

INTRODUCTION



Based in the Swiss city of Geneva, the Central Tracing Agency is an integral part of the International Committee of the Red Cross, recognised by all the states signatories to the 1949 Geneva Conventions as a neutral humanitarian intermediary in times of international conflict, civil war and internal disturbances.

The story of the Central Tracing Agency, or C.T.A. as it is known, is one of innovation, initiative and dedication stretching back to the year 1870. Then a small group of Swiss humanitarians demonstrated during the Franco-Prussian war that a tracing bureau on neutral territory is indispensable in times of conflict, when the victims are not only the hungry, the sick and the wounded – but those held prisoner by the enemy, under detention or separated from their relatives in the turmoil that is still part of everyday life for millions of people today.

Under various names, it has played a unique role in bringing moral comfort to those cut off from their families and loved ones. The millions of prisoners taken during the two World Wars, and in more recent conflicts, will remember the comfort brought by Red Cross messages from their families; the relatives themselves will recall the relief they felt when they heard through the Agency from their husbands, wives or children.

Since the Second World War, the Tracing Agency has continued to adapt its functions, under the right of humanitarian initiative accorded to the International Committee of the Red Cross by the Geneva Conventions, so that today its concerns stretch far beyond the maintenance of family ties between prisoners of war and their relatives.

In many areas of the world, the C.T.A. is working to bring together or re-establish contact between families separated as a result of internal upheaval in their own country, be they people forced to flee for their lives across frontiers in Asia or Africa, or the individuals in Latin America who have gone "missing", leaving distressed relatives unsure whether they are dead or alive.

It is not the aim of this brochure to analyse or begin to describe the horrors of the armed conflicts and civil strife the Agency has evolved in, but to show that in the most adverse circumstances the human instinct for family ties remains undiminished. The C.T.A. strives to encourage by helping people on the first step to re-building their lives, whether by bringing good news or relieving uncertainty.

When the founders of the Red Cross embarked on their first humanitarian mission in 1870, it was to bring assistance to the wounded and sick soldiers of Switzerland's two powerful neighbours.

A headquarters was established in the Swiss frontier city of Basle, to where the casualties were brought for treatment. A doctor caring for the victims day after day and talking to them about their problems found the majority were in a sad state of mind because many of their families had no idea whether they had been killed on the battlefield or taken prisoner.

It was felt by the founders of the assistance bureau that the morale of the internees could be boosted if they could send letters to their families. But the Basle Agency went further and acted as courier for lists of prisoners, whether wounded or not, provided by the belligerent states – so that for the first time in history the relatives of captured soldiers heard their sons, husbands and brothers were alive when in enemy hands. The Geneva Convention of 1864 had made no provisions for unwounded prisoners, and this historic step was the beginning of a long series of initiatives.

This practice of providing humanitarian help to the victims of international conflict was repeated during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877, with the setting up of an agency in Trieste. Both these initiatives were accorded a legal base under the Hague Convention of 1907.

When war engulfed the Balkans in 1912, an Agency was established in Belgrade, and its tasks were even more far-reaching than its predecessors, with material comforts and money also being forwarded to prisoners. Another innovation, of such importance today, was the introduction by the Agency of capture cards, sent to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the five belligerent states with a view to obtaining standard information on POWs. The Serbian Red Cross proved the most adept, by sending the Agency details of 10,500 Turkish POWs, including name, rank and serial number.

During the conflict in the Balkans the Agency was for the first time confronted with the language and phonetical diversity, so much part of its work nowadays, and through excellent organisation was able to gather together the necessary personnel to translate and decipher information on the well-being of prisoners in Serbian, Greek, Turkish, and Bulgarian.

Legal foundations

The Agency's power to act in the interests of victims of international conflicts has its base in the Geneva Conventions of 1949. The Conventions contain 36 Articles relating directly or indirectly to the tasks traditionally carried out by the C.T.A. in relation with the National Information Bureaux the belligerent States are obliged to set up in time of international conflict.

When the Geneva Conventions were updated in 1977, The Additional Protocol I specifically mentioned the Agency, implying not only the permanent nature of its legal rights but the obligation States now have to allow the C.T.A. freedom of action during international conflicts.

Right of Initiative

The development of the Agency since its founding has been a result of initiatives taken by the International Committee of the Red Cross to provide humanitarian services for victims of conflicts, when the provision of these facilities has not been explicitly referred to in international humanitarian law. The Right of Initiative, inspired by Article 3 common to all four Geneva Conventions, allows the ICRC to work for victims of civil wars and internal tension and disturbances. On its own initiative the ICRC offers its services to all sides in non-international conflicts and to governments holding political prisoners.