

This Day in History... August 22, 1864

The First Geneva Convention

On August 22, 1864, twelve nations signed the first Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field.

While on a business trip to Italy in 1859, Swiss humanitarian Jean Henri Dunant witnessed the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino (part of the Second Italian War of Independence) in which nearly 40,000 soldiers were killed or wounded. Shocked by the lack of medical care, Dunant put his business aside and began tending to the wounded. He convinced locals to help without discrimination.

When he returned to his home in Geneva, Dunant wrote an account of what he witnessed, titled, *A Memory of Solferino*. In the book, he asked, "Would it not be possible, in time 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?"



Issued for the 50th anniversary of the American Red Cross.



The first bi-colored US postage stamp ever produced on the rotary press.

So on August 22, 1864, representatives from 12 countries met in Geneva to sign the new convention, which served as "the basis on which rest the rules of international law for the protection of the victims of armed conflicts." The signatories included four now-former German states, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland. The document included 10 articles. Some of the major points included that care centers for the sick and wounded couldn't be captured or destroyed, that civilians aiding the wounded shouldn't be hurt, and the recognition of the Red Cross symbol.

Sweden-Norway (the two were united by a personal union at the time) signed the convention that December and other nations later followed. In fact, American Red Cross founder Clara Barton was a driving force behind the United States ratifying the convention in 1882.



Issued for the 100th anniversary of the International Red Cross.



The Geneva conventions protect the rights of POW/MIAs.

However, as warfare and military technology evolved in the coming decades, the Geneva Convention became outdated. A series of new conventions were held:

- The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 were based on the Liber Code, a general order signed by President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War calling for ethical treatment during war.
- The Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies at Sea was held in July 1906.
- The Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War was held in July 1929.
- The discovery of war crimes during World War II led to the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War in 1949.

Within a few years, these conventions were already considered to be incomplete, as many wars were internal or involved insurgents that might not follow the convention anyway. New protocols were added to the conventions in 1977 (I & II) and 2005 (III). The United States is not party to the 1977 protocols.

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