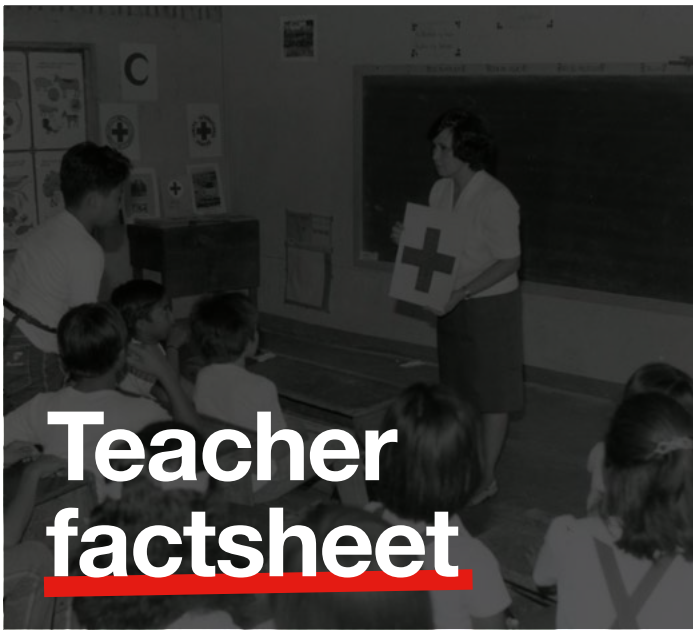
British Red Cross

First World War volunteers



This factsheet includes extra information that you may like to read before delivering the activities in the First World War Volunteers teaching toolkit. It includes:

- **Supplementary information for Module one: The power of volunteering**
- **Supplementary information for Module two: Protections in war**
- **Supplementary information for Module three: Humanity in action**

You can also find more information about the work that the British Red Cross did during the First World War **here**.

Please read the Resource overview document as well to give you an understanding of how the toolkit it structured.

Supplementary information for Module one: The Power of volunteering

Voluntary aid detachments

The Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) were established by the British Red Cross (working with the Order of St John) during the First World War, and provided vital emergency care and medical services for the sick and wounded. Thousands of people volunteered to support medical professionals in this important role, and many were trained to become nurses.

Volunteering was vital to the success of Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) during World War I. Some 90,000 people became volunteers in VADs in the UK and overseas where people needed help and support from the British Red Cross.

Individual volunteers became known as VADs during the war and so sometimes VAD is used to describe the person as well as the detachment (group) they volunteered for.

Auxiliary hospitals

The VADs needed places where services to help those affected or wounded by war could be carried out. Even before the outbreak of the war, the British Red Cross began to identify spaces that could be used to care for the sick or wounded if war broke out. These spaces ranged from small village halls to much larger buildings that could house many patients. These are known as “auxiliary hospitals”.

When WWI started, the British Red Cross received offers from the public for over 5,000 buildings that could be used for treating people. They had to sort through these to see which were suitable for the needs of the staff, patients and volunteers who would use them.

You can find more information about the work done by the volunteers **here**.

Supplementary information for Module two: Protections in war

Prisoners of War, the Geneva Conventions and the Red Cross emblem

When a soldier was captured by enemy forces they became a Prisoner of War, or POW, as they were sometimes known. The Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) set up by British Red Cross performed many important tasks during World War I, and one of these was to help care for POWs.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL or the rules of war) is the main set of laws which protect civilians and the sick or injured during armed conflicts. Nowadays, the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 protect those affected by armed conflict and 196 countries have committed to follow them – that's every independent country in the world! The original Geneva Convention was proposed by the founder of the Red Cross Movement, Henry Dunant, and was adopted by about a dozen countries in 1864. It referred to protections for soldiers injured during conflict.

The 1906 Geneva Convention (which updated the 1864 Convention for the wounded and sick), the 1907 Hague Convention X (which covered naval warfare) and the 1907 Hague Convention IV (which covered the conduct of hostilities, occupation and the treatment of POWs) were the main applicable treaties in force during the First World War. These rules included:

- People caring for the sick and wounded should be protected as they are not engaged in combat.
- The Red Cross emblem is a symbol of neutrality and protection displayed by medical personnel, chaplains and those under their care. It is not legal to attack those who wear the emblem, as they are clearly marked as non-combatants.
- Hospitals and other buildings treating the sick and wounded are not allowed to be attacked. However, they might lose this protection if they are being used for military purposes.
- All people (including humanitarian workers and army medical staff) caring for the sick and wounded should do so impartially. They should care for them no matter who they are fighting for and treat those in most need first.
- Relief societies, such as the British Red Cross, should be allowed to distribute aid to prisoners of war.

These protections helped the British Red Cross, working through Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs), to perform important roles during WWI without being harmed or targeted during the conflict.

During the First World War, the rules protecting prisoners of war were minimal, but they required belligerents to treat POWs humanely. Additional rules were later established in the Geneva Conventions of 1929 and 1949 to further protect POWs. Each new treaty was adopted as a response to atrocities which took place against POWs during the previous war. By detailing exactly what it means to treat POWs humanely, there can be no room for confusion. For example, the Third Geneva Convention of 1949 requires that (among other things):

- POW dormitories should be damp-proof and of the same quality as dormitories for a belligerent's own soldiers.
- POWs must be given monthly medical checkups.
- POWs must be allowed to pursue intellectual, sporting and religious interests.
- POWs must never be used for biological experiments.
- POWs are entitled to the same legal process as a belligerent's own soldiers if they commit violations of that country's laws (however, collective punishment for individual acts, corporal punishments, imprisonment without access to daylight and, in general, any form of torture or cruelty, are forbidden).

You can find more information about the emblem **here** and international humanitarian law **here**.

If you would like to explore the rules of war further with your learners, please see the **Rules of War resource**.

A history of the Red Cross emblem

1859: The Battle of Solferino
When Henry Dunant, a Swiss merchant, saw the terrible plight of the sick and wounded soldiers at the Battle of Solferino in 1859 he decided something must be done. He helped people on the battlefield, setting up a makeshift hospital and caring for the sick and wounded. Later, he wrote and spoke about the issue and made plans for teams of relief volunteers to help the sick and wounded in any future conflicts. This early act of humanity was the beginnings of what is today the largest global humanitarian organisation in the world – the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

1864: the first Geneva Convention
Various European powers, including Britain, were interested in Henry Dunant's ideas and met in Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss them and begin plans for forming national relief societies to carry out Dunant's proposals. In 1864 the Swiss government called a second conference that resulted in an international agreement or convention. The convention committed those governments that signed it to give humane treatment to the sick and wounded in war and to protect those who cared for them. This was known as the **First Geneva Convention**.

The need to be recognised
At the 1864 convention the representatives agreed that it was important for those helping to care for the sick and wounded to be recognised. War could be very difficult and confusing with people making choices in very challenging circumstances. Because of this they needed a simple symbol that would be known and recognised by everyone. It had to be a clear, neutral sign on the battlefield to protect medical staff, humanitarian workers and facilities.

Because they were in Switzerland, the governments at the Geneva meeting opted for a red cross on a white background. This is the inverse of the Swiss flag, the country in which the conventions were agreed and which Henry Dunant came from.

The Red Cross symbol (today known as the "emblem") with its contrasting colours of red and white had the advantage of being easily produced and recognised at a distance. It is not a first aid or medical sign. It is not a religious or political symbol. Its purpose is to protect the wounded, the sick and those who care for them in a neutral and impartial way.

The Red Cross emblem in the First World War
The Red Cross was already being used by the national relief society of Britain that was formed in 1870 following on from the Geneva Conventions. These national societies soon became known as Red Cross Societies. By the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the British society was already known as the British Red Cross.

The British Red Cross formed the Joint War Committee with the Order of St John when the war broke out. They pooled their fundraising activities and resources and worked together under the protective emblem of the Red Cross.

The Red Cross helped to save many thousands of lives during the First World War by allowing volunteers to go about their role in caring for the sick and wounded. It became a respected and trusted symbol that there was a human cost and human need to conflict and war.

1916: The British War Charities Act
The British Government ruled that charities collecting money for the war effort, including for wounded soldiers, must be registered. It also ruled that the only charity allowed to collect money using the Red Cross Emblem was the British Red Cross Society.

This meant that all future fundraising in the UK under the symbol of the cross was guaranteed to go to the work of the British Red Cross Society, working in partnership with the Order of St John through the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) during WWI.

The Red Cross emblem today
The Red Cross is a naval and military international symbol, agreed upon as a protective badge for all those engaged in humanitarian work. It could only be issued and worn with the permission of the naval or military authorities. It is still the emblem of the armed forces' medical services and its use is controlled by governments. It is a visible sign of protection under the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

Today the British Red Cross is the only UK organisation allowed to use the emblem.

The emblem "is first and foremost a symbol of neutral protection in wartime. To be effective, it must be understood and completely trusted". In peacetime, misuse of the emblem can lead to misunderstandings and uncertainty. Uncertainty may put people who need protection during conflict at risk.

Today there are three emblems that are recognized by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement; they all mean the same thing and countries can choose which emblem their National Society uses. The emblems are: the red cross, the red crescent and the red crystal. You can find out more about the emblem **here**.

Image © Jorge Perez (ICRC).

Supplementary information for Module three: Humanity in action

From the outbreak of World War I it was clear that those who became sick or wounded would need help with medicines, bandages and other forms of treatment. It was also clear that they would need help during their recovery with food, shelter and emotional support. The British Red Cross and (VADs) were quick to establish services to meet these needs.

The missing and wounded service

Later in the war, other needs became clear too. One of these was the need to hear news of people who may have gone missing or been wounded. When this need was identified, the role of VADs was expanded to provide a service to help find people who were missing or wounded. This "missing persons" service survives today for situations such as conflict or natural disasters, and is the only service that must be provided by all national societies of the Red Cross (more information **here**).

Initially, missing person requests were responded to with a form. The decision to provide a more personal approach for those missing a relative was significant, as each letter responding to an enquiry would need to be handwritten. During the war, the department received 342,248 enquiries. Responding to each enquiry in this way was seen as being more humane, which is at the heart of the British Red Cross and its activities.

Refugees

During World War I many people were forced to flee their homes because of the fighting or the threat of fighting in the country/region they lived in, and had to seek safety in other places, becoming refugees. The Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) set up and run by the British Red Cross helped many refugees, providing them with food, shelter, medical or emergency care and other basic needs.

Another term often used when talking about refugees is "displaced people". People can be externally displaced (from their own country to another country) or internally displaced (from one place to another within their own country). VADs worked with people who had been internally and externally displaced.

Note on the term "refugee"

Today the word refugee has a very particular meaning. Other terms like "asylum seeker", "displaced" and "migrant" are also used today, but all mean slightly different things. You can find out more about these different terms **here**.

It is important to know that at the time of WWI these different terms were not used and the word refugee was used to describe anyone who had moved away because of the conflict.

Just as the VADs provided support for refugees in WWI, there are millions of people around the world who need help as refugees or asylum seekers today. The British Red Cross works with international partners to provide this help in many parts of the world today. The **United Nations High Commission for Refugees** (UNHCR) keeps track of places in the world where the support is most needed.

Raising funds

The services provided by the British Red Cross and Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) during World War I needed large amounts of money to keep them running. Many volunteers gave their time unpaid, but there were still all of the costs of materials, transport, buildings and other costs.

The Joint War Committee gave a grant to the British Red Cross and the Order of St John for each patient they cared for in the VADs, but this was not enough to cover all of the costs. VADs had to raise the extra money needed for the services they provided by fundraising.

> *"By the end of the war, £21,885,035 had been raised and £20,058,355 spent on hospitals, medicine, clothing, grants and aftercare for the sick and wounded."*
>
> From the British Red Cross,
> **"What we did during the war"**

The war was a time of great difficulty. Many workers who supported their families with their earnings from jobs were called away to fight. The families left behind had to make do with what they had and could find. It was difficult to raise funds in such difficult times.

Thinking of how to raise money was only the first part of the fundraising task. There was then the challenge of deciding what to spend the money on when there were so many different needs. This is explored further in the resource.

You can find out more about how the British Red Cross fundraises today **here**.