

1863: five Genevans and an idea

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The story begins with a book. In 1862 Henry Dunant, a Geneva businessman who had witnessed the aftermath of the battle of Solferino in 1859, published a work in which he described the sufferings of the wounded left on the battlefield and proposed the creation of voluntary relief societies and the conclusion of an international agreement to protect the wounded and those who care for them.¹ The book met with considerable success in the Europe of the courts and the salons.

In 1863 a committee of five Geneva citizens was formed to put these ideas into practice: Henry Dunant, the jurist Gustave Moynier, president of the Société genevoise d'utilité publique (Geneva Society for Public Welfare), General Guillaume-Henri Dufour, former commander of the federal army, and the physicians Louis Appia and Théodore Maunoir.² This committee, which was to become the International Committee of the Red Cross, convened an international conference in Geneva in October 1863 and then obtained from the Federal Council the calling of a diplomatic conference in 1864.

On 22 August 1864 twelve States signed the first Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field.³ This treaty founded modern international humanitarian law. It established the neutrality of the wounded, of ambulances and of medical personnel, and adopted as its distinctive emblem a red cross on a white ground, the colours of the Swiss flag reversed.

The composition of the founding committee deserves attention. It brought together a businessman, a jurist, a general and two physicians, all drawn from Geneva's polite society, Protestant, educated and engaged in works of public welfare. This combination of skills and influence reflects the Geneva elite described in Part D: a milieu in which finance, law, science and philanthropy rubbed shoulders. The Société genevoise d'utilité publique,

of which Moynier was president, belongs to the philanthropic tradition inherited from the Reformation, which Part B described.

Henry Dunant himself was to follow a contrasting path. After the failure of his business ventures in Algeria, his bankruptcy in 1867 forced him to leave Geneva and the committee in disgrace.⁴ He lived for decades in obscurity before receiving, in 1901, the first Nobel Peace Prize.⁵ His story is a reminder that business Geneva scarcely forgave financial failure, even in its most visionary citizens.

Key point. The Red Cross was born in 1863 from the initiative of five Genevans drawn from the city's philanthropic elite, and the first Geneva Convention, signed on 22 August 1864, founded international humanitarian law. This private and local origin of a universal institution is the model of International Geneva.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (en), "Henry Dunant": arriving on 24 June 1859, the day of the battle of Solferino, Dunant saw there that "Forty thousand wounded, dying and dead remained on the battlefield"; *Un souvenir de Solferino* (A Memory of Solferino) published in 1862 in 1,600 copies, pleading for a neutral organisation to relieve the wounded. ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), "Henry Dunant": founding meeting of 17 February 1863, committee of five members (Dunant, Gustave Moynier, Guillaume-Henri Dufour, Louis Appia, Théodore Maunoir); *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse* (DHS), art. "Croix-Rouge" (Comité international de secours aux militaires blessés, February 1863). ↩
3. Wikipedia (en), "Henry Dunant": convention signed on 22 August 1864 by twelve States, sixteen being represented; *Croix-Rouge française*, "22 août 1864 : signature de la 1ère convention de Genève" (croix-rouge.fr); *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse* (DHS), art. "Croix-Rouge". ↩
4. Wikipedia (en), "Henry Dunant": bankruptcy declared in April 1867; Dunant resigned from the secretariat on 25 August 1867 and was excluded from the committee on 8 September 1867. ↩

5. Wikipedia (en), “Henry Dunant”: first Nobel Peace Prize (1901) shared with the French pacifist Frédéric Passy, for founding the Red Cross movement and initiating the Geneva Convention. ↩

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