

The Central Prisoners of War Agency

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VI. The Central Prisoners of War Agency

As long as German prisoners were held in captivity, the German Section of the Central Agency continued almost on its wartime basis.

Countries other than Germany, none of whose nationals were any longer prisoner, continued nevertheless long after the Armistice to turn to the Agency as the only international body having an adequate card-index of names, and able to answer their questions. It being the duty of the Agency to take on this postwar job, most of the national Sections continued on a reduced scale in 1947 and 1948.

The work of the Agency, from July 1947 to December 31, 1948, may be summed up as follows :

Mail items — Incoming :	607,673
Outgoing :	549,281
Staff ¹ — June 30, 1947	184
June 30, 1948	92
Dec. 31, 1948	58

GERMAN SECTION

In the early Summer of 1947, the staff of the German Section still numbered about a hundred. It had taken over the work of recording deaths, previously done by the German official Bureau. The Section registered on index cards information received from Allied sources about German military personnel interned or deceased, and handed it on to the Office for the Liquidation of the *Wehrmacht* (WAST), in Berlin.

¹ See above, p. 13.

Correspondence and research subsequently carried on was divided between the three Services dealing with Prisoners, Deaths and Civilians.

(a) Prisoners

Starting in Summer 1947, information was received on capture cards of German prisoners in Poland; 35,000 such cards had been received by June 30, 1948. Lists were made out in Geneva and sent to the four German *Suchdienste* (Tracing Bureaux), and to WAST in Berlin. The data made it possible to answer enquiries in suspense; it also supplied the basis of extensive search and enquiry in the camps on behalf of relatives whom prisoner of war mail could not reach. On the whole, results were most satisfactory.

The German Section continued to deal with applications for release, search for prisoners of war missing (after transfer from one Power to another, change of status, "civilianization", or other circumstances), and the return of property to discharged men. The Section also transmitted quantities of documents (powers of attorney and legal papers), which prisoners wished to have sent to their relatives.

Requests from Germany for news of military personnel missing on the Eastern front continued on a large scale, over 40,000 enquiries being received from July, 1947 to December 31, 1948. As Geneva was unable to institute such enquiries, the applicants were referred to the German *Suchdienste*.

By June 30, 1948, the German Section had received from France 106,000 cards giving information about prisoners who had been "civilianized". As these men could communicate freely with home, the ICRC confined itself to replying to specific demands.

In November 1948, the German Section was still receiving some hundred letters a day.

(b) Deaths

In 1947 and 1948, the Section received and forwarded to WAST death certificates of deceased prisoners of war, and of military personnel killed in action in the years 1944 and 1945. Most of

them came from France, others from Czechoslovakia, Poland and the American Zone of Occupation. There were none from Yugoslavia, in spite of requests made to the Yugoslav Red Cross.

As a rule, the cases referred to the Agency became steadily more complicated. This is not surprising, since most enquiries were about missing military personnel for whom relatives had long been searching in vain.

A great many enquiries for men killed in action, or shot after court-martial in France, were taken up with the local municipalities, the Ministry for Ex-Servicemen and the Delegations of the ICRC; they frequently led to positive results. Local tracing helped to find numerous graves and allowed exhumations to be made.

Numerous requests for information were made to the *Gräberfürsorge* (German War Graves Commission) in Rome¹ concerning combatants killed and buried in Italy; also to local authorities in Czechoslovakia.

All personal estate received in Geneva was transmitted to WAST, by which it was returned to the heirs-at-law. On receiving the estate the heirs often sent in claims or requests for further details.

(c) Civilians

The Central Agency received, from July 1947 to December 31, 1948, some 25,000 appeals for help in tracing German civilians who had remained in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and East Prussia, and was able to supply much valuable information.

Enquiries addressed to the Polish Red Cross, Polish local authorities and internment camps gave on the whole satisfactory results.

Search was instituted for *Volksdeutsche* in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia².

¹ This Service, composed of ten German officials, had been captured by the British Army in Northern Italy in 1945. On the representation of the ICRC Delegate in Rome, they were allowed to continue their duties, and were helped financially by the ICRC and the Holy See. When, at the end of 1947, it was proposed to send them back to Germany before their work was completed, the ICRC was able to have them attached to a Department of the Italian War Ministry and thus to have their legal status clarified until the end of 1949.

² See above, p. 65.

Numerous enquiries were received about conditions of German civilian workers (ex-prisoners) in France.

The work of the German Section from July 1, 1947, to December 31, 1948, can be summarised as follows :

Index-cards made out	458,000
Mail-items — Incoming	508,000
Outgoing	427,000
Staff : June 30, 1947	96
June 30, 1948	46
Dec. 31, 1948	22

ITALIAN SECTION

The Italian Section, the staff of which fell to five persons, worked in close understanding with the Italian Official Bureau in Rome.¹

The object of this collaboration was, firstly, the identification of Italian dead in Germany during the War, whose deaths were reported to Rome only by verbal testimony, or by incomplete or misleading documents; secondly, the tracing of ex-prisoners or their relatives, to whom Detaining Powers wished to return belongings and articles of value impounded on capture. As the information available was often erroneous and the family address was generally not given, the Italian Red Cross would have been unable to return such property without the Agency's help. The Italian Section was able to settle over 90 % of the cases submitted to it.

During the period under review, the Section received 12,500 letters, dispatched 11,500 and made out 17,500 new index-cards.

PALESTINE SECTION

In May 1948, postal communications with Palestine were interrupted, and Geneva at once received enquiries about residents, and messages for them.

¹ See *General Report of the ICRC, 1939-1947*, Vol. II, p. 239.

In July, 1948, a Palestine Service at the Agency started the exchange of family news from both sides of the combat area, and the collection of information about prisoners of war.

The work of this Service reached its peak in November 1948. The Service was then particularly busy with enquiries about prisoners of war, and with sending news of their whereabouts and state of health. Lists of prisoners drawn up by the Jewish and Arab official Bureaux reached Geneva through the Delegations in Palestine.

OTHER SECTIONS

Taken in two separate groups, the other Sections had a staff of 37 on June 30, 1947, and of 17 on December 31, 1948. During the whole period, the letters received by the two groups numbered 89,500, and they sent out 110,000.

In addition to the forwarding of Message Form No. 61¹ these Sections issued over 10,000 certificates of captivity in German hands to former Yugoslav and Polish prisoners living since the Armistice in DP camps in Germany.

In October 1948, the Agency received the names of 750 Hungarian prisoners and Displaced Persons who had died in Germany.

In November 1948, several hundred Yugoslav, Bulgarian, Rumanian and Albanian nationals, living as political refugees in Greece and due to emigrate to America and Australia, under the auspices of IRO, availed themselves of the Agency's services to send news to their families.

¹ Telegraphic messages between Germany and countries with which postal communications were still cut, Spain and Japan in particular.