlier, humanitarian law is not the same as human rights laws.

Although human rights violations should be aggressively denounced, humanitarian agencies must adhere to their principles and register their complaints with those who are in a position to make such statements.

It is due to the specific provisions of the Geneva Conventions that humanitarian agencies are able to remain independent and impartial with respect to governments (MSF, 2000). Based on humanitarian law, humanitarian agencies are able to demand access to victims, claim control over the distribution of relief, and enter a country’s territory without prior consent in order to bring medical relief to the wounded and the sick

(MSF). In no way does this mean political involvement in solving human rights issues. The initial goal of humanitarianism was to provide care “to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers” (Dunant, 1862). The humanitarianism should be left to the humanitarians and the politics to the politicians.

Ultimately, Henry Dunant witnessed unnecessary suffering during the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino that led him to the idea of creating a neutral organization to prevent the suffering of future victims of war, but would Henry approve of the humanitarian movement today?

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