The Geneva Convention

The Geneva Convention was a series of international diplomatic meetings that produced a number of agreements, in particular the Humanitarian Law of Armed Conflicts, a group of international laws for the humane treatment of wounded or captured military personnel, medical personnel and non-military civilians during war or armed conflicts. The agreements originated in 1864 and were significantly updated in 1949 after World War II.

Henry Dunant

For much of mankind’s history, the ground rules of warfare were hit or miss, if they existed at all. While some civilizations showed compassion for the injured, helpless or innocent civilians, others tortured or slaughtered anyone in sight, no questions asked.

In 1859, Genevan businessman Henry Dunant traveled to Emperor Napoleon III’s headquarters in northern Italy to seek land rights for a business venture. He got much more than he bargained for, however, when he found himself a witness to the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino, a gory battle in the Second War of Italian Independence.

The horrific suffering Dunant saw impacted him so greatly he wrote a first-hand account in 1862 called *A Memory of Solferino.* But he didn’t just write about what he’d observed, he also proposed a solution: All nations come together to create trained, volunteer relief groups to treat battlefield wounded and offer humanitarian assistance to those affected by war.

Red Cross

A committee was formed—which included Dunant and an early iteration of the [Red Cross](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/international-red-cross-founded)—in Geneva to explore ways to implement Dunant’s ideas.

In October 1863, delegates from 16 countries along with military medical personnel traveled to Geneva to discuss the terms of a wartime humanitarian agreement. This meeting and its resultant treaty signed by 12 nations became known as the First Geneva Convention.

Despite playing an important role in the progression of what became the International Committee of the Red Cross, continuing his work as champion for the battle-wounded and prisoners of war and winning the first Nobel Peace Prize, Dunant lived and died in near poverty.

Geneva Conventions of 1906 and 1929

In 1906, the Swiss government arranged a conference of 35 states to review and update improvements to the First Geneva Convention.

The amendments extended protections for those wounded or captured in battle as well as volunteer agencies and medical personnel tasked with treating, transporting and removing the wounded and killed.

It also made the repatriation of captured belligerents a recommendation instead of mandatory. The 1906 Convention replaced the First Geneva Convention of 1864.

After [World War I](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/world-war-i-history), it was clear the 1906 Convention and The Hague Convention of 1907 didn’t go far enough. In 1929, updates were made to further the civilized treatment of prisoners of war.

The new updates stated all prisoners must be treated with compassion and live in humane conditions. It also laid out rules for the daily lives of prisoners and established the International Red Cross as the main neutral organization responsible for collecting and transmitting data about prisoners of war and the wounded or killed.

Geneva Conventions of 1949

Germany signed the Convention of 1929, however, that didn’t prevent them from carrying out horrific acts on and off the battlefield and within their military prison camps and civilian concentration camps during [World War II](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii). As a result, the Geneva Conventions were expanded in 1949 to protect non-combatant civilians.

According to the [American Red Cross](http://www.redcross.org/), the new articles also added provisions to protect:

* medical personnel, facilities and equipment
* wounded and sick civilians accompanying military forces
* military chaplains
* civilians who take up arms to fight invading forces

Article 9 of the Convention specified the Red Cross has the right to assist the wounded and sick and provide humanitarian aid. Article 12 stipulated the wounded and sick must not be murdered, tortured, exterminated or exposed to biological experiments.

The Geneva Conventions of 1949 also laid out rules for protecting wounded, sick or shipwrecked armed forces at sea or on hospital ships as well as medical workers and civilians accompanying or treating military personnel. Some highlights of these rules are:

* hospital ships cannot be used for any military purpose nor captured or attacked
* captured religious leaders must be returned immediately
* all sides must attempt to rescue any shipwrecked personnel, even those from another side of the conflict

Male and female prisoners of war received expanded protections in the Convention of 1949 such as:

* they must not be tortured or mistreated
* they’re only required to give their name, rank, birth date and serial number when captured
* they must receive suitable housing and adequate amounts of food
* they must not be discriminated against for any reason
* they have the right to correspond with family and receive care packages
* the Red Cross has the right to visit them and examine their living conditions

Articles were also put in place to protect wounded, sick and pregnant civilians as well as mothers and children. It also stated civilians may not be collectively deported or made to work on behalf of an occupying force without pay. All civilians should receive adequate medical care and be allowed to go about their daily lives as much as possible.

Geneva Convention Protocols

In 1977, Protocols I and II were added to the Conventions of 1949. Protocol increased protections for civilians, military workers and journalists during international armed conflicts. It also banned the use of “weapons that cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering,” or cause “widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment.”

According to the Red Cross, Protocol II was established because most victims of armed conflicts since the 1949 Convention were victims of vicious civil wars. The Protocol stated all people not taking up arms be treated humanely and there should never be an order by anyone in command for “no survivors.”

In addition, children should be well cared for and educated, and the following is prohibited:

* taking hostages
* terrorism
* pillage
* slavery
* group punishment
* humiliating or degrading treatment

In 2005, a Protocol was created to recognize the symbol of the red crystal—in addition to the red cross, the red crescent and the red shield of David—as universal emblems of identification and protection in armed conflicts.

Over 190 states follow the Geneva Conventions because of the belief that some battlefield behaviors are so heinous and damaging, they harm the entire international community. The rules help draw a line—as much as is possible within the context of wars and armed conflicts—between the humane treatment of armed forces, medical staff and civilians and unrestrained brutality against them.