

Central Prisoners of War Agency

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VI. Central Prisoners of War Agency

GENERAL REMARKS

The work of the Central Prisoners of War Agency in 1952 was similar to that of previous years. The mail amounted to 162,000 letters and telegrams received or despatched.

This correspondence was mainly concerned with enquiries for military personnel missing since the second world conflict and searches for prisoners of war who had not been traced since the close of hostilities. This implied close checking by the Agency Services in archives and card-indexes, taking into account all possible distortion of names. The Agency's vast series of card-indexes often supply it with information on persons sought for, or with particulars which permit an approach to the authorities concerned.

The Agency searches for all possible sources of information. It makes a great many *special enquiries*; reference may be made here to the International Committee's initiative in setting up *regimental enquiries* to collect individual evidence from members of the units to which the missing military personnel belonged; such enquiries lead to detailed replies which add considerably to the information held by the Central Agency.

SECTIONS

The *German Section* received 62,000 letters and despatched 48,000. It filed 26,000 index cards and checked over 45,000.

In addition to requests from private individuals, it frequently occurs that Governments or official organisations concerned with the tracing of missing persons transmit to the Agency

enquiries as to which their own records have no particulars, or ascertain from the Agency if information in their possession is exact.

It is common knowledge that nearly all the information on record in Geneva was communicated to the Governments concerned, who made use of it to set up their own files. Nevertheless the Agency's card indexes are today still considered to be the most accurate and complete instrument for tracing purposes ; this is mainly due to the fact that circumstances in the war sometimes prevented the transmission of certain information by the ICRC, and also to the fact that the archives in various countries were dispersed, and sometimes destroyed by bombing.

In August 1952 the Government of the German Federal Republic submitted to the Agency a list of 4,507 cases not yet cleared up. The list concerned 992 missing German military personnel and 3,515 former German prisoners of war in Allied hands who could not be traced. A systematic check in the card indexes brought to light more precise details and new information—escape, discharge, transformation into civilian workers—in addition to information already available. Following these results the German Government expressed a desire for a check to be made on about 100,000 cases of missing military personnel from the particulars already in possession of the Agency's German Section.

Considerable documentation was received from various countries. The Belgian Ministry for Internal Affairs sent exhumation certificates for German servicemen. A French Delegation communicated for checking purposes lists of German prisoners of war deceased during captivity in France ; some of this information (about 16%) had not so far been supplied to the Agency, which was thus able to make up its card indexes and apply to the French authorities for the corresponding death certificates. The Czechoslovak Red Cross has continued to communicate the names of German servicemen who fell on its territory and were buried in Czechoslovakia.

Further, the Agency continued as before to correspond with the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the

USSR on the subject of German military personnel missing on the Eastern Front or notified as being held in camps. Over 2,500 requests for investigation were transmitted in Russian ; no replies have been received.

The "*Civilians*" Section continued to deal with the reunion of families belonging to German-speaking minorities who are still in Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia. Lists of adults and children were sent to the National Red Cross Societies of those two countries. The documents concerned 13,600 cases. At the request of families which had emigrated to West Germany, the Section has also endeavoured to obtain news of persons remaining in territories annexed by Poland or Russia ; over 15,000 applications were received in 1952.

The *Italian Section* received 6,500 letters and despatched 4,850. It entered 29,000 cards into the indexes and checked 8,500 cases following requests which generally came from the "Tracing Bureau" of the Ministry for Defence in Rome, or from the Interdepartmental Committee dealing with the issue of death certificates or the duplicating of those lost or destroyed during hostilities. Before issuing a certificate concerning a missing person the Italian Government regularly requests the Italian Section of the Agency to do all necessary checking in its card indexes.

It should be mentioned that this Section has received over 500 requests for certificates of captivity for Libyan ex-servicemen incorporated in the Italian Army who were interned by the British authorities in Egyptian territory after the fighting at Sidi el Barrani. The Italian Government having decided to grant a bonus to former prisoners of war and to the families of men who fought for Italy, a certificate of death or of captivity was necessary to obtain this bonus ¹.

¹ The names given by the applicants were often not identical with those appearing on the lists of prisoners or deceased military personnel issued during the war by the Detaining Power, which may be accounted for by the difficulty of giving a phonetic interpretation of Arab names ; these discrepancies made extra work necessary for checking and identifying the cases.

The *Grouped Sections* investigated 35,500 cases covering 77 nationalities and various categories of stateless persons. The figure for the incoming and outgoing mail during the year was 40,650 letters and telegrams. In addition to the tracing of military personnel, a great deal of the work concerned civilians missing since 1946; for instance :

Greece. — The search for Greek citizens who—voluntarily or not—left their country during the civil war was continued ; the Central Prisoners of War Agency transmitted to the National Red Cross Societies of countries adjacent to Greece the enquiries and messages collected by the Greek Red Cross, sent by families remaining in Greece ¹

Middle East. — The principal work of the Agency consisted in forming a link between, first, the Arab minorities in Israel and the Arab States and, secondly, Israeli minorities in Arab countries and the State of Israel.

The International Committee's Delegation in Israel having ceased to function in 1951, the transmission of family messages between the different Middle East States should have been taken over by the Joint Armistice Commissions. But the system appears to have been carried on between Jordan and Israel only. On account of this break down the Agency received numerous requests from Arab countries in the Middle East, either for the transmission of family news between persons separated by close-shut frontiers, or for the tracing of members of the same family separated by the fighting. The Agency had the pleasure of ascertaining that the institutions with which it was in contact—Red Crescent Societies in the Arab countries and the Magen David Adom in Israel—did everything possible to facilitate its work.

Indochina Section. — Thanks to the setting up by the French Red Cross of the " Office du Prisonnier " in Saïgon, the Agency was able to keep track of the information collected by the French authorities from repatriated prisoners of war.

¹ From January 1, 1949 to December 31, 1952, 21,190 enquiries were thus transmitted. For the same period 4,970 replies were received.

This work of co-ordination carried on through the Delegate of the ICRC in Indochina is particularly useful ; it allows full use to be made of the information obtained and for its transmission to the families concerned with all possible speed. This method was made necessary on account of the total absence of other sources of information as to the names of prisoners of war in the hands of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The number of enquiries sent in 1952 from the Agency to the Office du Prisonnier, Saïgon, amounted to 600, to which over 200 replies were received.

Korean Section. — Lists of prisoners of war belonging to the armed forces of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, and Chinese volunteers, have been regularly received ; these lists were sent to the representative of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea in Moscow, for transmission to his Government. Duplicate lists, mentioning the Chinese volunteers, were also sent to the Chinese Red Cross in Peking. On the other hand, during 1952, the Central Prisoners of War Agency received no information concerning military personnel or civilians in North Korean hands, nor any replies to the 987 individual enquiries transmitted by the ICRC since the outbreak of the conflict.

Prisoners of War of the First World War.

The Agency still receives enquiries concerning prisoners of the 1914-1918 conflict (64 enquiries in 1952). In the case of Germany the enquirers apply to the ICRC on the advice of the official authorities, the archives of the German Army for 1914-1918 having been destroyed during the Second World War.

In conclusion, the Central Agency for Prisoners of War frequently applies to Red Cross Societies and to other official or private agencies to obtain material for replies to the numerous questions put to it. Whether it is a question of a family of trying to get in touch with its members from whom it is separated, or of obtaining documents of an official or other nature which are essential for every-day life, the important social nature of this action cannot be too fully emphasized.