

THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS CONFERENCE IN TORONTO

THE International Red Cross is at the moment probably the most widely representative international organization in the world. Like the United Nations, it embraces all races, creeds and ideologies. More hospitable than the United Nations, it invited to its eighteenth quadrennial Conference in Toronto this summer nearly all those countries, like Italy, Japan, the two Germanies and the two Koreas, which the United Nations cannot agree to admit. More than this, the Red Cross Conference welcomed the simultaneous presence of rival delegations claiming to represent the Chinese Republic; for some days the Chinese Communists and Nationalists sat together in the same council hall. This may have been the first appearance of an official Communist Chinese delegation in the West. The names of 51 governments and of 58 national Red Cross Societies appear in the official list of delegations. There have been many more important conferences in Canada; perhaps there have been more picturesque ones (though not many); there have been very few which were watched with wider or more attentive interest.

The point at issue at Toronto was whether a humanitarian movement whose value had, by any objective test, been proved through two world wars could survive as a universal institution in the midst of existing international tensions. If the answer proved to be "no", the International Red Cross, although it would remain an eminently useful organization among states friendly to one another, would cease to serve the main purpose for which it was created, that is, the carrying on of humanitarian work across battle-lines; either the hardships of war would be materially aggravated for those directly in the path of the fighting or governments and humanitarian bodies would have to find some generally acceptable substitute for the Red Cross.

The significance of this issue and of the partial resolution of it in Toronto was probably not grasped by those who followed the Conference casually in the press. Although the Red Cross is the best known of all humanitarian movements, its unique and bizarre constitutional structure and its relations with governments are understood by few even of its own members.

Structure of IRC

The International Red Cross is like a building consisting of two substantial wings joined by a considerably less substantial connecting structure. The newer and more densely populated wing comprises the national Red Cross Societies, together with the League of Red Cross Societies into which the national societies are federated. National societies claim to contain one hundred million members and as one million of these are Canadians it is reasonable to assume that most readers of this article need no explanation of their activities. The League (which dates only from 1919) is, like its constituent societies, a "voluntary" (that is, non-governmental) organization. Its purpose is to assist the national Red Cross Societies in their humanitarian activities and, so far as may be proper and practical, to co-ordinate their work when it transcends national boundaries. The League is the guardian and exponent of the traditions of the Red Cross in time of peace.

The balancing wing of the International Red Cross structure is the International Committee of the Red Cross, variously spoken of as the "Committee", the "International Committee", or the "ICRC". This, the older part, is approaching its centenary. At full strength, it contains exactly 25 members. When its membership falls below this number, the members themselves decide who shall fill the vacancies. All 25 members are, and must be Swiss. They are for the most part persons of substance,