

Rewriting the biography of Henry Dunant, the founder of the International Red Cross

R.Ottaviani, D.Vanni, M.G.Baccolo, L.Guerin and P.Vanni*

*Ufficio storico della CRI - Regione toscana - Florence - ITALY

Summary

This paper presents quite a different version of the origins of the Red Cross from that officially recognised. On the basis of historical documents and statements of authors who are critical and attentive to the detail of the circumstances and events which gave rise to the Red Cross, it is possible to discern a surprising historical truth.

Résumé

Ce texte présente une version des origines de la Croix Rouge, bien différente de la version officielle. Sur la base de documents historiques et derrière des affirmations d' auteurs (qui ont su se montrer critiques et attentifs aux détails des réelles circonstances ayant donné naissance à la Croix Rouge) - il est possible de discerner l'émergence d'une vérité historique nouvelle. Celle-ci surprendra tous ceux qui sont intéressés à connaître les véritable origines de la Croix Rouge.

The complex character ascribed to Dunant, by many historians, arose from the need to explain the co-existence of two different personalities, unscrupulous businessman and generous lover of suffering humanity.²³⁴⁵⁶⁷ This dual personality emerges from the history of the origins of the Red Cross. His contradictory character was strengthened by the fact that many European countries had incorrect information and odd documents about him. There were accusations of unlawful appropriation and homosexuality, which were introduced through trickery by means of rumours, or newspaper reports, or printed brazenly on leaflets, or in official communications by the Red Cross. Dunant rarely mentioned the names of his persecutors: these were suspicions, sad surprises, misunderstandings and bitter experiences to be borne in silence. However, in some cases, his exasperation rose to such a point that the enemy whom he suspected and knew very well, can be gleaned from correspondence with his brother. The source of these calumnies was, in Dunant's view, the work of a single individual: the one and only person who could benefit from the injuries inflicted on Dunant's reputation. In Dunant's letters to his family there are very meaningful clues. At times Dunant blames the French Intendance, the Administration, his unfortunate business affairs, his inability to manage his own possessions ... but who really had sufficient reason to persecute him for so many years? Not his creditors, who would have been extremely happy for him to work, earning money for them to be repaid. Why should the French Administration, (even though he believed it to be hostile), continue to persecute him following his downfall and public disappearance?

In the opinion of Pandit⁷, his obscure and hidden enemy was Moynier, the most powerful individual in the International Committee, the person who, for more than forty years, was at the head of the Red Cross.

Moynier has always been defined as a man of high moral principles and, hence, his hard-line approach to

Dunant has always been justified on this account. [Hence, when one reads that Moynier was an able and competent person, it becomes understandable that people think that the Red Cross was able to continue its work and expand under his leadership.] Nonetheless, for historical clarity one should try to throw some light on some obscure points, and try to understand exactly how things were. In 1873, Moynier published *Les premiers dix ans de la Croix Rouge* (The first decade of the Red Cross), a text in which the name of Henry Dunant does not appear once. Why? Could the desire to safeguard the "good name" of the Red Cross from being tainted by Dunant's disgraceful economic misfortunes, possibly justify such behaviour?

Moynier's envy was well known to the Red Cross historians, who were far too often ready to consider it a slight accident of fate. Many of Dunant's biographers, however, were ill at ease with the hostility shown to him by Moynier⁸⁹¹⁰.

The historian, Mrs. Violet Kelway Libby, in her book *Henry Dunant, A Prophet of Peace* is the one biographer of Dunant who offered criticism both of Moynier's account and of the book by Alexis Francois *Le Berceau de la Croix Rouge*¹⁷.

Moynier did not want to be better thought of than Dunant. Nor was he simply jealous or envious. Rather, he wanted all the fame and honour which was due to Dunant as the sole founder of the Red Cross¹². He wanted Dunant to build and then to disappear. Moynier spent his life fighting the truth, never once feeling a sense of shame, fear or guilt⁷.

None of Dunant's biographers has considered the fact that, after Berlin, Moynier had forbidden Dunant to act in any way as a representative of the International Committee. All of them "believed" that Dunant was not up to the task and that he felt ill at ease in leading a Conference of thirty-one participants.

For example Gigon¹³ stated that Dunant was not capable of speaking in public, had problems in having his

views and opinions accepted, and was greatly overwhelmed and crushed by Moynier's personality. Gigon's view of the two men's behaviour was that Dunant represented the female aspect and Moynier the male one. Gigon thus purported to compare both their characters and their work-relationship in the developing initiative. In the light of what he wrote, it is difficult to believe that Gigon himself had gone to Geneva University Library to research this issue.

The facts inform us otherwise. We know that on several occasions Dunant spoke during the Conference. Dunant wrote

"The assembly voted unanimously that the symbol for medical volunteers, as indeed for the ambulances, which Dunant had mentioned several times, even if not officially, was to be white with a red cross".

Moreover, the French delegate Dr. Boudier, in his speech at the Conference said "Unfortunately the most generous intentions are quite often difficult to apply. I am very much afraid that, and I am speaking quite frankly, the ideas mentioned by the eloquent Mr. Dunant number amongst these" ^h

The adjective "eloquent" could have been attributed to Dunant on the basis of Boudier having already known him, however, they had never met before. Thus, Dunant did speak during the Conference, taking the floor several times, even though not officially. He spoke at length and, as result, it is easy to imagine how much Moynier wished to rid himself of the weight of Dunant's words.

At this point, Moynier began to play a double game, at a time when Dufour was honorary president of the Comite International de Geneve, presiding over meetings in Moynier's absence. Dufour was well aware of his own precarious position and also of Moynier's ambitions. However, he did not voice his opposition either to the falsification of the reports from the first Conference, nor to Moynier's decision to exclude Dunant from the 1864 Conference, nor to the resignation of Dunant in 1867, nor to the letters addressed to several national societies of the Red Cross which described Dunant's dishonesty, nor to the publication of *Les premiers dix ans de la Croix Rouge* which completely ignored the existence of Dunant.

After the Conference, in November 1863, while Dunant was collecting funds and preparing to leave for Paris, Moynier made his first move. In February 1863 at the Geneva Society for Public Assistance, which had G. Moynier as its president, the Commission of Five had been set up. This consisted of four citizens of Geneva: Dr. Gustave Moynier lawyer, Dr. Louis Appia medical doctor, Dr. Theodore Maunoir medical doctor and General Guillame-Henry Dufour (president), with Dunant

as secretary. In the name of, and under the authority of, the October 1863 International Assembly, the Geneva Commission, made up of the same five members, became the first International Committee of the Red Cross. Moynier suggested to Appia, that if he (Appia) agreed, he (Moynier) would write an article to be published in the newspapers that Appia had greatly helped Dunant to write his book *A Memory of Solferino*. Appia was to reply that this was not true and that he had no intention of trying to discredit Dunant⁷¹²¹⁴

In 1867, following his bankruptcy, Dunant asked to resign and he was expelled¹⁵¹⁶ For many years Moynier tried to cut off all the relationships Dunant had with friends who wanted to help him. Moynier sent circulars to everybody he thought Dunant was in contact with, his objective being to alienate him from public life. As long as Dunant's image appeared, it was difficult for Moynier to affirm that he was the sole founder of the Red Cross. First and foremost, Moynier had decided to send circulars to those places in which Dunant might have been able to find a job to survive. But, reduced to extreme poverty, Dunant continued unbelievably to carry out his activity!

"The enemy was constantly on the back of its victim". Dunant wrote to his brother: "They're trying to make me die of hunger" ". In 1891 he wrote again "The miserable ones who for over twenty years have tried to kill me, in a certain sense have been successful". Many writers did not believe what he had to say. It seemed unbelievable! Who ever could have thought that Moynier had a plan up his sleeve? In 1892, when Dunant arrived in Heiden, he asked for the door of his room to be blocked⁷.

In 1901 Dunant received the first Nobel Peace Prize for founding the International Red Cross.

In 1903, Moynier published his book *The Foundation of the Red Cross*⁶ in which he wrote that, when he saw Dunant for the first time, he was surprised to discover that Dunant had no idea about how to go about setting up an international organisation. The book claimed that Dunant was a visionary and that only Moynier was capable of setting up the initiative in an area of competence that only he knew anything about⁷

On the contrary, as Dunant had founded humanitarian societies both before and after the Red Cross, it was absurd to believe that he had no idea about how to set up such things. As Pandit states, it makes much more sense to believe, rather, that the original idea was not Moynier's. Indeed, history had given its judgement two years before Moynier's book, when in 1901, Dunant received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Furthermore, in *A Memory of Solferino* there were

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already great ideas. Hence, it was in Moynier's own interest to hastily make an agreement with Dunant before others contacted him. If Dunant had not agreed, the world would never have heard of the name of Moynier.

In time, and with the objective of deleting Dunant's name from the most important events of the Red Cross, Moynier stated other falsehoods such as the statement that Dunant was not in the Committee of Five when the Red Cross was founded (International Review, March 1963, pg. I 13). Minutes of the meetings, however, state that Dunant was present. In his 1903 book, Moynier stated that during the 1863 Conference, Dunant had had no right to intervene and speak, because he was not entitled to do so by not having been present at the first meeting on the 9th February. Later, it transpired that Dunant's undocumented presence was a simple matter of forgetfulness on the part of the author. In Pandit's view this book, *The Foundation of the Red Cross*, "contained Moynier's propaganda against Dunant in its final form"⁷

Moynier recognized that *A Memory of Solferino* influenced people at both moral and intellectual levels. But "One can say that Dunant "imagined" the idea of the Red Cross" was the sum total of Moynier's concessions concerning Dunant.

In 1904, when the new edition of *A Memory of Solferino* was published, in an article in the Red Cross Bulletin, mention was made of the fact that the Committee had existed even before the publication of *A Memory of Solferino*. This was also pointed out in a footnote in the Red Cross Peace Programme, as an afterthought. (The note had already appeared in the third edition of *A Memory of Solferino* in 1863. Once again, it was simply a matter of false propaganda⁷).

Until the bitter end, Moynier continued to affirm his ideas at every opportunity. For as long as he lived, Moynier maintained that Dunant was due no recognition in relation to the foundation of the Red Cross, and that Moynier alone was the sole founder of the Red Cross.

In 1918 when Moynier's nephew, Gustave Ador, was at the height of his power in Switzerland, (between 1917 and 1920 Ador gave up the Chairmanship of the International Committee for the Chairmanship of the Swiss Federal Council), Alexis Francois, a professor at the University of Geneva, published *Le Berceau de la Croix Rouge*. What Pandit has to say about this work is extremely interesting, to say the least. He recognises that "*Le Berceau* is a very extraordinary historical work". Indeed, he even goes on to say that it is written by "a competent research worker, it is packed with information but curiously enough, the conclusions are

made to someone's orders and do not follow from the facts marshalled with great thoroughness."⁷.

For example, Moynier did everything he could to dissuade Dunant from the idea of neutrality and did his utmost to keep it out of the 1863 Conference agenda. Indeed, Moynier fought an outright battle against Dr. Basting and other personalities to have this point removed from the discussion. However, the Conference adopted the proposal and Moynier, alone, isolated in his opposition, had to accept the idea. Notwithstanding this, *Le Berceau de la Croix Rouge* ends the description of the Conference as follows:

"In reality it is Moynier who emerges triumphant from the Conference. Obscure president of a small society, he succeeds in bringing under his juridical fold this herd of big officers and in making them vote quietly in favour of the resolution which curtailed their prerogative"⁷

We can only presume that the historian, beyond the logic of the events, was ordered to write thus. A weak explanation may be found in the sense that Moynier, finding everybody against his position, gave in and later accepted the idea of neutrality. Indeed, in his book *The Neutrality of the wounded soldiers* (1867), he stated with great brazenness that the International Committee had always accepted the idea of neutrality⁷

He corrected his aim by stating that at that Meeting "one could not ignore the ideas of the zealous secretary (Dunant) and his friend (Dr. Basting) since they had done so much for the cause. Time would out ..." i.e. Time would clarify matters in relation to people and things, ensuring their right place in History.

Those in charge of the Red Cross deny that Francois was ever commissioned by the Committee to write that book. Could it be that the reference point for the historian was Ador?

But the greatest surprise is to be found in what follows. After the death of Ador, the same professor, Alexis Francois, wrote a booklet on Dunant entitled *A Great Humanitarian Figure: Henry Dunant, his Life and his Works* ". The very title indicates that the tone is totally different from that of the *Le Berceau de la Croix Rouge*. In it Dunant is praised and his work portrayed in perspective. It is important to note that there is no mention of the Memorandum on Mons-Djemila. Rather, the author admits that Dunant went to Solferino to help the wounded soldiers following the example of Florence Nightingale. However, the author thinks that the main objective of Dunant was to deliver the booklet on *L'Empire de Charlemagne Retablie ou Le Saint-Empire Romain Reconstitue* to Napoleon, more out of hope and trust than of flattery. Dunant's business in Algiers is not mentioned.

Pandit, understandably, wonders what it was that brought about the historian's change of mind. The opinion of the Indian author was that, following the death of his uncle, perhaps Ador wanted a book written by Alexis Francois that would glorify Moynier, a work perhaps even requested by Moynier himself before his death, in which the figure of Dunant occupied a lesser role. Following Ador's death, Francois felt it possible to write what he really thought in a new publication, but, for one reason or another, he was not at liberty to deny what he had written in the *Le Berceau de la Croix Rouge*. Had it not been so, there would have been no reason not to clarify his position with a few statements, rather than leave this contradiction unresolved.

Whoever distorts the facts cannot be considered a historian and Francois, a university researcher, a respected historian, consequently forfeited his professional role. The damage which has resulted is enormous. Moynier managed to introduce lies into the history of the Red Cross, Gustave Ador kept these lies up for a total of 65 years. After their death, when this protection ceased, the historians from the Red Cross continued to spread these lies by perpetrating the indiscriminate spread of the information contained in Francois's *Le Berceau de la Croix Rouge*.

Writers such as Ellen Hart (*Man born to live*)¹⁸, believed what Francois wrote. She enlarged the allusions made by Francois and went so far as to state that Dunant suffered from a foolish pride and was mentally retarded. Similarly, many other worthy writers were ensnared in this trap and the world came to learn things that were false, to say the least. The official historian of the Red Cross, Pierre Boissier, adopted a different line and tried to throw some light on the figure of Dunant without, however, calling Moynier into discussion. An example of his approach can be found in his work *De Solferino a Tsoushima*.

In order to validate his claim that the manner of thinking within the Red Cross had been completely overturned, Pandit pointed to two distinct episodes. Towards the end of his life, Moynier held an exhibition in his own home of all the medals and prizes he had received throughout his time in the Red Cross. Comments made by various writers in relation to Moynier's defence of this act of self-praise, when seen especially in relation to the virtues of Protestantism, are an absolute joke.

The second episode highlighted by Pandit is that Boissier had discovered great loyalty on the part of Moynier towards Dunant. To make this affirmation, Boissier cited a circular sent by Moynier in 1892 to colleagues in the Red Cross in which he praised the

work done by Dunant in Berlin. Pandit considers this praise "betrayal". Moreover, in 1892 something else happened which needs to be taken into consideration. When the Red Cross International Conference was held in Rome, one of Dunant's friends, Wilhelm Sonderegger, sent a note from Heiden to Rome to be circulated amongst the delegates at the Conference. On the 20th April 1892, an appeal was published by a young friend of Dunant, Rudolf Muller, in an Ulm newspaper. In Red Cross circles, these two messages created a situation whereby it was only fitting for Moynier to say what he felt about Dunant. This situation made Moynier fall back to a defensive position, in order to appear a man of honesty. Many historians took things at face value and, so fell into the trap. Thus they were happy to relate versions of the truth which showed no critical appraisal of the facts and bore little or no relation to reality.

In Pandit's view, Moynier, a cruel individual lacking any moral scruples whatsoever, marred by self-interest, represented the antithesis of all that was Dunant. The two individuals were so totally different in their ideals and characters that it would have been impossible for them to work together for a common cause. It is only because of the world of false beliefs with which the writers of the history of the Red Cross were imbued that it was possible to create such a paradoxical myth that led people to believe that one complemented the other when, in reality, they were poles apart¹².

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Authors

Baccolo M.G. Past-Director of the Red Cross International Muséum. Castiglione délie Stiviere, Italy
Guerin, E. Foreign Language Lector, University of Florence, Florence, Italy
Ottaviani, P. Clinical Biochemistry Laboratory Assistant, I.O.T., Florence, Italy
Vanni, D. PhD Neurological & Psychiatrie Sciences, University of Florence, Florence, Italy
Vanni, P. Full-time Professor in Médical Chemistry, Department of Biochemical Sciences, & Lector in the History of Medicine, University of Florence, Director of historical office of CRI (Regione Toscana) Florence, Italy