



*Call for Papers*  
*International Conference*

**The Red Cross and the Red Star:  
Humanitarianism and Communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

University of Fribourg, Switzerland

**18-19 January 2024**

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Throughout the 20th century, humanitarianism and Communism developed complex relations made up of confrontations, challenges and (often frustrated) opportunities both at an ideological and practical level. This conference aims to explore the reciprocal interactions between the Red Cross Movement — the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the National Red Cross Societies (NRCS), the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (LRCS, now known as the Federation) – and Communist (or more generally of Marxist inspiration) regimes and organizations, between 1917 and 1991.

As both national and transnational phenomenon, revolutionary struggles involved actors and victims that were not covered by international humanitarian law. As early as 1917, humanitarians were confronted with the problem of the categorisation of civil wars, which complicated the establishment of who were responsible for applying the rules of war and defining the status of captured soldiers. Depending on the point of view of the belligerents, these soldiers were considered as political prisoners, criminals, or combatants. At the end of the Second World War, the emergence of People's Democracies and the reshaping of humanitarian law led to a significant shift, the USSR actively participating in the Movement. They even went as far as to claim paternity of the Red Cross. Despite significant tensions, the USSR and its allies became actively involved in the drafting of the Geneva conventions of 1949 and the Additional protocols of 1977. They also used the Movement to develop a common humanitarian diplomacy among the National Societies of the communist countries united in the "noble struggle for peace". Although communist regimes remained largely closed to humanitarian intervention on their own territories, they did not fail to use their National Societies to project themselves abroad and play on the rivalries between the ICRC and the League. During decolonization, some of the national liberation movements aligned with Marxism did not hesitate to use the Movement to obtain resources or forms of recognition on the international stage.

Despite the opening up of the archives following the disappearance of the Communist regimes on the European continent, as well as those of the Red Cross Movement, the relationship between Communism and the Red Cross has long remained overlooked by the historiography. This conference aims to examine this question as part of a global history of humanitarianism which has been significantly renewed over the last few years. The organizers of the conference propose to focus more particularly on the three following research themes:

- The first research theme explores questions of ideology and politics. How far did different concepts of solidarity, categories of armed conflicts and their victims, as well as understandings of international law, coexisted or clashed throughout the century? How did these tensions manifest themselves? How did different actors attempt to bypass these conflicts, or sometimes to exacerbate them? We invite papers considering both the anti-Communism of some Red Cross institutions and alternative humanitarian models proposed by Marxist actors.

- The second research theme examines the place of Communist regimes and Communist Red Cross societies within the Movement, both at an institutional and diplomatic level. The first aim is to explore the history of the Red Cross societies in Communist countries. What were the specific features of these national societies? To what extent did their alignment with the government spark debate within the Movement? What were the dynamics that existed between them and how did they collaborate with the rest of the Movement? The second aim is to analyse the role that they played at a diplomatic level, as well as their interactions with representatives of Communist states. To what extent did they try to influence the main decisions of the Movement during international conferences and to shape the codification of humanitarian law? How did they promote specific forms of humanitarian diplomacy within the Movement?

- A third research theme focuses on practices in the field, particularly in the context of revolutionary wars, uprisings or repression. What were the specific problems that humanitarian actors faced when they wished to obtain access to prisoners classified as political and, more generally, territories controlled by Communist authorities, in a context of conflict, or even of natural disaster? Conversely, how did revolutionaries mobilize the Red Cross Movement? To what extent did the involvement of the Red Cross Movement represent a threat, or on the contrary a resource? And how did these perceptions change over the course of the 20th century?

Proposals can be submitted in English or French (an abstract of max. 300 words and a short biography of max. 150 words) by **25 June 2023** to [redcross-redstar@unifr.ch](mailto:redcross-redstar@unifr.ch). The conference will be bilingual.

The conference organizers will provide accommodation and meals for participants during the event. Please let it be known if you need partial or full funding of your travel costs.