

# Central Prisoners of War Agency

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The scale of distributions was lower in 1954 than in former years, but the total is still considerable. The value of the relief supplied by the ICRC, and that entrusted to its care by third parties for the purpose of distribution, amounted to Sw. Fr. 919,590, as against Sw. Fr. 1,193,285 in the previous year.

The decrease was not general however ; in comparison with the diminution ascertained in practically all instances, it will nevertheless be seen that a considerable increase occurred in three countries, i.e., Bulgaria – Sw. Fr. 105,641 to 129,387 : Italy – Sw. Fr. 9,519 to 31,700 : USSR – Sw. Fr. 10,819 to 86,148, the respective increases being Sw. Fr. 24,000, 21,000 and 76,000, as compared to the previous year.

The operations were carried out in over 29 countries, occasionally in conjunction with delegations and in all cases through the technical services in Geneva which deal with the purchase, despatch and verification of relief supplies. National Red Cross Societies lent their assistance, and the work was facilitated by the understanding attitude of public authorities, and the efforts of persons of good will, which show the confidence placed in the International Committee's action.

## **IV. Central Prisoners of War Agency**

### **1. GENERAL REMARKS**

In 1954 the International Committee's investigations concerning war victims necessitated an exchange of correspondence amounting to 152,161 letters, telegrams and other documents. Photostat copies were made of 7,000 items (certificates of births, marriages and deaths, lists, etc.). The greater part of the Central Agency's work concerns missing military personnel, and prisoners of war whose trace has been lost since the close of hostilities. As in previous years the ICRC dealt with the transmission of family messages and private documents (certificates and extracts of births, marriages and deaths, certificates of captivity, etc.) and the return

of personal belongings of deceased persons, those humanitarian activities which conform to the spirit of the *Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*. It continued to examine documents, and to make use of the information contained therein, in connection with the tracing of missing civilians, as well as its work for the re-uniting of families separated by events of war ; it established or renewed, when necessary, the *ICRC Travel Documents* of which the object is to facilitate the emigration of displaced persons <sup>1</sup>.

## 2. CARD INDEXES AND ENQUIRIES

The whole of the information sent to Geneva is, as all are aware, placed on record at the ICRC headquarters in the card-indexes of the *Central Prisoners of War Agency*.

These records which are kept scrupulously up to date, allow for careful checking to be made, by the so-called method of "tallying" while taking into account all possible mis-spelling of names. The ICRC is thus in a position to supply information required from the cards in its possession, or to collect details which enable it to question the authorities concerned.

The Agency services have recourse to all sources of information. They opened special enquiries which allowed for individual testimonies to be collected from members of the same units as missing men ("regimental enquiries"). In 1954 fifteen thousand enquiries were opened, in particular with local authorities, German communal administrations, French, Polish and Czechoslovak municipal authorities ; they led to detailed replies which often allowed for more extensive searches.

## 3. WORK IN 1954

(a) **German Section.** — During the year the ICRC received some 33,000 enquiries ; searches were made for German nationals who were reported missing during the two World Wars, or recent

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<sup>1</sup> See below, page 33.

conflicts ; investigations were made concerning estates of men who died in captivity ; certificates of captivity for former prisoners of war were issued. The German Civilians Section continued to deal with documents concerning individual cases, in connection with the re-uniting of " Volksdeutsche " families <sup>1</sup>.

**(b) Greek Section.** — During the same period the ICRC exchanged with Greece and Red Cross Societies in neighbouring countries over 10,000 items of correspondence concerning the tracing of Greek nationals who left their country, voluntarily or involuntarily, during the war ; it transmitted family messages and dealt with cases of persons resident in Greece, or Greeks who had emigrated to Australia, whose children had been removed to other countries on account of the events of war. As in previous years, the Greek Section obtained about 5,000 positive replies ; it placed on record the numerous details supplied by the lists of repatriates, in order to bring its files, archives and card-indexes up to date.

**(c) Italian Section.** — The ICRC dealt with over 6,000 official enquiries and sundry individual requests concerning, in particular, the identification of military personnel deceased in captivity, with a view to establishing death certificates or duplicates of documents which had been lost or destroyed during the hostilities ; it was able to supply information in 5,350 cases. It continued to receive enquiries concerning Libyan ex-servicemen who had been enrolled in the Italian forces, and later interned by the British forces ; it sent replies in Arabic to 1,529 applications and issued, in 849 cases, the certificates required for the grants which the Italian Government had decided to allocate to former prisoners of war or their families. It will be recalled that the names given by the applicants did not correspond with those appearing on the lists of deceased persons or military personnel supplied by the Detaining Power during the war ; the phonetic interpretation of Arab names raised difficulties which made the work of tracing and identification more onerous.

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<sup>1</sup> See below, page 31.

**(d) Grouped Sections.**

**NORTHERN EUROPE.** The ICRC received about 8,000 enquiries from Poland and the Baltic and Scandinavian countries. It received 1,600 positive replies to enquiries opened on missing Poles, in Poland and France, as well as those concerning Polish, Balt or Scandinavian military personnel enrolled in armed forces abroad. It issued certificates of captivity or internment to former prisoners of war or deportees, made searches for missing civilians and transmitted family messages.

**CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE.** The ICRC examined over 7,000 enquiries received from Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Rumania, made searches for missing military personnel of the Second World War and former prisoners of war, issued certificates of captivity and followed up claims, in particular those in connection with back pay emanating from former Austrian prisoners of war in American hands. The ICRC also looked after the transmission of family news for displaced civilians, and the correspondence and documents concerning displaced Yugoslav children.

**WESTERN EUROPE.** The ICRC received over 6,000 requests for information, on which enquiries were opened, concerning Belgian, Dutch and Luxemburger nationals presumed to be held in the USSR, Spanish deportees who died in German concentration camps, and missing French nationals (Alsations and Lorrainers enrolled in the German forces and presumed to be held in the USSR, children of ex-servicemen and French workers in Germany) ; 3,200 positive replies were received. At the request of relatives, it also opened enquiries on prisoners of war held by the forces of the Democratic Viet Nam Republic, and transmitted messages.

**ANGLO-SAXON COUNTRIES, LATIN AMERICA, MIDDLE AND FAR EAST.** The ICRC examined over 7,000 requests for information. On enquiries from the United States of America and the United Kingdom, it made searches for missing military personnel and persons deported during the World Wars. Only 2,000 positive replies were received, all enquiries concerning the Far East (Korea, China, Democratic Republic of Viet Nam) having remained unanswered.

It made searches in Latin America for persons of other continents who had emigrated overseas, and with whom their families, especially those in Europe, wished to remain in contact.

In the Middle East, it was concerned with Israeli nationals in Arab countries, and Arabs resident in Israel. It transmitted family messages and dealt with cases of civilians held on either side of the closed frontiers. It was gratified to note that, in this connection, the Red Crescent Societies, and the "Magen David Adom" in Israel, made every effort to facilitate its work.

In the Far East, following the contacts established during the Asiatic Conference in Geneva, the ICRC resumed, during the second half-year, investigations in *North Korea* and *China* concerning military personnel presumed to be detained in those countries; over a thousand enquiry forms, giving details of the missing persons, and the circumstances, were sent to the Pyong Yang Government and the Chinese Red Cross.

Through its delegates in Viet Nam, the ICRC continued to make enquiries and to transmit messages on behalf of French combatants, and German, Spanish, Italian, Polish and other nationals, enrolled in the French Union forces and presumed to be prisoners of war, or missing. From the information it possessed, or collected, it was able to reply to numerous requests for information received from persons who had no knowledge of the lists of prisoners liberated in Indo China, issued by the French authorities.

Nine years after the close of the 1939-1945 conflict, the *Central Prisoners of War Agency* continues to be an instrument of careful, accurate and patient research. From all parts of the world enquirers have recourse to its services. In the case of a family trying to trace a missing person, or to renew the contact with members from which it is separated, to obtain originals or copies of personal or other documents which are essential to daily life, the social importance of its work is more than evident.