

THE GENEVA CONVENTION TEMPERS WAR WITH COMPASSION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: International Treaties & Agreements, and other important organizations

In 1929, on July 27 — 90 years ago to the day — 53 countries agreed to sign an accord regarding how to treat prisoners of war. This was formally called the Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War; and came to be known as the Second Geneva Convention. Together with three other treaties, and three additional protocols that were signed after World War II in 1949, this became the bedrock of what is now known simply as the Geneva Convention. Thus far, prisoners were treated in accordance with the Hague Regulations of 1899 and 1907, but after World War I, these came to be seen as inadequate. It is an important moment in the history of the world, because even as wars were seen as inevitable, it was recognised that individual soldiers deserved better treatment at the hands of opposition powers, and that the right to dignity must always be kept paramount, even in high pressure situations such as armed combat.

In the larger picture of geopolitics, the individual is often forgotten; worse, he is seen only as a statistic. But the Geneva Convention reminds us to look at the individual even in spaces such as war between nations. The agreement set down the rules for the treatment of prisoners taken in a war situation, explicitly putting down that prisoners of war (POWs) would be prisoners of the Power which holds them, and not of the unit that had captured them; and that they must be treated with honour, and allowed to live in humane conditions. The protocol also established that prisoners of war need only truthfully give their names and ranks, and that they cannot be coerced to reveal other details about themselves or the operations they have been involved in. All these caveats are to establish the individual as the linchpin of humanity.

In a climate of uncertainty and open hostility between nations, the Geneva Conventions play an important role in tempering the aggression of war with a touch of compassion. How one treats those who stand in opposition to that which we hold dear — be it our country, a cause, or a faith — will always be an important defining characteristic of a nation, a people, and even individuals. The Geneva Conventions that originally only addressed the treatment of combatants was later expanded to include non-combatants and civilians as well. In a world where the treatments of immigrants and refugees is one of the bigger problems we all face, it is a good time to remember that we are honour-bound to extend compassion and dignity to everyone — even those we may be ready to kill.

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