

MEETING OF INFORMATION OFFICERS

A meeting of representatives of the information services of National Red Cross Societies took place in Geneva from January 25 to 27, 1967. This was held under the auspices of the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies.

Views were exchanged on the situation and role of Red Cross information in the world, at the national and international level, and on the dissemination of information by press, radio and television and also through publications.

The dissemination of the Geneva Conventions and the use of modern audio-visual methods of information were also discussed.

National Societies represented were of the following countries: Belgium, Denmark, Federal Republic of Germany, France, German Democratic Republic, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland and Yugoslavia.

The *International Review* will subsequently describe the work of this meeting, which was opened with addresses made by Mr. S. Bordier, Vice-President of the ICRC, and Mr. H. Beer, Secretary-General of the League.

Great Britain

A book¹ on the British Red Cross and its work in Great Britain and the world has recently appeared in London. Written by Dame Beryl Oliver it is full of historical and practical interest. Amply documented with a mass of details of every description it gives a fascinating account of a great Red Cross Society. On these and many other grounds this book makes a worthwhile contribution to the history of that vast movement started by Henry Dunant a little more than a hundred years ago.

¹ *The British Red Cross in Action* by Dame Beryl Oliver, GBE, RRC, Faber and Faber, London, 1966, 579 pp.

It is no easy task to describe it in a few pages. Justice should not only be rendered to the immense amount of research carried out by the author. One should also give full due to the rôle which she herself played for more than fifty years, more than half the very existence of the British Red Cross, in the multiple activities of one of the most active and living bodies of the Red Cross movement.

In fact, joining the St. John Ambulance Brigade in 1910 and then second in command of the Women's Voluntary Aid Detachments at Devonshire House in 1916, Dame Beryl Oliver held positions of high responsibility with the British Red Cross since the end of the First World War. She is therefore both a witness and a leading personality in the epic she relates. However, she scarcely ever speaks of herself, as if it were sufficient for it to be understood that she was present at all important stages in the Society's history over the past half century.

If England showed a certain reserve towards the movement launched in Geneva in its beginnings, when represented with thirteen other countries at the 1863 Conference, it should not be forgotten that official reticence was more apparent than real. Dame Beryl's book will no doubt provide historians with useful material to show that people such as Professor Longmore, Captain Brackenbury, Sir John Furley, the future Lord Wantage and so many others were far from remaining inactive and attempted to awaken an interest amongst their compatriots, which already existed with Florence Nightingale, in aiding the sick and wounded military.

The moment of action arrived in July 1870 and the author reproduces the letter then published by the *Times* signed by Colonel Lloyd-Lindsay who was to become Lord Wantage of Lockinge (1832-1901) and the first Chairman of the British Red Cross.

It will be seen from the account given of this by Dame Beryl how the "National Society for Aid to Wounded in Time of War" rapidly organized itself, collected funds, sent nurses, ambulances, doctors, surgeons and negotiators to France, Germany and Switzerland. In often dangerous conditions, overcoming obstacles which would have stopped less determined and courageous people, the delegates of the new Society came to the aid in France and Germany of thousands of wounded and organized improvised hospitals and

infirmaries, "distributing mattresses, blankets, pillows, wine, brandy, biscuits, chocolate and cigars".

Depots were established, as were staging-points and aid posts organized in the firing line. The British public, for its part, reacted with speed. Women made bandages, mobile ambulances were equipped, canteens set up and clothing sewn for the sick. Attempts were even made to assist prisoners and two delegates of the British Society were sent to France and Germany for that purpose.

In different forms and proportions, a similar spirit of enterprise and practical beneficence was to be repeated during the war between Serbia and Turkey in 1876, the Russo-Turkish war in 1877-78, the Zulu war in 1879, the war between Serbia and Bulgaria from 1885-86, and the Turco-Greek war, not to mention the conflict in South Africa, in Egypt, the Sudan and the Balkans. In every corner of the globe, whether its country was committed or not, the British Red Cross organized relief, sent out personnel and sought the most effective ways of bringing aid, whilst accumulating valuable experience which was to be put to good use in the future. At the same time at home it consolidated its position each year, made sure of its own independence, foresaw events and, when necessary, undertook large-scale improvisation. One would like to quote figures, but there are too many of these and figures themselves would not suffice to give a fair picture of all the work accomplished. No less than 7,233,580 wounded were in fact transported by the ambulances of the Joint Committee of the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John during the First World War, certainly an extremely impressive number. Figures given for the last war are even more so. These do not, however, render a just account of the vast amount of courage, initiative, generosity and devotion shown by thousands of men and women whose names only briefly emerge in an ocean of misery and suffering.

The most striking factor in the history of the British Red Cross as related by Dame Beryl Oliver is above all the capacity for vigorous, practical organization and the improvisation of its leaders and members combined with an acute sense of accurate detail and work well done. Nothing is too small or insignificant for it to be neglected: machines for making soda-water in Egypt at the beginning of this century, musical instruments for prisoners, razor-

blades or books in Braille. No task is too onerous to be considered and undertaken. Teams of stretcher-bearers, cargoes of medical stores, food and every sort of object, field hospitals, all is ready to go on time, on occasions even before a military operation has been mounted.

To render fuller justice to Dame Beryl Oliver's book, one would like to mention the operations successfully conducted by the British Red Cross on all fronts in two world wars and in 25 others of more or less importance, whether in China, Greece or the Sudan. One should speak of its aid to refugees all over the world, of relief sent to prisoners in thousands of camps, of teams leaving for all directions to look for the wounded and sick in the jungle and released prisoners, of relief organized to aid the homeless after cyclones in the Antilles, earthquakes or floods in Asia and elsewhere.

Most impressive are the chapters in which the author analyses the rôle of the British Red Cross on the home front amongst evacuees and in air raids. "The work of the members in the Civil Defence Service was often carried out in conditions of great danger", notes Dame Beryl before quoting some examples of heroism amongst thousands of others.

Finally, future historians of the Red Cross will certainly render homage to the fruitful efforts accomplished in the developing countries and will consider these efforts as one of the greatest contributions made by the British Red Cross to the universality of the Red Cross movement.

By way of concluding this brief review of a book which must be read one could not do better than produce two quotations of great significance by Sir Winston Churchill, one in the body of the work and the other in the foreword: "The influence and usefulness of the Society are largely due to its independence of government control, and its relationship with the International Red Cross at Geneva rests on that basis".

"In peace as in war the Red Cross Societies of the world are united in a common purpose for the relief of suffering; working together where great calamities occur, making no difference between race, nationality, class or creed. They are helping not only to relieve pain and suffering, but to bring about a better understanding between the peoples of the world."

Y. G.