

CENTENARY OF THE BULGARIAN RED CROSS

The Bulgarian Red Cross Society is one of the oldest public service organizations in the country: it was founded as a committee in Sofia in October 1878, just after the signature of the Treaty of Berlin which ended the Russian-Turkish war and made Bulgaria an autonomous principality. Many of the local aid committees set up independently during the war in provincial towns to give aid to sick or wounded soldiers gradually united with the committee in Sofia. On 1 March 1884, the Bulgarian Government officially ratified the Geneva Convention; and in the same year it was represented at the Third International Conference of the Red Cross. Finally, on 27 July/8 August 1885, the Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs wrote to the ICRC that “eminent citizens of Sofia... have taken the step of creating a Bulgarian Red Cross Society and have drafted Statutes, which have been approved by the Government of the Principality and of which I have the honour to send you the translation... The committee is composed as follows...”. The conditions for recognition being thus fulfilled, the ICRC duly recognized the Bulgarian Red Cross and announced the fact to other Societies in a circular dated 20 October 1885, signed by Gustave Moynier, ICRC President, and Gustave Ador, Secretary.

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The new Society had not awaited recognition by Geneva to establish and develop its organization. Having seen Russian Red Cross medical teams at work during the war and having appreciated the immense services that they had given to soldiers and civilians alike, the population of

Bulgaria realized the need for a National Red Cross Society of its own. With the encouragement of public figures from various walks of life—medicine, the Church, the Government—the Bulgarian Red Cross soon had sections in all the principal towns.

In view of the unsettled political climate, the Society felt that its first duty was to prepare for action in the event of war, a secondary aim being to provide relief in natural disasters. This attitude was justified almost immediately: at the end of 1885 the Serbo-Bulgarian war broke out and the Bulgarian Red Cross was ready to serve. It was able to organize fourteen hospitals, to help equip twenty-seven others, to set up fifteen emergency dressing stations and to assist in many relief operations. The war provided a fine example of the spirit of mutual aid existing within the Red Cross Movement, as the National Societies of Russia, Greece, Romania, Belgium, France, Italy and Great Britain sent medical missions to Bulgaria, where they did admirable work ¹.

Once this war was over, the Bulgarian Red Cross pursued its efforts to enlarge its range of action. The chief concern at that time was to train nurses. In 1895, at the suggestion of the ladies' committee of the Red Cross, a course was organized and fifteen nurses received training from Bulgarian doctors. Five years later, the first Bulgarian school for nurses, directed by two Russian nursing sisters, was created, at the same time as a hospital where the nurses could receive practical training. This establishment expanded rapidly and became the Red Cross Hospital, highly esteemed for the standard of training and nursing it provided.

The Society was prominent in medical assistance during the fighting that followed the declaration of independence in 1908: the Balkan War in 1912, the Inter-allied War in 1913, and the First World War. While numerous teams from several foreign Red Cross Societies supplied help during these conflicts (during the Balkan War, eleven Societies sent medical missions), the Bulgarian Red Cross itself was able, when the need was greatest, to send medical delegations to other countries: during the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905, and during the First World War, in 1915 and 1916, for example.

In the months following the 1918 Armistice, the Society took an active part in repatriating Russian and Bulgarian prisoners of war and also cared for refugees. When famine struck the Volga basin in 1921, a

¹ *Bulletin international des Sociétés de secours aux militaires blessés*, ICRC, Geneva, 1886, pp. 251-254, contains an account of the journey made by the delegate of the Russian Red Cross, with complete equipment for a 300-bed hospital, from Odessa to Sofia in the depths of a bitter winter. See also *Bulletin international...* 1886, pp. 164-170.

special committee formed by the Bulgarian Red Cross collected 2 million leva which it handed over to the Nansen Committee; the Society also opened a canteen in the Saratov region and for two years provided food for two thousand children. Some years later, in 1928, it took a major part in the relief operations after the terrible earthquake that affected Bulgaria.

All these activities were exceptional, made necessary by external occurrences, but the Bulgarian Red Cross also had its normal, long-term activities: training courses for home nurses, first-aid courses, exhibitions on health problems, the collection of funds to finance orphanages, sanatoria, camps for children and special hospitals for the treatment of tuberculosis. The Junior section of the Society was founded in 1921 and quickly became a vital feature in popular health education.

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Today the Bulgarian Red Cross has about 2 million members. It is divided into 28 district committees, one for each of the country's administrative areas; these committees are subdivided into 212 town committees, 1050 village committees and 7120 basic units.

The supreme body of the Society is the Congress, which meets once five years. The day-to-day direction of the Society is carried out by the Central Committee of 139 members and the Executive Bureau of 17 persons nominated by the Central Committee.

A great part of the Society's present activities deal with health, under two different aspects: education of the population in health matters, and protection of health in order to increase the productivity of the population. To promote health education, the Society organizes conferences and study groups, discussions, competitions, "health days" and "health weeks". In the schools, the Junior Red Cross makes a large contribution to the health education of the younger generation. The Society publishes a journal, entitled "Health", which is very popular. In direct measures for the protection of health, the Bulgarian Red Cross is extremely active through some 65,000 volunteers, who carry out preventive medical examinations among the population and health checks in factories, mines, schools, public and communal establishments.

As part of this general concern with the health of the nation, the Bulgarian Red Cross organizes such campaigns as collecting blood (thousands of volunteers donate blood every year) and aid in accidents at work, on the roads, in the mountains or on water. All these activities require much practical organization. For example, to deal with accidents at work, the Society has created 50,000 small medical posts; on the roads

it has 344 first-aid patrols; there are 800 volunteers, including doctors, engineers, etc., ready to help in accidents in the mountains; over the last ten years, 15,000 people have been trained to give help in boating or swimming accidents. To co-ordinate these varied activities and to respond swiftly to distress calls, the Bulgarian Red Cross has its own radio network.

In the life of the Bulgarian nation, the Red Cross Society plays a major role and enjoys the confidence of the population and the authorities. Press, radio and television provide effective support. Its services have been recognized by the Council of State of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, which has conferred on the Society one of the country's highest honours.

The Bulgarian Red Cross is also active in the international sphere. It has hosted several international meetings of the Red Cross. Every two years it organizes an International Festival of Red Cross and Health Films, at Varna. In addition to the friendly and constructive relationship it maintains, as a member of the International Red Cross, with the ICRC and the League, the Bulgarian Society has direct contacts with other National Societies, to which it is prompt to send material aid in the event of natural disaster or armed conflict. In this practical way the Society helps to promote friendship, neighbourly relations and the spirit of peace among nations and peoples, thereby living up to the motto "Per humanitatem ad pacem".¹

The *International Review of the Red Cross* is happy to congratulate the Bulgarian Red Cross Society on its centenary and to offer good wishes for the future.

¹ The article has been written on the basis of a text supplied by the Bulgarian Red Cross and of ICRC documents.