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GENEVA AND THE RED CROSS

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“Slaves to no lord”

Aeschylus, *The Persians*

line 242

The Red Cross was born in Geneva, and it is in Geneva that one can find the headquarters of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's international institutions: the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Geneva has also been the venue of most of the International Conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent as well as the diplomatic conferences that adopted the Geneva Conventions for the Protection of War Victims, which form the basis of Red Cross action to help the victims of conflict.¹

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¹ As has been common usage for over a hundred years, the expression “*International Red Cross*” or simply “*Red Cross*” will be used to refer to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, particularly when reference is made to periods when these terms were the only terms used.

It is therefore legitimate to examine the relationship between the Red Cross and Geneva, particularly since that relationship is complex. That is the purpose of the present study.

It was purely by chance, while travelling on a business trip, that Henry Dunant found himself in the vicinity of Solferino on the evening of 24 June 1859, when one of the bloodiest battles of the nineteenth century came to an end; and it was that journey that led to the founding of the Red Cross and its establishment in Geneva.²

One might therefore be tempted to conclude that the link between the Red Cross and Geneva arose merely by chance.

² The history of the founding of the Red Cross is well known, and there is extensive literature on the subject. The following personal accounts and other works are of particular interest: J. Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino*, English version provided by the American Red Cross, reprinted by the ICRC courtesy of the American Red Cross, ICRC, Geneva, 1986, 147 pages (original French edition: *Un Souvenir de Solférino*, Imprimerie Jules-Guillaume Fick, Geneva, 1862); Henry Dunant, *Mémoires*, text compiled and presented by Bernard Gagnebin, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, and Éditions L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1971, in particular pp. 32-121; Alexis François, *Le Berceau de la Croix-Rouge*, Librairie A. Jullien, Geneva, and Librairie Édouard Champion, Paris, 1918; Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: From Solferino to Tsushima*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1985, pp. 7-121; François Bugnion, "La fondation de la Croix-Rouge et la première Convention de Genève", in Roger Durand (ed., with the collaboration of Jean-Daniel Candaux), *De l'utopie à la réalité : Actes du Colloque Henry Dunant tenu à Genève au palais de l'Athénée et à la chapelle de l'Oratoire les 3, 4 et 5 mai 1985*, Henry Dunant Society, Geneva, 1988, pp. 191-223; François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, ICRC, Geneva and MacMillan, Oxford, October 2003, pp. 1-28. The following may be consulted on relations between the International Committee of the Red Cross and Switzerland: François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, pp. 989-1005.

However, just as Bergson taught us that disorder does not exist but that what we refer to as disorder is merely an order different from the one we are expecting,³ so we know that chance is often merely the result of another causality than the one we had in mind.

The question then arises whether in the history and traditions of Geneva or in the collective mentality of that city there were particular circumstances explaining why the Red Cross idea took root there rather than elsewhere.

Let us not pretend that our distant ancestors were of a more humanitarian turn of mind than their contemporaries. There is nothing to suggest that that was the case. The way the inhabitants of Geneva treated the prisoners captured on the night (still celebrated in Geneva) when invaders from Savoy attempted to take the city by surprise clearly indicates that they were no better than other men of their time.

So if one seeks a specific feature in the geography or history of Geneva which would have prepared the city for its role as the “cradle of the Red Cross”, as Professor Alexis François,⁴ the first historian to study its origins, put it, one must turn elsewhere.

Geneva entered history by its bridge: “The furthest Allobroge town, and the nearest to the territories of the Helvetians, is Geneva” wrote Caesar. “A bridge connects it to Helvetia”.⁵

³ Henri Bergson, *La Pensée et le Mouvant*, in *Oeuvres*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1970 (Édition du Centenaire), pp. 1251-1482.

⁴ Alexis François, *Le Berceau de la Croix-Rouge*, Librairie Alexandre Jullien, Geneva, and Librairie Édouard Champion, Paris, 1918.

⁵ “*Extremum oppidum Allobrogum proximumque Helvetiorum finibus est Genua. Ex eo oppido pons ad Helvetios pertinet.*” Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, Translated by WA

Pure chance, once again, but how can one ignore the symbolic significance of this passage in the *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*? The first mention of the town in a document that has been handed down to us was due to the bridge which spanned the Rhone at the town gates.⁶ Geneva was a border settlement between *la Narbonnaise* (Gallia Narbonensis), which had been a Roman province for 60 years, and Helvetia, but also a trading city at the furthestmost boundary of the Roman world, in daily contact with independent Gaul (Gallia Comata) and the Celtic world.⁷

The features Geneva developed in five centuries of Roman rule were to mark the history of the city for more than a millennium.

The reign of Augustus saw the construction of several roads that converged towards Geneva: the road which ran along the left bank of the Rhone and intersected in Carouge – “*Quadrivium*”, “*the crossroads*”, on the outskirts of the city – with the Little Saint Bernard Road, which linked Cisalpine Gaul to Gaul north of the Alps. Geneva’s Roman forum – on the site of today’s Bourg-de-Four square – was also at the end of the Great Saint Bernard Road, which ran through the Aosta Valley, the Lower Valais and Chablais regions, linking Geneva with Milan and Rome. From Bourg-de-Four the Roman road ran through the “*oppidum*” in Geneva, along the present-day rue de l’Hôtel de Ville

McDevitte and WS Bohn, Book 1, Chapter 6, The Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Caesar/gallic.html>

⁶ Pierre Broise, “Un demi-millénaire de romanité”, in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de Genève*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, and Éditions Payot, Lausanne, 1974, pp. 35-62, *ad* pp. 35-36.

⁷ Ibid.

and Grand-Rue to the Rhone bridge and the road that runs along the Jura foothills, leading to Augst (near Basel) and Strasbourg.⁸

Thus, as far back as the days of antiquity, Geneva was an important staging post on one of the main continental trade routes, the road from the Rhone to the Rhine which linked the Mediterranean world – realm of the glittering Greco-Latin civilization – with the Frankish and Germanic world, which was seething with unrest.⁹ Geneva owes its long-standing status as a commercial centre to Roman domination. The invasions and upheavals which followed the collapse of the Roman Empire never interrupted the trade route linking northern Europe to the Mediterranean world through the Rhone and the Rhine, with Geneva as one of its principal links.¹⁰

This role of trading city was confirmed in the Middle Ages, particularly with the development of trade fairs. Italian, French, German and Flemish merchants gathered for these 10-day events held four times a year: at Epiphany, Easter, the Feast of Saint Peter's Chains (1 August) and All Saints' Day.¹¹ Fabrics and spices were the main items traded, but already in the fifteenth century the trading was coupled with major banking activity. The Medicis, the leading bankers of the day, opened a branch in Geneva.¹² Although Geneva was a trading centre, however, it would be a mistake to believe that the Genevan merchants became famous through long-distance trade – that was not the case.

⁸ Pierre Broise, “Un demi-millénaire de romanité”, pp. 37 and 47-48; André Oltramare, “Genève romaine”, in Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie, *Histoire de Genève*, vol. I, *Des Origines à 1798*, Éditions Alexandre Jullien, Geneva, 1951, pp. 33-45, *ad* p. 38.

⁹ Pierre Broise, *op. cit.*, pp. 48 et 61.

¹⁰ Louis Binz, “Le Moyen-Age genevois”, in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de Genève*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, and Éditions Payot, Lausanne, 1974, pp. 63-128, *ad* pp. 67 et 73.

¹¹ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89, 97 and 103-104.

¹² Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

On the other hand, the city-state was the home of large foreign communities. Tax registers tell us that those who paid most heavily in the mid fifteenth century were Giovanni Benci and Francesco Sassetti, the Florentine directors of the Geneva branch of the Medici Bank, followed by the Genoese Barnabé Giustiniani and Geronimo Grimaldi.¹³ In short, by the end of the Middle Ages, Geneva was already remarkable for its openness and cosmopolitanism.

The prestige of the Geneva fairs was sufficiently dazzling to arouse the jealousy of Louis XI, who coveted this source of prosperity and tax revenue. Anxious to rebuild France's economy, which had been drained by the 100 Years War, and to develop the Lyon fairs, which were suffering from the proximity of their Genevan rivals, the *insatiable araigne* ("the insatiable spider"), as he has unflatteringly been called, issued an edict in 1462 forbidding both foreign and French merchants to attend the Geneva fairs.¹⁴ This was a hard blow for the town, even though the German and Swiss merchants soon took over from the French and Italians who deserted its fairs.¹⁵ The Swiss thus came to realize the strategic importance of the city-state at the end of the lake which commanded the western access to the Swiss plateau.¹⁶

The expanding trade also fostered the emergence of local government,¹⁷ a development not confined to Geneva. Throughout late mediaeval Europe, the burgeoning cities gradually emancipated themselves, striving to slip out of the bondage of the feudal lords. In Geneva, the battle had to be fought on two

¹³ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-111.

¹⁴ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.

¹⁵ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

¹⁶ William E. Monter, "De l'évêché à la Rome protestante", in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de Genève*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, and Éditions Payot, Lausanne, 1974, pp. 129-183, *ad* pp. 129-130.

¹⁷ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

fronts: against the prince-bishop, but also the counts of Geneva, and then against the House of Savoy, which inherited all the rights of the counts of Geneva, whose line became extinct in 1401.

Initially the burghers were able to take advantage of the rivalry between the count and the prelate. Then the odds shifted to the ecclesiast with the Accord of Seyssel (1124) between Count Aimon I and Bishop Humbert de Grammont, by which the count acknowledged the bishop's supremacy and relinquished to him the government of the city-state.¹⁸ Forty years later, in 1162, Emperor Frederick of Hohenstaufen – Frederick Barbarossa – proclaimed Geneva's independence within the Germanic Holy Roman Empire. The primacy of the prince-bishop, who was immediately responsible to the Emperor, was thus unequivocally recognized.¹⁹ The imperial eagle, which together with the key of Saint Peter (Geneva's patron saint) adorns the Geneva coat of arms, testified to that immediacy. The bishop thus emerged victorious but was soon confronted with his none-too-faithful subjects' desire for emancipation.

For the bishop – much more a temporal sovereign than a spiritual leader – saw his authority challenged by the citizens' demands. In 1309, Bishop Aimon de Quart recognized the municipal institutions.²⁰ Eighty years later, on 23 May 1387, his successor, Bishop Adhémar Fabri, ratified the charter of the “customs, laws, franchises and freedoms of the noble and distinguished city of Geneva”.²¹ He recognized the rights of the citizens, which amounted to so many restrictions on the power he claimed he derived from God.

¹⁸ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹⁹ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-87.

²⁰ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

²¹ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

But a far more serious threat was already looming at the city's gates.

Completing its conquest of Vaud (in 1265) and then of the Bresse region (in 1272) and by acquiring the territory of Gex, Faucigny, the Genevois area and the county of Nice, the House of Savoy had carved out a vast domain – almost a kingdom – extending from the Saône to Ticino and from the Jura mountains to the Mediterranean.²² Geneva had thus become an enclave entirely surrounded by the lands of the House of Savoy. The counts (and subsequently the dukes) of Savoy whose court was cramped in Thonon or the neighbouring castle of Ripaille, dreamed of making Geneva the capital of their lands on this side of the Alps. After all, was it not the most important city in the region, indeed its natural centre? Was it not from its geographical situation at the tip of Lake Geneva, at the confluence of the Arve and Rhone rivers, that the town derived that status of regional capital?²³

The struggle proved ruthless and persisted over three centuries. Fortune often seemed to favour the House of Savoy. In 1401, Odon de Villars, the last Count of Geneva, relinquished all of his rights in the Genevois region, including the Bourg-de-Four Castle and the Island Castle in the heart of the city, to Amadeus VIII of Savoy for 45,000 gold francs and the cession of the domain of Chateaufort en Valromey.²⁴ In 1416, noting the new power of the House of

²² Henri Baud, “L'essor territorial et l'organisation de l'État”, in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de la Savoie*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, 1988, pp. 163-202, in particular pp. 163-170 and 192-196.

²³ “It was a historical necessity for Savoy to possess Geneva. Economically, Geneva was the natural centre of the entire region of northern Savoy. Militarily, it was the key to Vaud. Without Geneva, there was neither prosperity nor security for that part of the states of Savoy. Motivated by interests greater than the desires of any individual, the dukes of Savoy had always sought to tighten their grip on Geneva and, amid the general decay of feudalism, were aiming to achieve actual territorial sovereignty.” William Martin, *Histoire de la Suisse, Essai sur la formation d'une Confédération d'États*, 4th edition, Librairie Payot, Lausanne, 1959, p. 110.

²⁴ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 103; Henri Grandjean, “De la Féodalité à la Communauté”, in Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie, *Histoire de Genève*, vol. I, *Des Origines à 1798*, pp.

Savoy, which had become firmly established on both sides of the Alps and was in control of all the transalpine routes between Léman and the Mediterranean, Emperor Sigismond made the county of Savoy a duchy.²⁵ Finally, in 1444, Pope Felix V, who was none other than the former Duke of Savoy, Amadeus VIII, appointed himself Bishop of Geneva.²⁶ The bishopric of Geneva thus also became part of the patrimony of the House of Savoy, and all of the prince-bishops henceforth appointed were either members or liegemen of that dynasty.²⁷

That was virtually the end of the city-state's independence as it became a protectorate of Savoy for a time.²⁸ By the end of the fifteenth century, moreover, the wave of emancipation of cities was receding.²⁹ Virtually all cities agreed to become integrated into larger entities as regional capitals, the consequence of geography, developing trade and the forming of new kingdoms on the ruins of the feudal system.

On two occasions the duke seemed to be on the point of succeeding, the first time by intimidation when, at the "Council of Halberds" on 10 December 1525, Duke Charles III burst into Geneva with his men-at-arms, summoned the General Council, and demanded under threat that the burghers refrain from forming any alliance with the Swiss, that they respect the bishop's privileges and

91-135, *ad pp.* 134-135; Henri Baud, "Apogée et décadence du duché de Savoie", in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de la Savoie*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, 1988, pp. 203-229, *ad pp.* 204-205.

²⁵ Henri Baud, "Apogée et décadence ...", p. 205.

²⁶ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 115; Henri Baud, "Apogée et décadence ...", p. 207.

²⁷ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 116; Henri Baud, "Apogée et décadence ...", p. 219.

²⁸ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 117; William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 129; Henri Baud, "Apogée et décadence ...", p. 219.

²⁹ Louis Binz, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

grant the Duke of Savoy the right to supervise the election of the *syndics*.³⁰ On the second occasion his grandson Charles-Emmanuel came very close to capturing the city by guile in the famous night of the “Escalade” on 12 December 1602: his troops had already climbed over the ramparts and begun to infiltrate the city (and the duke had sent couriers to announce his victory) when the alert was raised in Geneva and its citizens swung into action to repel the invaders – an event celebrated to this day in the city every year.³¹

There is no need to relate the details of the struggle which went on for three centuries between the city-state and the House of Savoy. Suffice it to say that Geneva consistently rejected the regional role which seemed to be its natural calling given its geographical situation and the ambitions of the dukes of Savoy, preferring instead to retreat within its walls, raze all buildings around it to deny attackers cover, and obstinately cultivate the character of a city-state even while Europe was forming itself into large kingdoms.³² In this struggle to win back and then safeguard its independence in the face of an infinitely more powerful neighbour which hemmed it in on all sides, Geneva benefited from the wisdom of a group of courageous, clear-sighted and determined citizens. It also enjoyed the support of the Swiss cantons, especially Fribourg and Bern, which were well aware of the strategic importance of a city that commanded the western access to the Swiss Plateau and the road to France, and of the urgent need to prevent it from falling into the hands of a regional power such as Savoy.³³

³⁰ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 131; Henri Baud, “Apogée et décadence ...”, p. 219.

³¹ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-166; Roger Devos, “Un siècle en mutation”, in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de la Savoie*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, 1988, pp. 231-286, in particular pp. 246-247.

³² William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

³³ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 131. Mercenary service was one of the main sources of employment in the Swiss cantons, and the king of France was one of the mercenaries’ chief employers. The road to France thus constituted a vital artery for the Swiss, as well as a line of communication of prime strategic importance for the French.

In 1526, Geneva concluded the first “combourgeoisie” (common burgherhood) treaty with Bern and Fribourg, which was ratified by the General Council despite opposition from Bishop Pierre de la Baume.³⁴ In 1533, the bishop left the city – never to return.³⁵ In 1536, Bernese troops occupied the Vaud country, the Chablais region, Gex and Geneva.³⁶ Finally, on 25 May 1536, the General Council embraced the Reformation.³⁷

Under Calvin's influence Geneva became the capital and outpost of the Reformation.³⁸ As the centre of theological thought and teaching and of the dissemination of the new Protestant faith, the city provided considerable support for the Reformed churches in France, Piedmont, Scotland, Prussia and Bohemia.³⁹ Within a few years, as a result of the influx of refugees – many of whom were from the intellectual and cultural elite in France, driven out by persecution, massacres and then the religious wars – Geneva became a focus of humanism and a leading intellectual centre exerting influence throughout Reformed Europe and, through the Presbyterian church, even on the British colonies in America.⁴⁰

During the same period, Catholicism grew further entrenched in Savoy, which became one of the staunchest bastions of the Counter-Reformation through its

³⁴ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.

³⁵ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

³⁶ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-135. In 1528 Bern embraced the Reformation, which its troops proceeded to spread in the territories they conquered.

³⁷ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

³⁸ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

³⁹ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-151.

⁴⁰ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-174 and 180-182.

alliance with Spain and the Holy See and under the influence of prominent locals such as Saint Francis de Sales.⁴¹

Geneva had inherited two traits from its mediaeval period that foreshadowed its status as the international city we know today: cosmopolitanism and openness to the outside world. The struggle for independence, the Reformation and its role as protestant refuge strengthened these characteristics, adding a specific trait to the history of Geneva: resistance against the tug of regional gravity and the resulting need to defend itself near-continuously against a formidable enemy which enjoyed the support of Spain, the leading military power of the day. For almost two centuries the city remained an enclave in the territory of a powerful neighbour that desired its ruin and, from 1536 onwards, the destruction of the Reformed faith, which gave the city its identity. Lumbered as Geneva was by a system of fortifications requiring constant reinforcement and ruinous maintenance,⁴² and having decided – the only city in Europe to do so – to raze all its suburbs and indeed any building beyond its walls in the surrounding area, in order to deprive potential invaders of cover,⁴³ it was only through its distant alliances that the city was able to survive in the face of a hostile immediate environment. These were first and foremost the Swiss cantons, which were to prove the most reliable source of support, then the Reformed states of Germany, the Netherlands, England and Scotland, and even the kings of France, who, despite their implacable hatred of that "supposedly reformed religion", sought to ensure at all costs that Geneva, the “key to the Swiss cantons”, would not fall into the hands of the House of Savoy, the unconditional ally of Spain and the

⁴¹ Roger Devos, “Un siècle en mutation”, pp. 231-234 and 260-278.

⁴² William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁴³ Ibid.

House of Austria.⁴⁴ If Geneva was to safeguard its independence, identity and faith, it had no choice but to bank on alliance with distant powers.⁴⁵ It was thus the hostility of the Duke of Savoy that charted its destiny as an international city.

And, finally, Calvinism gave Geneva the conviction that faith would eventually triumph over force and the drive to disseminate the new evangelical message. The influence of the city of Calvin was admittedly limited to the religious sphere, but in that respect its range was that of a large metropolis, stretching to all of Reformed Europe:⁴⁶ its Academy trained the ministers of the Reformed churches in France and Piedmont, the Netherlands, the Protestant states of Germany, and Scotland. French refugees gave a dazzling boost to development in the printing trade, endowing Calvinism with a tremendous tool for proselytism and evangelization, and which, through Calvin's writings, also helped initiate a new flowering of the French language.⁴⁷ Bibles in vernacular languages, psalters and theological works were exported by the thousand quite

⁴⁴ It was Pomponne de Bellièvre, Henri III's ambassador to the Swiss cantons, who coined the expression "clé des Suisses" to describe Geneva. It meant both "the key to the Swiss cantons" and "the key to the Swiss mercenaries". He was the main mover behind the Treaty of Solothurn of 1579, which contained clauses to protect Geneva against the designs of the Duke of Savoy. See William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

⁴⁵ The names of several of Geneva's streets still testify to these distant alliances. The rue de Hesse, for instance, is a reminder of the construction of a bastion in 1606 to cover the "Rive" city gate on the lake side. It was called the Hesse bastion in recognition of a donation of 10,000 crowns by Landgrave Maurice of Hesse-Cassel. Similarly, the rue and place de Hollande are on the site of the former "Holland" bastion, which was built in 1662 thanks to a donation of 75,000 florins from the States-General of Holland to cover the "Corraterie" curtain (Jean-Paul Galland, *Dictionnaire des rues de Genève*, second edition, Promoédition S.A., Geneva, 1983, pp. 70-71).

⁴⁶ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-151.

⁴⁷ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-178. When seeking refuge in Geneva, several renowned printers, notably Robert Estienne, the court typographer, brought their presses, tools and printing type with them (Olivier Reverdin, "Figures de l'hellénisme à Genève", in *Homère chez Calvin, Figures de l'hellénisme à Genève*, Association Hellas et Roma and Librairie Droz, Geneva, 2000, pp. 27-101).

openly to Reformed countries and were smuggled to the rest of Europe. The writings of Calvin and his successors set the conceptual framework for Protestant thought while proposing a system for organizing Church and State that was modelled on what the reformer had tried to impose on his city of adoption. Lastly, in its capacity as Protestant refuge, Geneva was at the heart of a network of family alliances which extended over half of Europe.⁴⁸

The political hostility between Geneva and the House of Savoy was thus coupled with a war of religion. It was a hostility between Geneva and the dukes – but not the people – of Savoy that persisted for centuries. It was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that Geneva saw the Savoy threat fade and disappear over the horizon. Having resolutely focused its ambitions on Italy, the House of Savoy abandoned the idea of making Geneva the capital of its states on the north side of the Alps. So Geneva was at last able to open up to its hinterland, while remaining faithful to its international role. Its scholars, businessmen and bankers forged a network of contacts extending throughout Europe, from Saint Petersburg to Portugal and from Scotland to the Kingdom of Naples.⁴⁹

Voltaire lived in Geneva for 18 years, first in his residence “les Délices” and then a stone’s throw away from the city in Ferney, where he held court, entertaining Madame d’Epinay and Jean d’Alembert, who was amused by what he called the “Republic of the Bees” and who wrote the article on Geneva in the

⁴⁸ William E. Monter, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-174 and 180-182.

⁴⁹ Anne-Marie Piuz, “La Genève des Lumières”, in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de Genève*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, and Éditions Payot, Lausanne, 1974, pp. 225-254, in particular pp. 244-253; Cléopâtre Montandon, *Le développement de la science à Genève aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles*, Éditions Delta, Vevey, 1975; Jacques Trembley (ed.), *Les savants genevois dans l’Europe intellectuelle du XVIIe au milieu du XIXe siècle*, Éditions du Journal de Genève, Geneva, 1987.

Encyclopédie,⁵⁰ as well as many other illustrious thinkers of his time. Rousseau, who prided himself on the title of “Citizen of Geneva”, proposed a political ideal – democracy – modelled on the institutions of his native city, or rather on those he dreamt of for it.⁵¹

During the Revolution and later under Napoleon, Geneva had no choice but to exercise, for a brief period, the regional position pushed on the city by its geography but which it had so far obstinately refused to accept. Annexed by France, reduced to the rank of prefecture of the Department of Léman, Geneva governed the entire area comprising – in addition to what had been its own territory when it was a republic – the Gex country, which had been detached from the Ain department, and former parts of Savoy: the Genevois area, Faucigny as far as Bonneville, Cluses and Taninges, and the Chablais region. Whereas the Republic of Geneva had had a population of no more than 35,000, that of the department exceeded 200,000.⁵²

Needless to say, Geneva drew no satisfaction from this status of prefecture, which reduced it to the same rank as a hundred middle-size French provincial

⁵⁰ “In the eyes of the philosopher the Republic of the Bees is no less interesting than the history of great empires. It may be that the model of a perfect political administration can be found only in small states.” Jean d’Alembert, “Geneva”, article in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert*, <http://www.hti.umich.edu/d/did/> (first French edition in 1757).

⁵¹ Paul Chaponnière, “Les Sciences, les Lettres et les Arts au XVIIIe siècle”, in Société d’Histoire et d’Archéologie, *Histoire de Genève*, vol. I, *Des Origines à 1798*, Éditions Alexandre Jullien, Geneva, 1951, pp. 483-494, in particular pp. 488-491; Anne-Marie Piuz, *op. cit.*, pp. 244-253; Robert de Traz, *L’esprit de Genève*, Éditions L’Age d’Homme, Lausanne, 1995, pp. 27-32 and 37 (original edition: Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1929).

⁵² Paul Guichonnet and Paul Weber, “Révolution et Restauration”, in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de Genève*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, and Éditions Payot, Lausanne, 1974, pp. 255-299, in particular pp. 264-274; Édouard Chapuisat, “Le Département du Léman”, in Société d’Histoire et d’Archéologie, *Histoire de Genève*, vol. II, *De 1798 à 1931*, Éditions Alexandre Jullien, Geneva, 1956, pp. 3-28, *ad* pp. 5 and 9.

towns, none of which could boast influence comparable to its own. It therefore soon rejected this role. Napoleon was to regard Geneva with an air of suspicion as a city “where people spoke English too well” and which prided itself on hosting so many of his enemies.⁵³ The Revolution and the reign of Napoleon were a dark period in the history of Geneva. Deprived of its main markets, its trade ruined by the Continental System, the city was crushed by taxes, bled dry by successive levies.⁵⁴

As soon as the French garrison left – on 30 December 1813 – a group of enlightened citizens restored the Republic’s independence.⁵⁵ Would Geneva seize this opportunity to assume regional dominance peacefully by responding to the overtures of the Prussians and Austrians, who wanted to grant the city vast territories in order to make it a reliable stronghold through which French expansionism could be contained?⁵⁶ Nothing of the sort. Enjoined to choose between the role of regional metropolis which the victorious Allies seemed to be planning for the city, but which would involve integrating a large number of Catholic communities and thus losing its Protestant identity, and the re-establishment of a city-state confined within its walls but enlightening Europe with its religion and faith, Geneva scarcely hesitated.⁵⁷ For fear of absorbing too many Catholic villages, it abandoned the idea of expanding to its natural borders, contenting itself with the infinitely more modest plan of annexing land which had been part of the feudal estates of Saint Victor's Convent and the Cathedral Chapter since the Middle Ages: le Mandement, Jussy, and Genthod, supplemented by the acquisition of a narrow strip of land which linked the city

⁵³ Paul Guichonnet and Paul Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 270-272.

⁵⁴ Paul Guichonnet and Paul Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-274.

⁵⁵ Paul Guichonnet and Paul Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 274-277.

⁵⁶ Paul Guichonnet and Paul Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

⁵⁷ Paul Guichonnet and Paul Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 275-285.

to Switzerland through Versoix.⁵⁸ For Geneva would henceforth ensure its safety by entering in the Swiss federal alliance as a full member.⁵⁹

When Savoy was attached to France in 1860 as a result of the Italian War, this sealed the failure of the project to give Geneva a regional role. It remained the administrative centre of a tiny canton almost entirely surrounded by the territory of its powerful neighbour.⁶⁰ It was the same Italian campaign, however, which marked the birth of the Red Cross and of its establishment in Geneva, thus launching the city's new role as an international centre.



This all too rapid survey of the history of Geneva brings us back to the question raised at the beginning. Was it purely by chance that it was in Geneva that the Red Cross was created in 1863? Or was there something in the history of the city which would explain why that institution took root in Geneva rather than elsewhere?

This question raises a further issue laden with threat to the modesty of authentic Genevans (of which I am not one, by the way). Were there any features in the history of Geneva which distinguish it from those of other cities with

⁵⁸ Paul Guichonnet and Paul Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-284.

⁵⁹ Paul Guichonnet and Paul Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 277-278.

⁶⁰ Jean-Claude Favez and Claude Raffestin, "De la Genève radicale à la cité internationale", in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de Genève*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, and Éditions Payot, Lausanne, 1974, pp. 299-385, *ad p.* 305; Paul Guichonnet, "De la restauration à l'annexion", in Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire de la Savoie*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, 1988, pp. 361-404, in particular pp. 391-397.

populations of a similar size? Undoubtedly. Of course every city has its own specific calling of which it is justifiably proud, but it is relatively easy to find similarities amongst these countless different characters. The first is the city's drive to control and expand its hinterland. Geneva's character is quite different. With the exception of the brief revolutionary interlude when the city lost its independence,⁶¹ the unifying thread in its history is its rejection of the status of regional capital and, given the hostility of its powerful neighbour, its need to ensure its safety through alliances with states in a position to hold its immediate neighbour in check. It was the mentality of a city imprisoned within its own walls – walls endlessly, excruciatingly made taller and stronger – the mentality of a city-state that offset the hostility of its immediate environment with a vision that saw its security in distant alliances, looking not only beyond the city ramparts but far beyond the mountains surrounding it on all sides. Geneva was a city of merchants, bankers and scholars, which Calvin was to make the religious and intellectual capital of Reformed Europe, but whose ramparts isolated it from its immediate environment – a Venice with no Adriatic, no hinterland and no empire.⁶²

⁶¹ It is also worth mentioning the first Kingdom of Burgundy, of which Geneva was briefly – for a generation – the first capital, from 443 to 470. The capital was transferred to Lyon in 470, and the Kingdom disappeared in 534 when it was absorbed by the Frankish monarchy.

⁶² “ ‘There are five continents and then there is Geneva!’ Talleyrand's joke aptly describes the singular character of what is perhaps the most original of the metropolises of Europe. In terms of international influence, Geneva, the physically cramped city-state devoid of the territorial scope, demographic strength and material force that are the stuff of great nations, was much more the product of history than of geography. [...] It did not evolve along the classic lines of the major European cities, which gathered lands and ruled over regional territories. Quite the contrary: from the Reformation onwards, it was urban withdrawal within walls, forced separation from the immediate environment, that compelled the city to forego the functions of economic capital of northern Savoy that it had exercised hitherto, in order to respond to the call of wider horizons, both in thought and in trade. For it was a continental, and then global, outlook that was always the *raison d'être*, the very essence of its many activities. Devout in religion, shrewd in commerce, charitable, pedagogically adept, this 'cavern of gentlemen', as Stendhal called Geneva, thus became the 'Crossroads of Nations', from mediaeval fairs to international diplomatic conferences. *Post tenebras lux*, its motto proclaims. Besieged,

Geneva also inherited Calvinism's unwavering evangelism. To be a Genevan was not only to be the citizen of a city with an exceptional calling, but also to be the trustee of a truth and to have the mission of propagating it. As the city of refuge, Geneva became the centre of the preaching, teaching and propagation of the new Protestant faith. Within a few years, the printing activity imported by the first scholars who took refuge there became the city's leading industry, handing Calvinism an excellent propaganda tool. Whether or not he would acknowledge the fact, Henry Dunant – the tireless preacher of the new truth revealed to him on the battlefield of Solferino – was a true heir of Calvin.

Finally, the Reformation left Geneva convinced of “inalienable human dignity” as the consequence of God's alliance with creation,⁶³ as well as of the superiority of appealing to reason, to free will and to the responsibility of the individual over submission to dogma and to hierarchical authority. God addressed each individual in his or her own language, and all had equal access to His revelation.

The Enlightenment and the writings of the most illustrious of its sons taught Geneva that the State is there to serve civil society and that the government has only the authority given to it by, and for the well-being of, its citizens.

This limitation of the power of the State also applies to the conduct of war, and it is Rousseau who clearly established the principle underlying the law of war:

threatened, subjugated, it has always succeeded in overcoming the crises which have punctuated its history in an often dramatic succession of bright and dark periods.” Paul Guichonnet, *Histoire de Genève*, “Introduction”, pp. 5-6.

⁶³ Robert de Traz, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

“War is not [...] a relationship between man and man, but between State and State, in which individuals become enemies only by accident, not as men, nor even as citizens, but as soldiers; not even as members of their own nation, but as its defenders [...]. The purpose of war being to destroy the enemy State, its defenders may rightfully be killed so long as they are carrying arms; but as soon as they lay them down and surrender, ceasing to be enemies or agents of the enemy, they become simply men again, and there is no longer any right over their lives.”⁶⁴

It would of course be easy to point out that, following the example of Paris, Geneva had the executioner burn *Emile* and *The Social Contract* in public, and a warrant was issued for their author's arrest if he was found on the territory of the Republic.⁶⁵ This did not prevent Rousseau's ideas from penetrating the fabric of his native city and the collective mentality.

When Dunant published *A Memory of Solferino*, exactly a century after the public burning of *Emile* and *The Social Contract*, Geneva had long made peace with the author of *Confessions*, and was proud to claim his legacy.⁶⁶

By joining the Confederation, Geneva joined Swiss neutrality, guaranteed by the Treaties of Vienna and Paris, which ended the Napoleonic Wars.⁶⁷ That

⁶⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, translated by Christopher Betts, Oxford University Press (The World's Classics), Oxford and New York, 1994, Book I, chapter IV, pp. 51-52 (original French edition, *Du Contrat social*, 1762).

⁶⁵ Jean-Pierre Ferrier, “Le XVIII^e siècle - Politique intérieure et extérieure”, in Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie, *Histoire de Genève*, vol. II, *De 1798 à 1931*, Éditions Alexandre Jullien, Geneva, 1956, pp. 401-482, in particular pp. 446-450.

⁶⁶ In 1828, a fund was launched to mark the 50th anniversary of the great philosopher's death with a view to erecting a monument to his memory in his native city, which had treated him so shamefully. The monument was the work of Genevan sculptor James Pradier and was inaugurated in 1835 on the Ile des Barques, an island at the tip of the lake which was renamed Ile Rousseau.

neutrality, which has been constantly respected ever since, was a fundamental precondition for the neutrality of the Red Cross and of the role of neutral intermediary that fell to the founding Red Cross institution, the International Committee of the Red Cross.

And lastly, from the nineteenth century and the influence of the Great Awakening, the Reformed pietist movement that had a considerable hold over the City of Calvin, Geneva drew humanitarian conscience and the conviction that the salvation of the individual inevitably involved love of one's fellow human being and charity for the destitute.⁶⁸ As a movement of renewal for the Protestant faith, but also a movement of solidarity which corresponded with the emergence of social awareness at a time when the employer-employee relationship was perhaps at its harshest, the Great Awakening brought awareness of the suffering of the poor, the dispossessed, the outcast.

Henry Dunant was born on 8 May 1828 into a patrician family deeply marked by the dual influence of the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening.⁶⁹ In his *Memoirs* Dunant relates how as a child he discovered the suffering of others on a visit with his parents to the Toulon penal colony “with its convicts shackled and too often badly treated”.⁷⁰ As a young man he belonged to the Société des

⁶⁷ “...*Swiss neutrality and inviolability, and its independence from any foreign influence are in the true interests of the policy of the whole of Europe*” proclaimed the Act for the Recognition and Guarantee of the Neutrality of Switzerland, Annex to the Treaty of Paris of 20 November 1815, Clive Parry (ed.), *The Consolidated Treaty Series*, Oceana Publications, New York, vol. 65, pp. 299-300.

⁶⁸ Jean-Claude Favez and Claude Raffestin, *op. cit.*, pp. 292-293.

⁶⁹ “Dunant's humanitarian calling is to be explained both by Calvin and by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is inconceivable without the Reformation and without Rousseau's declaration of the man's right to freedom, equality and sovereignty.” Bernard Gagnebin (ed.), *Genève, Textes et prétextes*, H.-L. Mermod, Lausanne, 1946, p. 11.

⁷⁰ Henry Dunant, *Mémoires*, Text compiled and presented by Bernard Gagnebin, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, and Éditions L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1971, p. 28.

Aumônes, a local charity, and visited “his poor” and “his prisoners”.⁷¹ “So you can see that I looked after the peace-wounded long before I looked after the war-wounded”, he wrote.⁷² As a member of the Société évangélique he founded the Union chrétienne de Genève and was for two years in charge of the external relations of the new association. In this capacity, he established contacts with more than 150 other associations with similar aims in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain and even the United States. Last but not least, Dunant was one of the founders of the World Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations, which brought together 38 associations in eight different countries and which foreshadowed the creation of the Red Cross.⁷³

It was also the Great Awakening which led to the creation, in this same year 1828, of the Geneva Public Welfare Society, which set itself the primary objective of improving institutions for relieving, reducing and preventing poverty,⁷⁴ and in which Dunant was to find initial support.⁷⁵ For, impressed with the proposals Dunant put forward in the final pages of *A Memory of Solferino* to

⁷¹ Henry Dunant, *Mémoires*, pp. 24 and 27-28; Alexis François, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁷² Quoted by Gabriel Mützenber, *Henry Dunant, Le prédestiné*, Henry Dunant Society, Geneva, 1984, p. 108. Similarly (and referring to himself in the third person), Dunant wrote: “... he had begun by looking after those wounded by life in peacetime long before he looked after those wounded in war”, Henry Dunant, *Mémoires*, p. 27.

⁷³ Henry Dunant, *Mémoires*, pp. 24-25; Alexis François, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-17; Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: From Solferino to Tsushima*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1985, pp. 9-11; Gabriel Mützenber, *Henry Dunant, Le prédestiné*, pp. 105-155; Guy Le Comte, “Henry Dunant, fondateur de l'Union chrétienne de Genève”, in Roger Durand (ed., with the collaboration of Jean-Daniel Candaux), *De l'utopie à la réalité : Actes du Colloque Henry Dunant tenu à Genève au palais de l'Athénée et à la chapelle de l'Oratoire les 3, 4 et 5 mai 1985*, Henry Dunant Society, Geneva, 1988, pp. 139-151.

⁷⁴ Bernard Lescaze, *Pauvres et bourgeois à Genève, La Société genevoise d'Utilité publique en son temps, 1828-1978, Contribution à l'histoire économique et sociale de Genève*, Société genevoise d'Utilité publique, Geneva, 1978, in particular pp. 12-13 and 19-23.

⁷⁵ Henry Dunant, *Mémoires*, pp. 65-71; Jean-Claude Favez and Claude Raffestin, *op. cit.*, pp. 293 and 309; Bernard Lescaze, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-81.

create societies for the relief of wounded soldiers and to adopt a convention protecting the wounded and those who assist them, the Society set up a five-member committee to implement those proposals. That committee, which soon became known as the International Committee of the Red Cross, led to the creation of the National Red Cross Societies and to the adoption of the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field of 22 August 1864.⁷⁶

Two members of the Geneva Public Welfare Society deserve special mention since they were to become founders of the International Committee and play a leading role in the nascent institution.

First, Gustave Moynier, a young lawyer who had married into a wealthy family, thus freeing him from the need to earn a living, took over management of the Society at the age of 31 and soon gave it new impetus. Cosmopolitan in outlook, he discovered opportunities for international cooperation in the field of social action while attending an international charity conference. From then on it was the international perspectives rather than local projects which appealed to him and mobilized his energy.⁷⁷

And second, General Guillaume-Henri Dufour, the former commander-in-chief of the Swiss army, who enjoyed an aura of prestige for having brought the last conflict fought by Switzerland – in 1847, a civil war known as the Sonderbund

⁷⁶ Henry Dunant, *Mémoires*, pp. 65-71; Gustave Moynier, *La Croix-Rouge, Son Passé et son Avenir*, Sandoz et Thuillier, Paris, 1882, pp. 12-18; C. Lueder, *La Convention de Genève au point de vue historique, critique et dogmatique*, translated from the German by the International Committee of the Red Cross, Erlangen, Édouard Besold, 1876, pp. 48-58; Alexis François, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-115; Pierre Boissier, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-75; François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, pp. 6-28.

⁷⁷ Jean de Senarclens, *Gustave Moynier, Le bâtisseur*, Éditions Slatkine, Geneva, December 2000, pp. 69-83.

War – successfully to an end in the space of only three weeks.⁷⁸ He was universally respected, even by his former enemies, for the humanity with which he led the campaign, limiting losses to the absolute minimum, preventing excesses, and treating the victims with consideration, thus laying the foundations for reconciliation. As much as for his lightning victory, which demonstrated his qualities as a strategist and protected Switzerland from intervention by the Great Powers, he was respected for the orders he gave his troops before launching the campaign:

“Soldiers, you must emerge from this struggle not only victorious but blameless. [...] Therefore I place under your care children and women, old people and ministers of religion. Anyone who lays a hand on innocent people dishonours himself and defiles his flag. Prisoners, and above all, the wounded deserve your respect and your compassion, the more so as you have often found yourselves with them in the same camps.”⁷⁹

On the eve of the campaign he sent his division commanders his “recommendations on the conduct to be followed in respect of the population and the troops”:

⁷⁸ In December 1845, political and religious differences between cantons led the seven Catholic cantons of Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwald, Zug, Fribourg and Valais to conclude a separate alliance (the “Sonderbund”), but the Federal Parliament, which brought together all the Swiss cantons, considered that this alliance contravened Switzerland’s confederal covenant and pronounced its dissolution. Refusing to submit, the Catholic cantons withdrew from the Parliament, whereupon the latter ordered armed intervention (on 4 December 1847) and appointed Guillaume-Henri Dufour to command the federal forces. The campaign was brought to an end 26 days later before the Great Powers had had time to intervene.

⁷⁹ Guillaume-Henri Dufour, “Proclamation to the Army”, 5 November 1847 (extracts), quoted in Olivier Reverdin, *La guerre du Sonderbund vue par le Général Dufour, Juin 1847 - avril 1848*, Éditions du Journal de Genève, Geneva, 1948, pp. 42-43.

“If a body of the enemy is repulsed, give to the wounded the same care as you give to your own; treat them with all the forbearance due to one who is stricken [...]. Disarm the prisoners, but refrain from any hurt and from reproach [...]. After the battle restrain the fury of your troops; spare the vanquished. Nothing bestows greater honour on a victorious army and, in a civil war, nothing can give greater encouragement to the opposing forces to submit. To act in a contrary manner can only exasperate our opponents and push them to the extreme limits of resistance. However strong we are, the despair of the enemy must be feared.”⁸⁰

Dufour was to have no reservations about using the tremendous prestige he enjoyed well beyond Switzerland's borders in behalf of the International Committee of the Red Cross, which he headed during the first few, and decisive, months of its existence. Gustave Moynier succeeded him as ICRC President in 1864 and remained in office until his death in 1910.

Thus, each century prepared and enriched the ground in which would germinate the seed that Henry Dunant was to sow on his return from Solferino. That the resulting flower blossomed beyond all expectations shows that the seed fell on soil that was ready to receive it.

⁸⁰ Guillaume-Henri Dufour, “Recommendations on the conduct to be followed in respect of the population and the troops”, 4 November 1847 (extracts), quoted in Olivier Reverdin, *La guerre du Sonderbund vue par le Général Dufour, Juin 1847 - avril 1848*, pp. 43-44; Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: From Solferino to Tsushima*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1985, p. 52. Both the “Recommendations on the conduct to be followed in respect of the population and the troops” and the “Proclamation to the Army”, issued the next day, were written in Dufour's own handwriting, a fact which testifies to the importance he attached to the content.

And not only that. For although the birth of the Red Cross was the result of an accident – Henry Dunant's arrival in Castiglione delle Stiviere on the evening of 24 June 1859, just as one of the bloodiest battles of the nineteenth century had come to an end a few miles away – the fact that the Red Cross remained in Geneva was the result of a deliberate decision.

For, convinced that the new institution could not blossom in what he considered to be a modest little provincial town and that Paris was the only city that offered the enlightenment, resources and communication facilities essential to its development, the Count of Breda (delegated by the French Central Committee to the First International Conference of Societies for the Relief of Wounded Soldiers, held in Paris in 1867) proposed that the headquarters of the International Committee be transferred to the French capital, which shone at the time with all the glory of the Second Empire and professed to be the metropolis of enlightenment and progress.

The conference dismissed this proposal:

“In the opinion of the conference the headquarters of the International Committee should remain in Geneva. The geographical situation of this city, the political neutrality of Switzerland to whom it belongs, no less than historical tradition and awareness of a duty to the founders of the undertaking seem to be the deciding factors.”⁸¹

⁸¹ *Conférences internationales des Sociétés de Secours aux Blessés militaires des Armées de Terre et de Mer, tenues à Paris en 1867*, deuxième édition, Commission générale des Délégués et Imprimerie Baillière & Fils, Paris, 1867, part two, p. 184 ; Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: From Solferino to Tsushima*, p. 212.

It is easy to imagine what would have happened if the conference had taken up the Count of Breda's proposal. Had it been transferred to Paris, the Red Cross would have become the plaything of French diplomacy and would have died with the Second Empire at the Battle of Sedan during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

The question arose again following the founding of the League of Red Cross Societies immediately after the First World War. Convinced that the new organization would be unable to find its own identity in Geneva, where the influence of the International Committee weighed too heavily, the League's leaders decided in 1922 to transfer its headquarters to Paris,⁸² an environment which did not prove to be more conducive to its development. Its stay was short-lived. On 5 September 1939, as the Wehrmacht was invading Poland, and France was entering the "phoney war", the League hastily returned to Geneva.⁸³ To our knowledge, the possibility of a transfer was never raised again.

Geneva thus not only served as the cradle of the Red Cross but helped to shape its image and character and, at the same time, provided invaluable support. Until the First World War, it was the people of Geneva who provided the bulk of the financial resources needed by the ICRC. During both world wars many Genevans volunteered their services to the International Prisoners-of-War Agency, whose mission was to restore contact between the millions of prisoners scattered throughout Europe and the rest of world and their families. Geneva was also the city where the International Committee recruited all its members up

⁸² Daphne A. Reid and Patrick F. Gilbo, *Beyond conflict : The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1919-1994*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva, 1997, p. 58. In 1991, the League of Red Cross Societies changed its name to International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

⁸³ Daphne A. Reid and Patrick F. Gilbo, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

to the First World War and, until fairly recently, the majority of its delegates, those “foot soldiers of humanitarianism”, as Antoine Maurice so aptly put it,⁸⁴ whose task it is to insist on respect for humanitarian principles amidst the horror of the fighting.

Within a few years of its founding the Red Cross already stretched beyond the frontiers of Europe, and each tradition, culture and civilization enriched a Movement which was bound to strive towards universality. Yet while opening up to the world the Red Cross has renounced none of the heritage of the city where it was born. The International Committee in particular has retained the hallmark of its native city, where it still has its headquarters.

Conversely, the emergence of the Red Cross transformed the destiny of Geneva and brought new life to its role as an international city. Thus, the International Committee prompted the convening of the diplomatic conference that was to adopt the original Geneva Convention on 22 August 1864. That Convention – which marked the beginning of contemporary international humanitarian law and has been revised and expanded by the diplomatic conferences of 1906, 1929, 1949 and 1974-1977 – made Geneva a city of worldwide renown by making it synonymous with the protection of war victims and with impartial aid in wartime.

Likewise, as the result of the tremendous activity in which the International Prisoners-of-War Agency engaged in countless conflicts, particularly during the two world wars, the name Geneva became internationally synonymous with hope and comfort. During the First World War, the Agency received 2,000 to 3,000 letters a day, mainly lists of prisoners and requests for information. On the

⁸⁴ Antoine Maurice, “Genève n'aurait pas été Genève sans le CICR. Et réciproquement”, *Tribune de Genève*, 1 October 1999, supplement, p. 4.

basis of these lists of prisoners and its own research, it sent out 491,922 notices regarding French prisoners-of-war, 45,222 on British prisoners, 70,331 on Belgian prisoners, 537,161 on German prisoners and hundreds of thousands of others concerning prisoners of other nationalities and civilians.⁸⁵ Tens of thousands of French and German war-disabled and tens of thousands of French and Belgian civilians from occupied or devastated territories were channeled through Geneva in the course of operations to repatriate seriously wounded soldiers and civilians.⁸⁶

In the course of the Second World War, the Agency received over 59,511,000 messages and sent out over 61,158,000.⁸⁷ The ICRC launched major relief operations in aid of prisoners of war, civilian internees and entire needy populations, transporting some 450,000 tons of aid – the equivalent of 90 million food and general relief parcels – to prisoner-of-war camps. Every month, some 2,000 railcar-loads of relief were sent to POW camps. Indeed, during the war the ICRC's Relief Division in Geneva was, *de facto*, Europe's largest private transport company.⁸⁸ And last but not least, it was from Geneva that the delegates left to visit POW camps in order to assess the conditions, ensure that the humanitarian treaties were being adhered to, and furnish a glimmer of hope to the prisoners and their relatives.

⁸⁵ *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1912 à 1920*, ICRC, Geneva, 1921, pp. 42-47.

⁸⁶ *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1912 à 1920*, pp. 107-108 and 141-143.

⁸⁷ *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on its activities during the Second World War (1 September 1939 - 30 June 1947)*, 4 volumes, ICRC, Geneva, May 1948, vol. II, *The Central Agency for Prisoners of War*, p. 30.

⁸⁸ *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on its activities during the Second World War (1 September 1939 - 30 June 1947)*, 4 volumes, ICRC, Geneva, May 1948, vol. III, *Relief activities*, pp. 7-8 and 276, and vol. IV, *Annexes*, p. 5.

There is little doubt that the extensive activity in which the International Prisoners-of-War Agency engaged throughout the First World War weighed heavily in the choice of Geneva as the headquarters of the League of Nations.

Two candidates were submitted to the commission of the Peace Conference that drafted the Covenant of the League of Nations and thus laid the foundations for the reorganization of international relations. The first candidate was Brussels, which was supported by France and relied on the universal prestige which Belgium's heroic resistance to the German invasion had earned it. The second was Geneva, which enjoyed the support of the English-speaking countries. President Wilson put all his weight behind Geneva's candidature, stressing that the goal of the League of Nations must be not to prolong the antipathies born of war but, on the contrary, to build peace by establishing friendly relations amongst all peoples. The headquarters of the League thus had to be located in a neutral State, and the activity of the "International Red Cross", which had served both sides in the course of the war, militated in favour of Geneva as the host for the new institution.

"President Wilson yielded to none in his admiration for Belgium, but the present question was one not of awarding honours but of finding the best surroundings for international deliberation. The antipathies of the war should be set aside; otherwise it might be thought that the League was a mere coalition of Allies moved by the hatreds born of the war. Our object was to bring about friendly relations between all peoples. We wished to rid the world of the sufferings of war. We should not obtain this result if we chose a town where the memory of this war would prevent impartial discussion. The peace of the world could not be secured by perpetuating international hatreds. Geneva was already the seat of the International Red Cross, which had placed itself at the service of both groups of belligerents,

and which, so far as possible, had remained unaffected by the antipathies provoked by the war. Moreover, Switzerland was a people vowed to absolute neutrality by its constitution and its blend of races and languages. It was marked out to be the meeting-place of other peoples desiring to undertake a work of peace and co-operation. The choice of Geneva did not mean that we did not recognize the eminent merits of Belgium and of Brussels. There could be no comparison between the two peoples from the point of view of their conduct during the war. The capitals of other neutral nations might have been proposed, but none had behaved so impartially as Switzerland. Switzerland had always acted with dignity; she had suffered from the war and she had gained the respect of both groups of belligerents.”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Report of the fourteenth session of the Commission of the League of Nations at the Peace Conference, 10 April 1919 (extracts), in David Hunter Miller, *The Drafting of the Covenant*, vol. II, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, 1928, pp. 360-368, *ad* pp. 367-368; see also Arthur S. Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 57, April 5-22, 1919, Princeton University Press, Princeton (New Jersey), 1987, pp. 218-226, *ad* pp. 225-226; Federal Councillor Felix Calonder's letter to President Wilson of 22 March 1919 proposing that Switzerland host the headquarters of the League of Nations and referring to the humanitarian tradition of the Confederation is included in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 56, March 17 - April 4, 1919, pp. 169-170. A further source that may be consulted is Antoine Fleury and Gabriel Imboden (eds, with the collaboration of Daniel Bourgeois), *Documents diplomatiques suisses*, volume 7, tome I, 11 Novembre 1918 – 28 June 1919, Benteli Verlag, Bern, 1979, in particular pp. 240-242, 245, 246-248, 258-259, 261-262, 294-298, 365-368, 478-484, 533, 557-559 and 586-591. We would also mention the account by William Rappard, who was the unofficial representative of the Federal Council to the Peace Conference: William E. Rappard, “Comment et pourquoi Genève devint siège de la Société des Nations”, in *Genève, son passé, son présent, son avenir*, Association de la Presse genevoise, Geneva, 1945, pp. 73-78; William E. Rappard, “Woodrow Wilson, la Suisse et Genève” (based on papers hitherto unpublished), in *Centenaire Woodrow Wilson*, Centre européen de la Dotation Carnegie, Geneva, 1956, pp. 29-74. The following works may also be consulted: Frédéric Barbey, *Un homme d'État suisse, Gustave Ador, 1845 - 1928*, Librairie J.-H. Jeheber, Geneva, 1945, p. 137; Victor Monnier, *William E. Rappard, Défenseur des libertés, serviteur de son pays et de la communauté internationale*, Éditions Slatkine, Geneva, and Helbing und Lichtenhahn, Basle, 1995, in particular pp. 203-204, 224 and 246; Antoine Fleury, “L'enjeu du choix de Genève comme siège de la Société des Nations”, in Saül Friedländer, Harish Kapur and Ardré Reszler (eds), *L'historien et les relations internationales, Recueil d'études en hommage à Jacques Freymond*, Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, 1981, pp. 251-278.

Similarly, the International Committee contributed to the creation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. While over 800,000 Russian refugees – most of them completely destitute – were flooding into Europe and China following the October Revolution and the defeat of the White armies, the insistent representations of the ICRC and in particular of its president, Gustave Ador, prompted the League of Nations to create the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees and to appoint as its head the famous Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen, already renowned for his work to repatriate prisoners of war taken during the First World War.⁹⁰

With the failure of the League of Nations and the creation of the United Nations, the world's centre of political gravity shifted to New York and Washington, a trend that has been accentuated since the end of the Cold War. However, by retaining the headquarters of the International Labour Office, the World Health Organization, the UN Commission on Human Rights, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the ICRC, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and a number of other charitable organizations, Geneva has remained the capital of humanitarian action. At the political level the city has hosted countless conferences, through which painful conflicts have been settled and peace has been built – from the first meetings between Briand and Stresemann, who tried in vain to end Franco-German

⁹⁰ Telegram and letter from ICRC President Gustave Ador to the President of the Council of the League of Nations and Memorandum of the International Committee of the Red Cross to the Council of the League of Nations, 20 February 1921, ICRC Archives, dossier B Mis CR 87 - 2/39 et 39 bis; notes by Sir Eric Drummond, Secretary-General of the League of Nations, to Gustave Ador + annex, 1 March 1921, ICRC Archives, dossier B Mis CR 87 - 5/ 59; telegram from Sir Eric Drummond to Fridtjof Nansen, 24 August 1921 (copy), and letter by Fridtjof Nansen to Sir Eric Drummond, 1 September 1921 (copy), ICRC Archives, dossier B Mis CR 87/SDN; *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, No. 27, March 1921, pp. 266-271; No. 30, June 1921, pp. 621-624 and 628-629; No. 32, August 1921, pp. 815-816; No. 33, September 1921, pp. 928-938; No. 34, October 1921, pp. 1016-1020.

antagonism, to the meeting between Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev in November 1985, which brought the Cold War to an end.

The founding of the Red Cross thus made a decisive contribution to reviving the international role of that venerable city. But above all, the Red Cross has given Geneva the added quality of heart and soul, without which any society is liable to sink into materialism.

The Red Cross would not have become what it is without Geneva, without the spirit of openness inherited from the Middle Ages, from Calvinism, from the city's tradition as a place of Refuge, and from the century of the Enlightenment. But the opposite also holds true: Geneva would not be Geneva without the Red Cross.

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