

‘START FOR THE FIELD IF I CAN REACH IT?’

Clara Barton, the Universalist “Angel of the Battlefield” of the American Civil War, was convalescing from broken health and was out of sorts in Switzerland in 1870, when suddenly war broke out between France and Germany on July 18. Immediately she girded herself for action, to render humanitarian and nursing care for wounded soldiers, just as she did in the American Civil War. She hastily jotted a diary note: “Start for the field if I can reach it.”

She started through Switzerland toward France and the fighting, but as she passed through Basel she noticed huge storehouses of the International Red Cross. The International Red Cross had been organized several years before in Europe, but the United States had refused to join. It adopted as its symbol the flag of Switzerland, a country that tried to be a benevolent neutral in all the conflicts of Europe, but a symbol with colors reversed. Rather than the Swiss white cross on a red field, the Red Cross was identified by a red cross on a white field. Contributions from all over Europe flooded into the Basel Red Cross storehouses, to be distributed to needy soldiers of the belligerent states without distinction.

It was, wrote Barton, “a larger supply than I had ever seen at any one time, in readiness for the field at our own Sanitary Commission [forerunner of the American Red Cross, organized and funded from private Universalist and Unitarian sources] rooms in Washington, even in the fourth year of the war . . . and trained authorized, education nurses stood awaiting their appointment, each with this badge upon the arm or breast, and every box, barrel or package with a broad, bright scarlet cross with rendered it as safe from molestation . . . as the bread and wine before the altar.”

Barton’s efforts to provide succor to the soldiers of the American Civil War were heroic and tireless, but she was one lone woman, and the results were so very limited compared to the pressing heart-wrenching need. But here in Europe with a war just having broken out, the Red Cross was organized, well stocked and staffed, and from the first moment hard at work. She was in awe of “the work of these Red Cross societies in the field, accomplishing in four months under their systematic organization what we failed to accomplish in four years without it . . . a whole continent marshalled under the banner of the Red Cross.”

Clara Barton pressed on to the fighting front in northern France, but both French and German officers refused to let her pass to treat the wounded. Many were suspicious that she was a spy, or dismissed her as a camp follower. With a heavy heart she returned to Switzerland, without having treated a single wounded soldier, but shocked by the desperate hollow eyes of thousands of civilians suffering the brutal effects of war.

Yet an idea had been born, to organize a Red Cross organization in America, and for it to serve not only the victims of war, but the victims of disasters of all kinds. Clara Barton would return to the United States, found American Red Cross, stamp upon it her vision, and lead it into maturity.

Ref: Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Clara Barton: Professional Angel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 158-163.