

Geneva Conventions

The Geneva Conventions comprise of three protocols and four additional treaties that set the standards for ethical treatment in war. The Geneva Convention originated in 1864 but were given a major overhaul in 1949.

Geneva Convention is an important topic covered in the world history segment of the UPSC Mains Exam.

Origins of the Geneva Conventions

Since time immemorial, rules of war varied from civilisation to civilisation, some such as the Babalonians were exemplary in their conduct while the Roman Empire and the Mongols did not shy away from reducing entire cities or its populations to ash. This was the norm until Henry Durant arrived on the scene.

Henry Durant was a businessman from Geneva who sought audience with Napoleon II, a nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, regarding the acquisition of land for a business venture. He did get land in northern Italy but he also bore witness to the aftermath of the bloody Battle of Solferino, one of many fought during the Unification of Italy.

This prompted him to write an account of what he had witnessed while proposing a solution to mitigate some of the violence of war - the training of a volunteer group that would provide assistance to those affected by war, civilian and soldier alike

Thus an early form of the Red Cross was formed to explore Durant's suggestion. On October 1863, delegates from 16 nations came to Geneva and discussed the terms of humanitarian treatment during the war. The result was a treaty signed by 12 nations and became known as the First Geneva Convention

The Geneva Conventions of 1906 and 1929

Another convention was called for by the Swiss government to review and make any improvements to the first Geneva Convention. The amendments included protection for wounded or captured prisoners of war and protection for the medical personnel treating, evacuating and removing the dead and wounded

Following the end of World War I in 1919 it was decided that the amendments made in 1906 were not enough for humanitarian conduct in times of war and further updates were made in 1929 to ensure a civilized treatment to the prisoners of war.

The new amendments introduced rules about the daily lives of prisoners and led to the establishment of the Red Cross as the main neutral organisation which will ensure the collection and transmission of data regarding the death and wounding of combatants.

Geneva Convention of 1949

Although Germany was one of the signatories of the Convention of 1929, it did not stop its fascist government from carrying out horrific acts on both on the civilian and military personnel during World War II. Thus the Geneva Conventions were expanded in 1949 to protect non-combatant civilians.

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

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.

Geneva Convention Protocols

In 1977, Protocols I and II were added to the Conventions of 1949. Protocol I 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 International Committee of the Red Cross, Protocol II was established because most victims of armed conflicts since the 1949 Convention were victims of vicious civil wars.

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

Over 190 states follow the Geneva Conventions because of the belief that some battlefield behaviours 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.